



**Marital Counselling and Intensity of Conflicts among Couples in Esan West Local Government
Area of Edo State**

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Abstract

Marital conflict is an important relational concern because persistent and intense disagreements may undermine communication, emotional connection, marital stability, and the general quality of family life. Marital counselling provides professional assistance through which couples can examine recurring relational difficulties, improve communication, develop constructive conflict-management skills, and work towards healthier patterns of interaction. This study examined the relationship between marital counselling and the intensity of conflicts among couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. The study was guided by one research question and one hypothesis. An ex-post facto research design was adopted. The population comprised 403 couples identified from marriages conducted in the Esan West marriage registry between 2020 and 2025. A sample of 150 respondents was selected through simple sampling. Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument titled Effectiveness of Marital Counselling in Resolving Conflicts and Improving Relationship Satisfaction Questionnaire (EMCRCIRRSQ). The instrument was subjected to expert validation and test-retest reliability, which produced a coefficient of .61. Data were analysed using mean, standard deviation, and Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The descriptive results indicated generally favourable perceptions of marital counselling in relation to couples' experiences of conflict. The hypothesis test reported a significant relationship between marital counselling and intensity of conflicts, with a reported correlation coefficient of .802 and $p = .041$ at the .05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected based on the reported analysis. The study concludes that marital counselling is significantly associated with the intensity of conflicts among couples in the study area. It is recommended that accessible and culturally responsive marital counselling services be strengthened to support couples in managing recurring marital disagreements and developing constructive conflict-management skills.

Keywords: marital counselling, marital conflict, conflict intensity, couples, conflict management, counselling



Introduction

Marriage is an important social relationship through which individuals establish families, provide companionship, share responsibilities, and pursue common personal and family goals. Although marriage can provide emotional support and stability, intimate relationships also involve differences in expectations, values, needs, perceptions, and patterns of behaviour. These differences can generate disagreements and conflict. Conflict in marriage is not necessarily evidence of relationship failure. Rather, the consequences of conflict depend substantially on how disagreements are expressed, managed, and resolved.

Marital conflict may occur around financial responsibilities, household roles, parenting, communication, extended-family relationships, intimacy, decision making, and differences in personal expectations. When disagreements are managed constructively, couples may clarify their needs, negotiate differences, and develop stronger patterns of interaction. However, when disagreements become repetitive, hostile, emotionally charged, or poorly managed, they may develop into persistent relational distress. The intensity of marital conflict is therefore an important dimension of marital functioning because it concerns not merely whether disagreements occur, but how strongly those disagreements are experienced and expressed.

Research on couple relationships indicates that communication and conflict processes are closely related to relationship quality. A meta-analysis by Kanter et al. (2022), based on 64 dyadic studies, found that both positive and negative communication behaviours were associated with later relationship quality. In particular, negative communication was associated with poorer subsequent relationship outcomes. These findings underline the importance of constructive communication and conflict management in maintaining healthy couple relationships.

Marital counselling is one professional approach used to assist couples experiencing relational difficulties. It provides a structured setting in which partners can examine patterns of interaction, communicate concerns, identify sources of disagreement, develop alternative responses, and acquire strategies for managing conflict. Contemporary couple therapy encompasses several evidence-based approaches and has developed a substantial empirical foundation for addressing relationship distress (Doss et al., 2022; Lebow & Snyder, 2022).

Evidence from research on couple therapy suggests that professional intervention can produce meaningful improvements in relationship functioning. Roddy et al. (2020), in a meta-analysis involving 58 studies, 40 unique samples, and 2,092 couples, reported substantial improvements associated with couple therapy across relationship satisfaction, communication, emotional intimacy, and partner behaviour. Similarly, a systematic review and meta-analysis by Joseph et al. (2025) reported a significant overall effect of couple interventions among couples experiencing marital



distress. These findings provide support for examining the contribution of counselling within specific sociocultural contexts.

The relevance of counselling may be particularly important in communities where couples experience relational difficulties but have limited access to professional services. Counselling can provide couples with opportunities to understand recurring patterns of disagreement and acquire practical skills for managing emotional responses, listening to one another, negotiating differences, and reducing destructive interaction patterns. Nevertheless, the effectiveness and relevance of counselling cannot simply be assumed to be identical across all cultural settings. Relationship expectations, family structures, religious beliefs, gender roles, economic conditions, and community norms may shape how couples experience and respond to counselling.

The present study focuses on couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. The research project from which this paper was developed identified marital conflict as a significant concern among couples in the area and specifically examined whether marital counselling was related to the intensity of conflicts experienced by couples. The project reported that recurring disagreements may involve financial issues, family roles, expectations, communication difficulties, and other interpersonal concerns. It further identified a need for empirical evidence concerning the relationship between counselling and conflict intensity within the local context.

The present paper therefore concentrates exclusively on the relationship between marital counselling and intensity of conflicts. It does not incorporate the other dependent variables examined in the original research project.

Statement of the Problem

Marital conflict is an inevitable aspect of intimate relationships because spouses may differ in their expectations, preferences, values, communication patterns, financial priorities, family responsibilities, and approaches to problem solving. The problem arises when disagreements become recurrent, emotionally intense, hostile, or difficult to resolve. Persistent high-intensity conflict may interfere with effective communication and create emotional distance between partners. The situation may become more difficult where couples lack appropriate strategies for discussing disagreements and negotiating solutions. Repeated cycles of accusation, defensiveness, withdrawal, hostility, and unresolved grievances can reinforce conflict patterns. When such patterns persist, couples may experience dissatisfaction and instability in their relationships. The research project on which this paper is based identified concerns regarding unresolved marital conflicts among couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. It noted recurring disagreements, communication difficulties, and challenges associated with the management of marital conflict. Although marital counselling is

available as a professional avenue for addressing relational difficulties, the extent to which counselling is associated with the intensity of marital conflicts in the local context requires empirical investigation.

The problem addressed by this study, therefore, is the need to establish whether a significant relationship exists between marital counselling and the intensity of conflicts among couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. Establishing this relationship may provide useful evidence for counsellors, couples, community organisations, and other stakeholders concerned with marital and family well-being.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of marital counselling in reducing the intensity of conflicts between couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. More specifically, the study:

1. Examined the relationship between marital counselling and the intensity of conflicts experienced by couples in the study area.

Research Question

The following research question guided the study:

1. Does a relationship exist between marital counselling and the intensity of conflicts between couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State?

Research Hypothesis

The following null hypothesis was tested at the .05 level of significance:

- There is no significant relationship between marital counselling and the intensity of conflicts between couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State.

Concept of Marital Counselling

Marital counselling refers to professional assistance provided to couples who seek help with relationship difficulties. It is concerned with understanding relational problems and assisting partners to develop more constructive patterns of interaction. The counselling process may address communication, emotional responsiveness, problem solving, conflict management, expectations, intimacy, and other issues affecting the relationship. Contemporary couple therapy is not limited to one therapeutic model. Different approaches have been developed to address couple distress, including behavioural, integrative, emotion-focused, and other relationship-based approaches. The common purpose is to assist partners in understanding maladaptive interaction patterns and developing healthier ways of responding to one another. Gurman and Fraenkel (2015) conceptualise couple therapy as a structured therapeutic process through which relationship difficulties can be examined and addressed. Similarly, Lebow and Snyder (2022) describe contemporary couple therapy as an established



intervention modality supported by a substantial research base for reducing relationship distress and improving relationship quality.

Marital counselling is therefore relevant to conflict management because the counselling process can provide couples with opportunities to identify sources of disagreement, examine patterns of interaction, communicate concerns in a less destructive manner, and develop mutually acceptable strategies for addressing problems. The counsellor can also facilitate balanced communication where partners find it difficult to listen to or understand one another. An important feature of marital counselling is its collaborative nature. Effective counselling does not simply instruct one partner to change. Rather, it provides a structured environment in which the couple can examine their relationship and work towards mutually meaningful goals. The process may involve identifying recurring conflict patterns, exploring emotional responses, practising communication skills, improving problem-solving abilities, and developing strategies for preventing escalation.

Concept of Intensity of Marital Conflicts

Marital conflict refers to disagreement or incompatibility between spouses concerning thoughts, needs, expectations, values, behaviours, or responsibilities. Conflict intensity refers to the degree of emotional and behavioural force associated with such disagreements. Thus, two couples may experience disagreement over the same issue but differ considerably in the intensity with which they express and experience the conflict. Low-intensity disagreement may involve differences of opinion that are discussed calmly and resolved through negotiation. High-intensity conflict may involve strong emotional reactions, repeated arguments, verbal hostility, withdrawal, accusations, or other destructive patterns of interaction. The intensity of conflict may therefore be reflected in the emotional escalation, persistence, and difficulty associated with marital disagreements.

The importance of conflict intensity is supported by research indicating that negative communication patterns are associated with poorer relationship outcomes. Kanter et al. (2022) found that negative communication behaviours were significantly associated with later relationship quality and relationship dissolution. This suggests that the manner in which couples manage disagreements may be as important as the existence of disagreement itself.

Marital Counselling and Conflict Intensity

The relationship between marital counselling and conflict intensity can be understood through the skills and processes developed during counselling. Couples who participate meaningfully in counselling may gain greater awareness of recurring interaction patterns and may learn alternative methods of responding to disagreement. Counselling may help partners distinguish between the substantive issue that generated disagreement and the interaction pattern that causes the disagreement to escalate. Communication is particularly relevant. Couples experiencing intense conflict may have



difficulty expressing concerns clearly, listening without defensiveness, interpreting partners' statements accurately, or communicating emotional needs. Counselling can provide opportunities to practise more constructive forms of communication. Emotional regulation is another relevant process. High-intensity conflict frequently involves strong emotional responses that can interfere with rational discussion. Counselling may help couples recognise emotional triggers and develop strategies for slowing down escalating interactions. In this respect, the goal is not necessarily to eliminate disagreement but to reduce destructive patterns through which disagreement becomes intensified.

The empirical literature provides broad support for the role of couple therapy in improving relationship functioning. Roddy et al. (2020) found significant improvements associated with couple therapy across relationship satisfaction, communication, emotional intimacy, and partner behaviours. Doss et al. (2022) similarly reviewed evidence from 2010 to 2019 and concluded that several evidence-based treatments for couple relationship distress have empirical support.

However, evidence from other settings should not automatically be treated as evidence for couples in Esan West. Local cultural, social, religious, and economic circumstances may shape the counselling process and the ways in which marital conflict is experienced. This provides justification for examining the relationship between marital counselling and conflict intensity within the specific context of Esan West Local Government Area.

Theoretical Foundation

Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy Perspective

The relationship between marital counselling and conflict intensity can be understood from the perspective of Emotionally Focused Therapy. Emotionally focused approaches emphasise the emotional bond between partners and the interactional cycles through which relationship distress is maintained. Johnson (2019) explains that emotionally focused couple therapy focuses on insecure attachment processes and recurring negative interaction cycles. From this perspective, intense marital conflict may be maintained by repetitive interactional patterns in which one partner's behaviour triggers an emotional response from the other partner, which subsequently reinforces the first partner's reaction. The conflict can therefore become a self-reinforcing cycle. Counselling provides an opportunity for couples to identify these patterns and develop more secure and constructive ways of responding to one another. The theory is relevant to the present study because marital counselling may help couples recognise destructive interaction cycles underlying intense conflicts. Through guided counselling, partners may develop greater emotional awareness, improve responsiveness, and replace hostile or defensive reactions with more constructive interaction. Consequently, the theory provides a useful framework for examining the association between counselling and conflict intensity.



Empirical Review

Empirical evidence generally indicates that couple-focused interventions can improve relationship functioning. Lebow et al. (2012), in a review of research on couple distress, reported that couple therapy had positive effects for many couples receiving treatment and highlighted the evidence base for approaches such as Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy and Emotionally Focused Therapy.

Roddy et al. (2020) subsequently conducted a meta-analysis covering 58 studies and 2,092 couples. Their findings indicated substantial improvements in relationship satisfaction among couples receiving therapy and significant effects in areas including communication, emotional intimacy, and partner behaviour. The authors also reported that improvements could be maintained across short and longer follow-up periods.

Doss et al. (2022) reviewed research conducted between 2010 and 2019 on evidence-based treatments for couple relationship distress. Their review demonstrated continuing empirical support for several couple therapy approaches, while also emphasising the importance of considering treatment characteristics and relationship circumstances when evaluating outcomes.

Kanter et al. (2022) examined whether couple communication predicted subsequent relationship quality and dissolution through a meta-analysis of 64 dyadic studies. The findings indicated that positive and negative communication behaviours were associated with later relationship quality, while negative communication was also associated with relationship dissolution. This evidence reinforces the importance of communication processes in understanding marital conflict.

More recent evidence also supports the usefulness of couple interventions. Joseph et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of couple interventions for marital distress and reported a statistically significant overall effect across the interventions reviewed. The authors, however, noted substantial differences among studies and signs of publication bias. This qualification is important because it demonstrates that although couple interventions have empirical support, their outcomes may vary according to intervention characteristics, participants, and research conditions.

Lebow and Snyder (2022) further observed that couple therapy has developed into a prominent intervention modality with a substantial empirical foundation. Contemporary approaches increasingly recognise the complexity of couple distress and the importance of matching interventions to the needs and circumstances of couples.

Despite this body of evidence, there remains a need for locally situated research. Much of the international evidence is derived from settings with different cultural, institutional, and social conditions from those found in Nigerian communities. The present study therefore contributes local



evidence by examining the relationship between marital counselling and conflict intensity among couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State.

Research Methodology

The study adopted an ex-post facto research design. The design was considered appropriate because the researcher did not manipulate marital counselling as an experimental treatment but examined naturally occurring experiences among the respondents. The original project explicitly described the design as ex-post facto and explained that the variables were studied without experimental manipulation.

For the present paper, the design is interpreted primarily as a correlational approach to examining the association between marital counselling and intensity of marital conflicts. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of relationship rather than definitive proof that counselling caused a reduction in conflict intensity.

The population comprised 403 couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. According to the original project, the population represented marriages recorded in the Esan West marriage registry between 2020 and 2025. A sample of 150 respondents was selected from the population of 403 couples using simple sampling. The project consistently identifies 150 respondents in the methodological and results sections, although an isolated statement in the original document incorrectly refers to 200 students. For this publication manuscript, the documented sample of 150 respondents is retained because it corresponds with the demographic and inferential analyses reported in the results.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire titled Effectiveness of Marital Counselling in Resolving Conflicts and Improving Relationship Satisfaction Questionnaire (EMCRCIRRSQ). For the present paper, only the items relevant to marital counselling and intensity of conflicts were considered. The questionnaire employed a four-point response format comprising Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree, scored 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. The original instrument contained 20 items, although this paper reports only the section relevant to the two variables under investigation.

The instrument was subjected to expert review. Test-retest reliability was used to determine the stability of the instrument. Twenty copies of the questionnaire were administered to 20 couples in Esan Central Local Government Area, which was outside the study area. After an interval of two weeks, the instrument was administered again to the same respondents. The two sets of scores were correlated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation, producing a reliability coefficient of .61. The original project regarded the coefficient as sufficient for the study.

The questionnaires were administered directly to respondents by the researcher with the assistance of two trained research assistants. The completed instruments were retrieved on the same day. The administration exercise lasted two weeks.

Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research question, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to test the hypothesis at the .05 level of significance. A mean benchmark of 2.50 was used for interpreting responses to the four-point rating scale.

Results

Research Question

Does a relationship exist between marital counselling and the intensity of conflicts between couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State?

The original project presented five questionnaire items addressing marital counselling and conflict-related outcomes. The reported means ranged from 2.90 to 3.61, and all five items were interpreted as agreed. Respondents reported that marital counselling made a positive difference in their relationships ($M = 3.61$, $SD = .49$), that its benefits were noticeable in everyday interactions ($M = 3.40$, $SD = .49$), and that counselling helped them identify the root causes of recurring conflicts ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .47$). Respondents also indicated that their relationships felt stronger because of counselling ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .53$) and that the frequency of arguments had decreased since counselling ($M = 2.90$, $SD = .66$).

These descriptive results suggest that the respondents generally perceived marital counselling positively in relation to their experiences of marital conflict. In particular, the responses indicate perceived improvements in understanding recurring conflicts and everyday interactions.

Test of Hypothesis

Hypothesis: There is no significant relationship between marital counselling and the intensity of conflicts between couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State.

Variables	N	df	r	p	Decision
Marital counselling and intensity of conflicts	150	148	.802	.041	Reject H_0

The reported Pearson correlation coefficient was $r = .802$, with a reported probability value of $p = .041$. Since the reported p value was below the .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was rejected. The project therefore reported a statistically significant relationship between marital counselling and intensity of conflicts among couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State.

It is important, however, that the p value be verified against the original dataset before publication. The reported correlation coefficient of .802 for a sample of 150 would ordinarily be



expected to produce a substantially smaller p value than .041. Therefore, the inferential result should be recalculated from the raw data before the manuscript is submitted to a journal.

Discussion of Findings

The finding indicates that marital counselling was significantly related to the intensity of conflicts among couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State, based on the statistical result reported in the original project. The descriptive results further showed that respondents generally perceived counselling as helpful in identifying the causes of recurring conflicts, improving everyday interactions, strengthening relationships, and reducing arguments. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on couple therapy. Roddy et al. (2020) found that couple therapy was associated with improvements in several relationship domains, including communication, emotional intimacy, and partner behaviour. These domains are directly relevant to marital conflict because communication difficulties and maladaptive interaction patterns can contribute to the escalation of disagreements.

The finding is also consistent with Lebow et al. (2012), who reported evidence supporting the effectiveness of couple therapy in addressing relationship distress. Their review highlighted the usefulness of evidence-based couple interventions, particularly approaches that address interactional and emotional processes within intimate relationships.

The present finding can also be understood in relation to communication research. Kanter et al. (2022) found that negative communication behaviours were associated with poorer subsequent relationship outcomes. If counselling assists couples in replacing destructive communication patterns with constructive dialogue, it is reasonable that counselling may be associated with changes in the way marital conflicts are experienced and managed. The result also accords with the contemporary view of couple therapy advanced by Lebow and Snyder (2022), who describe couple therapy as an established intervention for relationship distress. Their review emphasises that contemporary couple interventions are increasingly informed by research concerning relational processes and mechanisms of change.

The result should nevertheless be interpreted carefully. The present study employed an ex-post facto design and Pearson correlation rather than a randomised experimental design. Therefore, the finding establishes an association between the variables within the sample but does not, by itself, establish that marital counselling caused conflict intensity to decrease. Couples who seek counselling may differ from couples who do not seek counselling in important ways, including their level of distress, motivation to improve the relationship, access to professional services, or willingness to change. Consequently, causal conclusions should be avoided.

Another issue concerns the direction of the reported correlation. The original project reports a positive correlation of $r = .802$ between marital counselling and intensity of conflicts. A positive



coefficient means that higher scores on the two measured variables were associated with higher scores on the other variable. This does not, by itself, demonstrate that counselling reduced conflict intensity. The interpretation depends on how the questionnaire items were coded and whether the conflict-intensity measure was reverse scored. The raw dataset and scoring procedure should therefore be checked carefully before publication.

This point is particularly important because the purpose of the study describes marital counselling in terms of reducing conflict intensity. If higher scores on the conflict measure represent lower conflict intensity because the items were positively worded, the direction may have a different substantive interpretation. If higher scores represent greater conflict intensity, however, the positive correlation would require a different explanation. The scoring key should therefore be included in the final manuscript or supplementary material.

Conclusion

The study examined the relationship between marital counselling and intensity of conflicts among couples in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. The descriptive findings indicated generally favourable perceptions of marital counselling, particularly in relation to identifying sources of recurring disagreements, improving day-to-day interaction, strengthening relationships, and reducing arguments. The inferential analysis reported in the original project indicated a statistically significant relationship between marital counselling and intensity of conflicts among couples. The finding provides local evidence that marital counselling is associated with the way couples experience and manage marital conflict. However, because the study employed an ex-post facto correlational design, the finding should be interpreted as an association rather than definitive evidence of causal effectiveness. In addition, the reported correlation and probability value require verification against the original dataset before publication. Subject to verification of the scoring procedure and inferential statistics, the study provides useful evidence supporting continued attention to professional marital counselling as a component of marital conflict management in Esan West Local Government Area.

Recommendations

- Counselling centres, community organisations, religious institutions, and relevant local authorities should support accessible marital counselling services for couples experiencing recurring disagreements.
- Counsellors working with couples should incorporate practical conflict-management skills, including active listening, emotional regulation, constructive expression of needs, negotiation, compromise, and problem solving.

- Marital counselling programmes should consider the cultural, family, religious, and socioeconomic circumstances of couples in Esan communities so that counselling interventions are relevant to their lived experiences.
- Couples should be encouraged to seek professional counselling before disagreements develop into persistent and highly intense conflict patterns.
- Counsellors involved in marital and family services should receive continuing professional development in evidence-based couple interventions and contemporary approaches to relationship distress.
- Community and religious leaders who encounter couples experiencing serious relational difficulties should be encouraged to refer them to appropriately trained counsellors rather than relying exclusively on informal advice.
- Future researchers should employ longitudinal and experimental or quasi-experimental designs to determine more clearly whether structured marital counselling produces reductions in conflict intensity over time.

Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the ex-post facto design limits causal inference. Although the study identifies a relationship between marital counselling and conflict intensity, it cannot conclusively establish that counselling caused changes in conflict intensity. Second, the study relied on self-reported questionnaire responses. Respondents may have provided answers influenced by social desirability, personal perceptions, or their current emotional experiences. Third, the population and sample were restricted to couples within Esan West Local Government Area. Consequently, the findings should not automatically be generalised to all couples in Edo State or Nigeria without further evidence. Fourth, the reported test-retest reliability coefficient of .61 suggests moderate stability and should be considered when evaluating the precision of the instrument. Future studies could strengthen measurement quality through additional reliability and validity evidence. Finally, the reported correlation coefficient and probability value require statistical verification. This is especially important because the reported $r = .802$ and $p = .041$ do not appear to correspond mathematically for a sample of 150. The raw data should be reanalysed before the study is considered publication ready.

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