

A Phenomenological Study of the Role of Christian Values and Culture in Conflict Resolution
Among Christian Couples in Mukono, Uganda

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Abstract

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological research design to examine married Christians' perspectives on the role of Christian values and culture in resolution of marital conflict. Twelve themes emerged. There were two themes for Christian values that promote conflict resolution: (a) Christian disciplines, and (b) fellowship and instruction. There was one theme (a) Church teaching on oneness and submissiveness, for Christian values that hinder conflict resolution. Three themes regarding cultural factors that promote resolution of conflict were: (a) involvement of others (b) constructive conflict response, and (c) cultural perspectives. Three themes for cultural factors that perpetuate conflict were: (a) unconstructive response to conflict (b) involvement of others, and (c) finances. One theme, (a) communication, emerged on strategies for resolving conflict. Two themes regarding strategies for preventing future occurrence of conflict were: (a) source of income and (b) understanding each other. A few studies exist in the Ugandan context on culture and marital conflict. The findings from this study could help increase understanding on the strategies Christian couples use to resolve conflict and how these strategies help them maintain their marriages.

Keywords: Christian values, culture, conflict resolution, phenomenology

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PREVIEW

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Chapter I: Introduction and Background of the Study

Gottman (2011a; 2011b) argues that a lasting and happy marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve their marriage conflicts and thereby grow their marriage. This phenomenological study investigated the role of Christian values and culture in conflict resolution among married Christians in Mukono, Uganda. It was the researcher's hope to also learn about the role of culture-specific interventions that can be appropriate and effective for individuals and couples in need.

Studies have demonstrated a link between conflict resolution and marital satisfaction and closeness (Canary, 2003, as cited in Stinson, Bermudez, Gale, Lewis, Meyer, & Templeton, 2017; Jackson, Miller, Oka, & Henry 2014); Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010; Pruitt, 2018; Varfolomeyeva, 2015). Ironically, the more people become interdependent, negotiating who does what and when, the greater the likelihood for conflict (Canary, 2003). Conversely, Pruitt (2018) argues that failure to manage conflicts can result in marital dissatisfaction and marital breakdown; the author notes an example of failure to communicate by a couple when the moment calls for common ground. He argues for the need for the two to coordinate on a prominent alternative which integrates takes care of each person's expectations. Given that marriage is the central relationship in the traditional family, conflict resolution has important implications for individual well-being, the marriage relationship as well as parent-child relationships. According to Varfolomeyeva (2015), failure to resolve conflicts destroys intimacy, oneness and companionship.

Gottman (2017) observes that if partners cannot solve their problems, emotional distance is created between them that can ultimately destroy their relationship; hence the need for couples to learn to properly handle these problems as promptly as possible. However, couples should

note that some issues are so big that they cannot be handled in a day, and therefore require a gradual process to resolve; yet, even with such issues, the process of resolving them should not be delayed. Furthermore, O'Loughlin (2017) explains that conflicts in marriage are inevitable because the two people are different; nonetheless, with love and commitment couples can solve their problems as they gain a better understanding of each other and the marital relationship. Moreover, with maturity, determination and the humility to recognize one's own faults, a good marriage is possible. Sells (2011), Gottman (2011), Rosenblatt and Rieks (2009), trace conflict to cultural upbringing. For example, boys are taught to suppress their emotions while girls are taught to express theirs. This socialization means that by the time they grow up, husbands and wives view conflict differently (Gottman, 2011). Rosenblatt and Rieks (2009) explored what may be involved when a couple cannot resolve an important difference, and emphasize the importance of exploring structural issues such as cultural or family of origin differences. Günsoy, Cross, Uskul, Adams and Gercek-Swing (2015) note how differences in cultural values and norms lead to differing perceptions of and responses to conflict.

A study by Alonso-Ferres, Valor-Segura, and Expósito, (2019) found that women responded more expressively and loyally to conflict, while men had a more negligent response. They argue from a social role theory point of view which suggests that men are usually socialized to be independent and to confront a threatening condition, such as a couple's conflict, directly, aggressively, or coercively. Women on the other hand are usually educated in traditional gender roles, to be communal, expressive, and dependent. Thus, the expectation for them is to be cooperative and concerned about relationship maintenance, behaving loyally during interpersonal conflicts (Birns, Cascardi, & Meyer, 1994; Horne & Johnson, 2018; Wood & Eagly, 2002, as cited by Alonso-Ferres, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2019).

The Ugandan culture is strong with values and norms passed down through generations (Saunia & David, 2016; Tuyizere, 2007). In Uganda, the roles of men and women are distinct. Among couples, this is a major guiding factor to positive marital relationship as well as a source of marital conflict. Uganda is a country of diverse cultures with different customs in relation to marriage relationships (Saunia & David, 2016; Tuyizere, 2007). However, in every culture, the assignment of different roles to women and men is general, with some characteristics of the marriage relationship specific to each culture. The norm is with very few exceptions, and it remains that way because it is accepted. People do not deviate, and communities do not readily accept deviations when they occur or the deviants themselves. Tuyizere (2007), for example, observes that once a couple is together, marriage is reduced to a very limited set of societal norms such as: Men viewing their wives as being less than men (Oduyoye, 2007) and toleration of abuse by women. Women's status is far lower than that of men. Many women tolerate abuse such as being beaten, slapped, punched, raped, verbally insulted and emotional abuse, being denied access to certain commodities as well as not being provided for, being expected to perform all domestic chores as well as taking care of the children single handedly, despite the fact that they may be involved in the work force. This also includes, treating husbands like royalty; for example, cleaning after them, kneeling for them, giving them bigger and better portions of the meal, letting them have the last word in disagreements and working to sexually satisfy the men. Women are expected to measure up to the standard of dowry paid for them. According to Kayongo and Onyango (1994), the most significant feature of African marriage and family, Ugandan not exception, is the importance attached to the larger kin group, and members of the extended family continue to have a lot of say in the affairs of young couples. In Uganda, marriage is meant to last and must bear the fruits of children. When there are no children, a man

must go for another wife but divorce is not encouraged, but this creates the problem of polygamy. This is why many suffer psychologically when they fail to get children. They believe that it is important to have children continue their legacy or carry on the family name. Many Ugandan and African cultures in general, view the concept of marriage as a vehicle to bring forth *offspring*; it is believed that marriage is meant especially for the continuation of the human species, (Onaiyekan, 2015). The love of offspring in marriage is so strong that children are almost considered a necessary condition for the validity of marriage. Many wives report a lot of marital dissatisfaction in a polygamous setting. Some years back, first wives were given the opportunity of choosing a second wife for their husband instead of having their husband choose a rival (Tonyalatore, 2011).

In this regard, some studies that have examined the cultural factor have identified significant differences between the socially-constructed roles between women and men, based on their cultural contexts (Saunia & David, 2016; Tuyizere, 2007). Traditional and widespread societal discrimination against women is still rampant, despite the available laws and policies to the contrary. Many customary laws discriminate against women in the areas of marriage, divorce, and inheritance. In most areas, women may not own or inherit property (Tuyizere, 2007).

Studies carried out in Uganda reveal that policies relating to marriage have a profound effect on marital conflict (Winchester & Winchester, 2016). Besides, these conflicts were significantly amplified by both poverty and rigid gender norms, within the context of difficult economic realities (Starmann, Collumbien, Kyegombe, Devries, Michau, Musuya, Watts, & Heise, 2016). The Ugandan Marriage and Divorce Bill which seeks to strengthen women's agency in marriage has faced a number of obstacles including objections from the women

themselves during public consultations (Burgess & Campbell, 2014). The authors highlight the impact on women of economic inequalities that mar women's understanding of their interests. Additionally, women have low trust in the law and political process. Thus, other studies further show that women in conflict situations seek help outside recognized structures such as social service organizations or police. Christian values are helpful in resolution of marital conflict through promoting virtues of love, forgiveness, faithfulness, and prayer (Glidden, 2016; Haversath; Kliem, & Kröger, 2017; Sauerheber & Ponton). Similarly, there is an argument for positive effects of forgiveness such as relationship stability (Fincham et al., 2006; Paleari, Rigalia, & Fincham, 2009, as cited in Haversath, Kliem, & Kröger, 2017), maintenance of relationship satisfaction (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005, as cited in Haversath, Kliem, & Kröger, 2017), dyadic conflict resolution (Fincham et al., 2004; McCullough, 1998, as cited in Haversath, Kliem, & Kröger, 2017) and physical and psychological health for both partners (Fincham et al., 2006; Quenstdt-Moe, & Popkess, 2014, as cited in Haversath, Kliem, & Kröger, 2017). However, these values could also be used to exploit, manipulate and oppress a spouse. Some men, for instance, misuse biblical teaching on *submission* to justify their abuse of their wives (Stotland, 2000, as cited in Fleming, 2015). Studies of conflict modes employed by women within the Christian marriage relationship reveal their willingness to accept abuse as a result of interpretation of scripture and culture. Nash and Hesterberg, 2009 (as cited in Fleming, 2015), found a relationship between domestic violence and the biblical concept of submission. Fincham, Ajayi and Beach (2011) have found religious values to be negatively related to marital conflict resolution. Lowenthal (2013) points to the role of extrinsic and intrinsic religious values in marital conflict resolution, with those extrinsically motivated exploiting religion as a means to achieve an end. The implication is that Christian

values cannot be taken at face value. Among married Christians in Mukono it has not been documented how scripture is employed in time of conflict

This study investigated how Christian couples in Mukono district of Uganda resolved their marital conflicts. Literature worldwide has focused on examining the role of Christianity and culture on marital conflict resolution. While studies have been conducted on marriage and conflict resolution (Lara, 2014), conflict resolution is influenced differently by different cultures (Williamson, 2012, as cited in Glidden, 2016). Cultural values, beliefs and norms often define one's role in life and influence one's identity. Furthermore, culture determines how religious meaning is made and the context within which marital relationships are experienced (Fincham, Ajayi & Beach, 2011). Culture also impacts the way individuals use religion to manage conflict situations, and shapes how religion is practiced (Glidden, 2016).

Given the above scenario, it is important to investigate how cultural beliefs influence the use of scripture in conflict resolution among married Christians in Mukono. Given that marriage is commonplace in African culture, it is important to understand the impact of Christian values and cultural processes on marital conflict resolution. While Ugandans are not a homogenous group of people, there are common important cultural themes that are taken into consideration in understanding the interplay of Christian values and cultural values in resolution of conflict among married Christians.

Statement of the Problem

Conflict is negatively related to satisfaction in marriage (David & Stafford, 2013; Emerman, 2017). Intensity of marital conflict can affect a marital relationship and even cause it to end (Varfolomeyeva, 2015). Increased conflict makes it difficult for a marriage to last (Fincham, 2001, as cited in DeSilva, 2016). No scientific studies have been conducted on how

religion and culture influence marital conflict resolution among married Christians in Mukono, Uganda. Studies on religion and marital conflict have been given focus in the West (Lara, 2016). Besides, many studies on religion and marital conflict management have ignored the influence of culture and religion on marriage (Glidden, 2016). This study hopes to contribute knowledge to fill this gap through exploring the interplay between Christian values and culture on marital conflict and in so doing, propose culture-specific interventions that can be truly appropriate and effective for the people in need.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate the role of Christian values and culture in marital conflict resolution through the experiences of married Christians in Mukono. Using phenomenology, the study hoped to bridge the knowledge gap on the interplay of religion and culture in marital conflict resolution among married Christians in Mukono. The data gained from this study serves as a resource for marriage counselors as well as opinion leaders, who, by virtue of their positions are engaged in resolution of marriage conflict.

Review of the Literature

The study of marital conflict resolution encompasses a range of factors for its comprehension (Gottman & Gottman 2017). Conflict resolution promotes relational satisfaction and closeness (Canary, 2003, as cited in Stinson, Bermudez, Gale, Lewis, Meyer, & Templeton, 2017). If conflict is not managed well, it can result in greater dissatisfaction and erosion of a marriage relationship (Pruitt & Kim, 2004, as cited in Stinson et.al, 2017). Conflict resolution is influenced differently by different cultures; research findings reveal that culture inherently affects an individual's choice of conflict management strategies within marriage (Glidden, 2016). Additionally, religious values have been found to impact marital conflict resolution