



Causes and Management of Domestic Conflicts among Couples: The Esan Case

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ABSTRACT

Whereas the issue of domestic conflict is universal, its manifestation differs between and within ethnographic regions of the world. This paper examines the phenomenon of domestic conflict among couples in Esan-speaking area of Edo State. Particularly the paper addresses the main causes of the problem and the management strategies adopted in the resolution of the crisis. In terms of methodology, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and In-depth Interviews were employed in gathering the data for the study. The major variables found to be responsible for domestic conflict include revelation of concealed pre-marital history, wives' attitude towards in-laws, infertility, management of spouse's income, number and sex of children born, indulgence of spouse in extra-marital affairs and participation of spouse in politics. Various mechanisms for managing the crisis in Esan are reviewed. Finally, policy implication and recommendations are advanced accordingly.

INTRODUCTION

Life is full of paradox. This is particularly true when considered against the phenomenon of domestic conflict which couples encounter or get enmeshed in soon after marriage. Wedding ceremonies and betrothal rites in our environment are often marked by open declarations of goodwill, promise and unending love between spouses. Statements such as "I take you to be my lawful wedded wife/husband, to have and to hold, from this day onward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part" are common proclamations during wedding ceremonies. This is often followed by scenes where couples feed each other,

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a public attestation to the fact that partners will live up to their bidding. No sooner do such events conclude, spouses get embroiled in disagreement, agitations, quarrels, and in some cases, outright struggle, inflicting injuries on one another. Under conditions of improper management, such situations result in litigation, separation and sometimes annulment of the marriage bond. What an irony!

The negative experiences re-capitulated above are common features of most marriages in our localities. They agitate the mind, portend dangers and shake the fabric of our collective existence. According to Imobighe (2003), conflict emerges wherever social relationship develops. It can occur within and between families, groups, organisations and states. It is: 'a condition of disharmony within an interaction process, which usually occurs as a result of clash of interests between the parties involved in some form of relationship. Such a clash of interest could occur because either they are pursuing incompatible goals or they are using incompatible means to pursue their chosen goals (p. 20)'

This paper does not intend to deal with the phenomenon of domestic violence per se, rather, it addresses itself to the broad range of conflict situations which couples experience generally, either in the form of quarrel, disagreement, discord, friction, antagonism or open-clash. It attempts to tackle the issues from a purely ethnographic perspective, drawing heavily on the nature of these crises among the Esan People of Edo State.

Objectives of the Study

In order to achieve the above expectation, the paper has the following objectives:

1. Attempts a review of the major contributions of selected local and International scholars in the area of domestic conflicts among couples.
2. Identify the main causes of domestic conflicts among couples in Esan land.
3. Examine management strategies and models adopted in the resolution of domestic conflicts among couples in Esan land.
4. Provide policy implication and recommendations on how to check the incidence of domestic conflicts among couples in Esan in particular and Nigeria in general.

Literature Review

Considerable attention has been given to the issue of domestic conflicts at both local and international levels. Perhaps, one of the most recent, exciting and invigorating study of the phenomenon has to do with a cross-cultural analysis of domestic violence in selected geo-political zones in Nigeria. Aina

(2004) investigated the phenomenon among the Yorubas, Tenuche's (2004) study focused on Tiv, Idoma, and Igede peoples of Kogi and Benue States. The minority ethnic groups in Edo and Delta States were explored by Aderinto (2004), while Alumanah (2004) undertook a study of the Igbos. Using semi-structured questions, in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guides, they reported that the incidence of domestic violence is 'perpetuated' in different forms such as beating, hitting with objects, pushing, stabbing, throwing something at partners, denial of house-keeping allowance to mention a few.

The major causes of domestic violence according to the study include refusal of wives to submit to the husbands' authority, sexual mis-conduct by wives, interference by in-laws, conflicts between works and domestic duties by wives, religious conflicts between partners, flirtation by male partners, and husbands' inability to live up to their domestic responsibilities due to poverty (Erinosho 2004:4). However, the works of the above-named scholars focused attention on the issue of domestic violence, which in most cases is *only* an aspect of domestic conflicts. Secondly, their investigation zeroed on middle class Nigerians only. Thus, based on our understanding of the pervasiveness of the problem, we do know that domestic squabbles are not limited to any one segment of the society.

Idialu (2003) also investigated the causes of crises among couples in Edo State. In the said study, emphasis was placed on family finances. A major conclusion reached in the work has to do with the fact that financial problems put enormous strain on family relationship. She argued that contemporary marriages experience more strains because of financial matters than any other factor. Her conclusion agreed with that of Lauer (1992).

Anyakoha and Eluwa (1991) addressed the factors which affect family relationship. In their study, they concluded that variables such as changes in growth and development, individual differences, home conditions, family size, human needs, parental attitudes and child-training methods were quite significant in the explanation of such phenomenon.

At the international level, various scholars have attempted to deal with the issue of domestic conflicts (Bilsman-Frankema and Woolthuis; 2005, Bachmann; 1998, Alvarez, Barney and Bosse 2003). Bjornberg (2004) investigated the problem among Swedish Dual-Earner couples, paying attention to three major variables, namely: mutual balancing in division of labour and resources, scope of self-governance and the capacity to make choice without force. He observed that:

'Domestic conflict is an expression of structural conflict and power inequality in society. It is built into family life and has various kinds of expressions. Contradictory needs and interests are elementary aspects of couples' everyday lives although they do not necessarily become spelled out in open conflict'.

The sampling framework for the study is shown below.

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Table 1; Sampling Framework for the study.

LGAs in the District (5)	the LGAs Selected (3)	Wards Selected per LGA	Enumeration (EAs) per Ward	Areas Selected per	No. of Couples selected EA	of per	Final Respondents per EA
Esan West	Esan West	3	4		5		20 x 2 = 40
Esan Central							
Esan North East	Esan Central	3	4		5		20 x 2 = 40
Esan South East	Igubeben	3	4		5		20 x 2 = 40
Igubeben							
TOTAL	3	9	12		15		= 120

Table 2: Identified Causes of Domestic Conflicts Among Couples in Esan.

S/n	Identified causes of Domestic Conflicts	Esan West	Esan Central	Igubeben
1.	Revelation of concealed pre-marital history by spouse	+++	+++	+++
2.	Wives attitude towards in-laws	+++	+++	+++
3.	Wives claim to equality with husbands	+++	+++	+++
4.	Decision on whether or not a wife should work and the type and place of work	+++	++	+++
5.	Desire for higher education by wives	++	+++	++
6.	Whether or not the couples need house-helps and the number, age and sex of the individuals	+++	++	+
7.	Type of religion to profess	+	++	+++
8.	Desired number of children (family size)	++	++	++
9.	Choice of schools for children- private or public	+	+	+
10.	Type of friends kept by spouse	++	++	++
11.	Membership of organisations couples belong especially the husband	+++	+++	+++
12.	Choice of medication during ill-health	+	+	+
13.	Proportion, mode and frequency of remittance of couple's income to parents' family	++	++	++
14.	Inability to bear children (Infertility)	+++	+++	+++
15.	Giving birth to same sex children (especially females)	+++	+++	++
16.	Sexual relationship- frequency and ability to satisfy mate	+++	+++	+++
17.	Types of friends/acquaintance kept by children	++	++	++
18.	Participation in politics-especially by wives	++	++	++
19.	Indulgence of spouse especially wives in extra-marital affairs. (real or imagined)	+++	+++	+++

Note:

- +++ Where this opinion was expressed by majority of the respondents
- ++ Where this opinion was expressed by some of the respondents.
- + Where this opinion was expressed by very few of the respondents

Part of the findings in the above study had to do with the fact that domestic conflicts occur less frequently in families where there is “a nucleus and a periphery”. A family with a nucleus and periphery is built on ‘gift-giving’ as against ‘bargaining’ and ‘calculation’. In this kind of relationship, disintegration, conflict, fragmentation and tensions are built in from the beginning; priority is on individual rights and autonomy rather than need for jointness. (Einarsdattir, 2002; Holter and Aarseth 1993).

METHODOLOGY

Data generated in this study are based on a recent survey conducted among selected couples in Central Senatorial District of Edo State. The Esan people

occupy five (5) out of the eighteen (18) Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the State. Collectively, they make up Edo Central Senatorial District. The other Senatorial Districts are Edo South and Edo North.

In this survey, three (3) LGAs were randomly selected from the five LGAs in the District. Next, the selected LGAs were divided into wards. Three (3) wards were then randomly selected from each of the selected LGAs. We proceeded thereafter to pick four (4) Enumeration Areas (EAs) from each of the selected wards. Data on EAs were obtained from the National Population Commission (NPC) offices in the selected LGAs, based on a recently revised and up-dated maps of all the EAs in the area preparatory to the 2006 National Population head-count.

Finally, on the basis of household identification and house-numbering allotted to individual households in the selected EAs, five couples were selected from each EA. This gave a total of twenty (20) couples from each of the three (3) selected LGAs. In all, sixty (60) couples or 120 respondents constituted the sample size for the study. Semi-structured questionnaires and in-depth interview were used to elicit information from the respondents. The spouses were interviewed differently/independently to enable them volunteer information as freely and objectively as possible. The interviews centered on variables causing disagreement and tension between couples and how these problems can be managed.

From the data presented below, some remarks are necessary.

1. The causes of domestic conflicts identified above represent the kernel or bone of contention among couples in the Senatorial District.

2. Certain variables were particularly identified as very *serious* in terms of the crises husbands and wives experience in the area. They include:

- Revelation of concealed pre-marital history by spouse. Feelers received from respondents indicate, that this was often a major cause of problem in most homes. Intense indignation expressed towards this issue, is borne out of the fact that one of the partners may have been cheating on the other all along.

- Feeling of equality by women (wives) with their husbands aggravates the level of tension in the home. Husbands resent the idea because they perceive it as a serious challenge and an attempt to undermine their authority

- Indulgence of spouse (especially wives) in extra-marital affairs. Views expressed indicate that whereas, culturally, it is considered not too out-of-place for husbands to indulge in such act(s), it amounts to outright abomination on the part of wives to do so.

- Choice of wife's acquaintances. Husbands reportedly frown at the kinds of friends their wives keep, particularly when such friends are too choosy, wear expensive outfits, linked with history of divorce or separation, and if they belong to members of certain associations/meetings with questionable undertones.

- Spouse's choice of religion. The basis of this conflict is linked to a situation where one of the spouse accepts membership of new or emerging

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denominations with prophetic leaning such as; *prayer warriors, holy ghost vineyard and 'mountain of fire'* among others.

- Participation of spouse (especially wives) in politics. Whereas participation by husbands in politics is seen as normal and usual, that of a wife is perceived by many as strange and unbecoming, the prevailing forces of modernity notwithstanding.

- The issue of house-helpers. Generally, women respondents expressed great reservation and resentment, insisting that they would not allow their husbands to recruit house-helpers who are matured females because they cannot afford to lose their homes to such unsuspecting individuals.

3. The least problematic areas in terms of explaining the causes of domestic conflicts among couples in the study area include choice of medication during ill-health, and the type of school children should attend. The first (choice of medication) proved to be so because of the fact that both spouse always express anxiety when any members the family is ill. They also believe certain ailments may have been caused by witches and wizards (*azen*), which only native doctors (*obo*) can cure. To this end, the wish of the majority is that the sick individual gets well. As to the choice of type of schools for children, this is dictated by the size of family income. Family budget therefore has to be in consonance with couple's financial ability.

Mechanisms for Resolving Domestic Conflicts among Couples in Esan

Typical of most cultures in Nigeria, the *Esan* people believe that disagreements among couples should be promptly handled, and the issues involved resolved amicably. In this section of the paper, the various mechanisms adopted in resolving conflicts between couples in such a manner that they do not escalate or result in divorce are examined.

The first option identified is that which encourages couples themselves to bury the hatchet. That is, a strategy which emphasizes *mutual resolution* based on couple's voluntary evaluation of the issue, vis-à-vis, their rights and obligation. This is similar to what Ekstam (2000) calls *collaboration*, or what Bisno (1988) identifies as *integrative sub-strategy*. The parties in dispute agree that they have a problem, and they intend to find solutions to it. This approach stresses problem-solving and creative development of solutions. Couples make spirited efforts to emphasise mutually-advantageous benefits. In most cases, it may mean giving low emphasis to one's own interests while projecting the interest of the other in a process of exchange. According to Bjornberg, (2004), the model described above succeeds if both parties:

- Adopt non-problematic options within the need-interest dilemma that could lead to happiness in the relationship.

- Are prepared to give up on their needs and interests, reach a compromise (conflict resolution), avoid further negotiations and decide not to revisit the issue any further (conflict management).

The second mechanism for resolving conflicts between spouses in Esan involves recourse to tradition and authority figures: This approach is resorted

to when the disagreement has escalated and assumed a scale that can be described as monumental. Two variants can be clearly distinguished in this approach.

The first is where families of the couple (*Egbele or iruen*) decide to intervene mutually to resolve the crisis. This initiative supercedes individual efforts that may have been exerted by some persons within the fold to resolve the problem. In order to dislodge the couples psychologically, they are invited to see the joint Elders' Council (*eko-edion*) at the residence of the husband's father. Here, the elders listen to both parties and apportion blame appropriately. At the end, fines are slammed on any of them that is guilty. The couple is counseled accordingly and the joint Elders' Council sets up a monitoring committee to ensure that decisions reached are enforced to the letter.

The second variant of this strategy is where certain authority figures such as pastors, imams and few supporters are called in, usually at the instance of one of the spouse, to intervene and help resolve the misunderstanding. This strategy is preferred by some, because, traditional practices and observances which can desecrate the faith of the partners are controlled for. Secondly, counsel offered comes from supra-human source(s) – Bible, Koran etc. The extent to which this variant succeeds in restoring smooth relationship between the parties in dispute is largely dependent on the nature of the disagreement. If the issues involved bother on misdemeanors, negligence or disobedience, the likelihood of success is high. However, if contentious issues such as adultery/fornication (*awa*), proposing a second wife or witchcraft (*azen*) are involved, the problem may not end so easily.

The third strategy involves taking the matter to the traditional head of the locality - *Onojie*. The dispute is taken there by one of the spouse, usually the aggrieved party. The Traditional Ruler-in-Council in conjunction with his chiefs (*Enijie*), invites the parties to present their views. At the end, one of the following may happen:

- The issue is amicably resolved without conditions.
- The issue is resolved with some conditionalities such as inviting one or both parties to swear to the gods, (*ive-ewo*) or to go home and perform certain sacrifices to appease the gods. (*Izo-ese*)
- If the matter could not be resolved, the couple is advised to go to the court to solve their problem.

It is important to mention that there is nowhere any of the mediating parties discussed above openly suggest divorce or separation as a solution to the problem. This is because, it is believed that once marriage is contracted, it is a life-long venture. It is assumed that the 'nineteen' children, (*omo Igbe-Isilin*) in the woman's womb, which she is expected to deliver belong to her spouse. In essence, if for any reason(s), the lingering conflict between couple ends in divorce, it would have been at the instance of one of the spouse who feels it is no longer in his/her interest to continue with the relationship.

Policy Implication and Recommendations

Conflict, irrespective of the way it presents itself and the environment it occurs, has dysfunctional and disruptive impact on society. As has been rightly observed by Garuba (1998), if not properly managed, conflict can lead to anarchy, breakdown of laws and order, disintegration of the polity and diversion of scarce resources from profitable ventures to less noble ends.

One of the most pressing needs in Nigeria presently is the desire to forge unity among her peoples, and thus, ensures stability and social order at all levels. It is often said that a stable family begets a stable nation. This is true because, if the family which is the most elementary fabric of the social system is in disarray; then, it is unlikely that individuals and collectivities which are themselves products of such institution will possess the moral, intellectual and ethical enablement to accomplish national objectives. No matter how laudable national, state and local initiatives may be, the society needs well-adjusted 'actors' to translate policy objectives to reality. Where families do not enjoy the desired peace, happiness and conviviality, it would be unreasonable to expect that individuals who hail from such environments will possess the necessary drive, traits and focus to accomplish organisational goals. That is why, great care needs to be exercised to ensure that all forms of disruptions within the family are nibbed in the bud.

Besides the implication discussed above, domestic conflicts, especially those between couples have other debilitating effects. Offsprings from such backgrounds, often encounter frustration, devastated moods, anger, and feelings of insecurity. The after-effects of the above situations are usually unimaginably serious. Some children suffer normlessness, weak social integration and low achievement potentials in school. Other consequences include alcoholism, proness to crime and suicide. The challenge of national development calls for concerted efforts; a situation where all and sundry need to co-operate and complement the efforts of one another. The attitudes of couples are very crucial in this regard, and the role of the family as an indispensable organ in socialising, mobilising and deploring the needed manpower for national development cannot be over emphasised. (Gelles and Conte, 1990).

In order to achieve a balanced family relationship, and by extension national development in contemporary Nigeria, there is need to pay attention to the issue of domestic conflicts. This is necessary in view of the fact that any form of dis-equilibrium or instability within the family system can have devastating consequences on the society. On the basis of the findings reached in this study, the following measures are suggested in order to reduce the phenomenon of domestic conflicts among couples in Esan in particular and the Nigerian society at large.

1. Intending couples should not *rush* into marriage. There is need to understudy one another over a *considerable* length of time. While it is not being suggested that courtship be indefinite, it should however be sufficiently

long enough to allow the individuals involved to *discover* behavior traits that need to be modified, and secondly, to assess with passage of time whether or not the desired behavioral changes have been accomplished.

2. Frequent and intense communication between couples is necessary. There is no alternative to effective communication in the family. When spouses communicate frequently, they avail one another the opportunity to bare their minds over matters that are capable of generating crisis in the future. For example, how should partners relate with in-laws, how should couples' earnings be managed, what type of invitation should couples honour, and what constitutes *tolerable* use of alcoholic beverages? These are issues over which compromise can be struck when there is effective interpersonal communication.

3. Husbands and wives need to *trust* one another. Marriages last when partners have intense trust for each other. When there is occasional misunderstanding between partners, over matters that are capable of evoking suspicion or derailing integrity, maybe arising from rumours or other unproven sources, it is only firm and mutual *trust* that is capable of dowsing such imbroglio and ensuring healthy relationship between the partners.

4. There is need to handle the issue of gender equality with caution. This has been a sensitive issue in most homes. The principle should not be interpreted in a vacuum, rather, it should be applied within the context of a people's culture. Husbands need to appreciate the fact that gender equality is gaining momentum at both local and international levels, to that extent, they cannot afford to be left out. On the other hand, wives should not invoke the principle at every opportunity or adopt it as an intimidatory strategy. Natural division of labour should be accorded its proper place within the marriage bond (Watts; 1991)

5. Finally, couples need to develop more resilient coping strategies. As much as possible, they should be ready to subordinate their interests and needs to the overall interest of the family. Besides, they should pursue mutually- advantageous goals and avoid narrow and selfish interests that are capable of igniting controversies (Giddens 1992). Reciprocity should be the watchword of married mates

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Disagreement between couple which is the focus of this paper is a deep-rooted problem in most marital relationships. We have endeavored to highlight the potential causes of domestic conflicts among couples in Esan, Edo State. The mechanisms for managing domestic conflicts between couples in the study area were extensively reviewed. In line with the findings reached in the study, suggestions were advanced on how to achieve smooth and harmonious family relationship. On a final note, couples are enjoined to emphasise similarities rather than differences between one another, eschew

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spirit of competition, embrace self-sacrificing attitude galvanised by loyalty, integrity and reciprocity.

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