

A Review of the Effects of Communication in Building Marital Relationship

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ABSTRACT

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Communication is widely regarded as the cornerstone of a successful marital relationship. This paper reviewed the role of communication in fostering intimacy, resolving conflicts, building trust, and maintaining emotional connection in marriages. Drawing on empirical studies and theoretical perspectives, the paper highlights how effective communication enhances marital satisfaction, while poor communication patterns often lead to misunderstandings and marital breakdowns. The seminar concludes by offering recommendations for couples, counsellors, and stakeholders on promoting healthy communication in marriages.

KEYWORDS: Communication, Marriage, Conflict Resolution, Marital Satisfaction, Relationship Building

Introduction

Marriage is widely recognized as one of the most important social institutions that influences human development and social stability. It forms the foundation of the family system and serves as a framework for procreation, companionship, economic cooperation, and emotional support. However, the stability and success of any marital relationship largely depend on the quality of communication between spouses. Marriage, as one of the most significant social institutions, requires consistent nurturing to maintain its stability and satisfaction. Among the many factors that contribute to a healthy marital relationship, communication stands out as a fundamental tool. It is through communication that couples express affection, share values, resolve differences, and plan for the future (Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2010).

Communication is the process by which individuals convey information, thoughts, emotions, and intentions through verbal and non-verbal means. In marriage, it serves as the main vehicle through which partners share their needs, resolve conflicts, express affection, and build trust. According to Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2018), effective communication

enhances emotional intimacy and strengthens marital satisfaction. Conversely, poor communication can result in misunderstandings, unresolved conflicts, and eventual breakdown of the marital bond.

The increasing rate of marital instability and divorce in many parts of the world, including Nigeria, has been attributed to several factors, among which poor communication stands out. According to Gottman (1994), communication patterns can predict the longevity or dissolution of a marriage. His findings suggest that couples who regularly engage in hostile or avoidant communication are more likely to experience dissatisfaction and separation.

In the Nigerian context, cultural and religious expectations often place additional pressures on couples, making effective communication even more critical for marital success. However, many couples lack the necessary communication skills to navigate the complexities of marriage, leading to emotional distance and conflict. Therefore, understanding the effects of communication in building marital relationships is vital for enhancing marital quality and reducing the rate of separation. This paper examines the effects of communication on building marital relationships and underscores its role in promoting marital harmony.

Concept of Communication in Marriage

Communication in marriage refers to the exchange of thoughts, feelings, and meanings between partners through verbal and non-verbal means (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2018). It involves speaking, listening, body language, and emotional expressions that foster understanding. Communication is a central pillar in any human relationship, particularly in marriage. It involves the exchange of messages through verbal and non-verbal means with the aim of achieving understanding and emotional connection (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2018). In marital contexts, communication is essential for expressing affection, resolving conflicts, managing expectations, and planning for the future.

Markman et al. (2010) emphasized that communication serves as the engine that drives relational satisfaction, with healthy communication being associated with greater marital adjustment. Communication includes both content (what is said) and process (how it is said), making tone, body language, and timing crucial to marital dynamics.

Concept of Marital Relationship

A marital relationship is a legally and/or socially recognized union between two individuals that involves emotional, physical, and often economic interdependence (Olson & DeFrain, 2006).

The Role of Communication in Marital Relationships

Enhancing Emotional Intimacy: Communication helps spouses share their inner thoughts and feelings, promoting intimacy and emotional bonding. According to Gottman and Silver (1999), couples who engage in regular and meaningful conversations are more likely to experience emotional closeness. Emotional intimacy is built when couples feel safe to express their thoughts and feelings. Gottman and Silver (1999) identified emotional bids and responses as key factors in building emotional connection. Daily affirmations, empathy, and deep conversations help couples form secure emotional bonds.

1. **Conflict Resolution:** Disagreements are inevitable in any marriage. However, the ability to discuss issues calmly and constructively is key to conflict resolution. Poor

communication patterns such as criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling often lead to escalated conflicts (Gottman, 1994). Disagreements are inevitable in any close relationship, but the manner in which conflicts are managed is critical. Constructive communication allows for disagreements to be resolved without hostility. Couples who use assertive communication and active listening are more likely to reach consensus (Gottman, 1994).

2. **Building Trust and Transparency:** Honest and open communication fosters trust between partners. When spouses feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgment, trust is established, which forms the bedrock of long-lasting relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 2003). Trust in marriage is reinforced through open and honest communication. When couples hide information or manipulate facts, trust is eroded. According to Knobloch and Solomon (2003), relational uncertainty increases when communication becomes inconsistent or vague, resulting in suspicion and emotional distance.
3. **Strengthening Commitment and Understanding:** Effective communication enables partners to align their goals, expectations, and values. This mutual understanding strengthens their commitment and reduces ambiguity in the relationship (Canary & Dainton, 2003).

Effects of Poor Communication in Marriage

A. Marital Dissatisfaction

Marital dissatisfaction is often the first visible consequence of poor communication in a relationship. Couples who are unable to effectively communicate frequently experience misunderstandings, emotional distance, and unmet expectations. According to Amato and Previti (2003), communication problems were cited as one of the leading causes of divorce in the United States. The study, based on qualitative data from divorced individuals, highlighted that poor communication patterns such as constant criticism, defensiveness, and failure to listen contribute significantly to relational breakdown. When spouses feel that their concerns are dismissed or misunderstood, dissatisfaction tends to grow over time, diminishing marital quality and satisfaction. Most of the individuals interviewed reported communication issues as central to their decision to divorce, particularly lack of emotional sharing and chronic arguing (Amato & Previti, 2003).

B. Psychological and Emotional Strain

When communication falters, spouses may begin to feel emotionally isolated, leading to psychological strain. The inability to express oneself or to be heard and understood can result in increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Fincham and Beach (2010) noted that couples experiencing frequent communication breakdowns often feel disconnected, leading to negative emotional states such as resentment, sadness, and loneliness.

Moreover, emotional unavailability and avoidance, forms of poor communication, can prevent partners from forming a secure emotional bond. The absence of emotional intimacy can exacerbate mental health issues within the relationship, as partners are left without emotional support. Communication deficits have been linked to poor emotional regulation, increased depressive symptoms, and greater relational dissatisfaction among married individuals (Fincham & Beach, 2010).

C. Escalation of Conflict and Abuse

Ineffective communication also increases the likelihood of conflict escalation. When couples do not resolve issues through open dialogue, frustrations may build up over time, turning minor disagreements into major confrontations. Karney and Bradbury (1995) observed that poor communication habits such as yelling, name-calling, or stonewalling are significant predictors of marital distress and conflict.

In extreme cases, unresolved communication issues can lead to emotional or physical abuse. The inability to express grievances respectfully or to acknowledge a partner's feelings may result in aggressive or coercive behaviors. Conflict becomes cyclical and chronic when spouses avoid constructive communication, perpetuating a toxic marital environment. Conflict behavior characterized by negative reciprocity and withdrawal is often associated with increased risk of verbal and physical aggression in distressed marriages (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Barriers to Effective Marital Communication

A. Cultural Norms

Cultural and societal expectations often play a crucial role in shaping how couples communicate. In many traditional cultures, open discussions about emotions, sexuality, or finances are discouraged, particularly among women. Olson and DeFrain (2006) emphasized that gender roles and hierarchical marital expectations in such societies limit communicative openness. When one or both partners feel constrained by cultural expectations, they may withhold important information or suppress emotional expression, thereby weakening mutual understanding and trust. In some cultures, emotional restraint and avoidance of confrontation are viewed as virtues, which inadvertently contribute to poor spousal communication (Olson & DeFrain, 2006).

B. Technological Distractions

While digital technologies offer numerous benefits, they can also interfere with intimate communication. The excessive use of smartphones and social media has been linked to a decline in face-to-face interactions among couples. Hertlein (2012) explored how digital distractions shift attention away from interpersonal relationships, contributing to feelings of neglect and disconnection.

Couples may substitute meaningful conversations with screen time, reducing emotional intimacy. Technology can also become a source of conflict through issues such as cyber infidelity, online secrecy, or excessive attachment to devices. Technological devices alter time allocation, accessibility, and boundaries within romantic relationships, often resulting in decreased quality of face-to-face communication (Hertlein, 2012).

C. Stress and External Pressures

Life stressors such as financial difficulties, long working hours, and parenting responsibilities can significantly impair marital communication. Under stress, individuals often become less emotionally available and more reactive, increasing the likelihood of miscommunication. Karney and Bradbury (1995) found that external pressures reduce the cognitive and emotional resources available for effective interaction, making it harder for couples to respond empathetically or problem-solve together. External stress not only disrupts

communication patterns but also interacts with pre-existing vulnerabilities in marital dynamics, exacerbating conflict and dissatisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

D. Poor Communication Skills

Lack of knowledge or practice in communication techniques is a major barrier in many relationships. Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2018) emphasized that some couples do not possess the skills to articulate their emotions, actively listen, or respond constructively during disagreements. Instead, they may rely on avoidance, sarcasm, or passive aggression, all of which harm relational health. Without training in basic communication competencies such as assertiveness, empathy, and reflective listening, misunderstandings are likely to increase. Communication breakdowns often result from basic skill deficits, including lack of listening, inability to validate emotions, and poor regulation of nonverbal cues (Guerrero et al., 2018).

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory, developed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), posits that relationships are formed and maintained based on perceived benefits and costs. In a marital context, effective communication reduces emotional costs and enhances mutual satisfaction, thus increasing the perceived rewards of the relationship.

Symbolic Interactionism

Blumer (1969) introduced Symbolic Interactionism, which explains how individuals create shared meanings through interaction. In marriage, communication helps couples construct a shared reality, define roles, and manage expectations.

Gottman's Sound Relationship House Theory

Gottman (1999) proposed a model where positive communication builds a "sound relationship house." This includes components such as love maps, fondness, turning toward bids for attention, managing conflict, and creating shared meaning—all of which are built through ongoing, effective communication.

Empirical Review

Numerous studies support the link between communication and marital satisfaction. For instance, Fincham and Beach (2010) found that poor communication skills predict lower marital quality and higher divorce rates. Similarly, a study by Amato and Previti (2003) found that communication problems were cited as the most common reason for divorce among American couples.

In Nigeria, Adebayo (2012) conducted a study on marital stability and found that poor communication ranked second only to infidelity as a cause of marital breakdown. Another study by Ojo and Fasakin (2019) in Lagos State revealed that couples who engaged in open discussions reported higher levels of trust and emotional satisfaction.

However, gaps remain in the literature, especially regarding how socio-cultural factors and gender roles influence marital communication in African contexts. Furthermore, the role of technology and media exposure in shaping communication patterns among modern couples remains underexplored.

Strategies for Improving Communication in Marriage

Effective communication is not only vital for the survival of marital relationships but also for enhancing intimacy, trust, and satisfaction. Research and counselling practice have identified practical strategies that couples can adopt to foster healthier communication and resolve conflicts constructively. These strategies include active listening, the use of "I" statements, scheduled conversations, professional counselling, and non-verbal sensitivity.

1. Active Listening

Active listening is a foundational communication skill that involves fully concentrating, understanding, responding, and remembering what the other person says. It requires the listener to set aside their own agenda and focus entirely on the speaker, providing verbal and non-verbal cues of attentiveness such as nodding, maintaining eye contact, and using affirmations like "I understand" or "go on."

According to Nichols (2009), active listening fosters empathy, reduces defensiveness, and creates an atmosphere of mutual respect. It helps couples clarify misunderstandings and deepens emotional connection. Most marital communication failures occur not because partners do not speak, but because they do not listen well (Nichols, 2009). Research by Markman et al. (2010) also supports this, showing that couples who practice active listening report significantly higher relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution outcomes.

2. Use of "I" Statements

"I" statements allow individuals to express their emotions and needs without casting blame or provoking defensiveness in their partner. Instead of saying, "You never listen to me," which may sound accusatory, one might say, "I feel unheard when I try to share my thoughts." Rogers and Farson (1987) emphasized that "I" statements reduce escalation during conflicts and promote constructive dialogue. This technique encourages responsibility for one's own feelings and fosters openness. Using 'I' statements helps prevent blame and allows the speaker to express vulnerability rather than aggression (Rogers & Farson, 1987). Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2018) also note that this communication tool is especially effective in emotionally charged situations, where the risk of misunderstanding is high.

3. Scheduled Conversations

In the busyness of daily life, spontaneous deep communication can be rare. Scheduled conversations provide couples with dedicated time to engage in meaningful dialogue, away from distractions such as television, phones, or work stress. This practice not only enhances communication quality but also signals intentionality and commitment to the relationship.

According to Doherty (2013), structured couple time including weekly check-ins can significantly improve relationship satisfaction and reduce conflict frequency. It provides a platform for addressing concerns, planning family matters, or simply connecting emotionally. Setting aside time each week for couple dialogue serves as a preventive measure against emotional drift and unresolved grievance (Doherty, 2013).

4. Professional Counselling

Engaging the services of a marriage counsellor can be instrumental in teaching effective communication techniques and addressing long-standing relational issues. Counsellors help

couples identify negative communication patterns, build empathy, and learn conflict resolution strategies.

Gottman and Silver (1999) advocate for evidence-based therapy methods, such as the Gottman Method, which includes techniques like soft start-ups, repair attempts, and building love maps all of which enhance communication. Counselling also provides a neutral space where both partners feel safe to express their perspectives. Couples therapy enhances communication by offering structured techniques and guided reflection to rebuild connection and manage conflict (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Fincham and Beach (2010) argue that therapeutic intervention is particularly crucial when couples have entrenched communication problems or face emotional gridlock.

5. Non-Verbal Sensitivity

Communication is not limited to spoken words. Tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and posture all play a significant role in how messages are conveyed and interpreted. Being aware of these non-verbal cues can help avoid unintended meanings or emotional misfires.

Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2018) emphasize that non-verbal communication often reveals more about one's emotions than verbal content. For instance, a partner may say "I'm fine" while their body language clearly suggests otherwise. Misalignment between verbal and non-verbal messages can create confusion or distrust. Marital communication is not only what you say but how you say it through your body, your eyes, and your silence (Guerrero et al., 2018). Cultivating non-verbal awareness enhances emotional attunement, allowing partners to respond with greater sensitivity and empathy.

Improving communication in marriage is not a one-time event but a continuous process. Strategies such as active listening, use of "I" statements, scheduled conversations, professional counselling, and sensitivity to non-verbal cues provide practical pathways for couples to deepen their connection and manage conflicts effectively. These methods not only strengthen emotional bonds but also contribute to long-term marital satisfaction and resilience.

Conclusion

This seminar paper reviewed literature on the role of communication in marital relationships. Effective communication was shown to influence emotional intimacy, conflict resolution, and trust. Several barriers to communication, including cultural norms and stress, were identified. Theoretical perspectives such as Social Exchange Theory and Symbolic Interactionism were used to explain how communication shapes marital dynamics. Empirical studies both locally and internationally confirm that poor communication is a key contributor to marital dissatisfaction and breakdown. The paper also highlighted various strategies for improving communication among couples. The insights gained from this review provide a strong foundation for the current study, which aims to explore communication's impact on marital relationships, particularly within the Nigerian context. The seminar paper therefore, concluded that effective communication is pivotal in building and sustaining a healthy marital relationship. It facilitates emotional intimacy, conflict resolution, and trust-building. On the other hand, poor communication can lead to dissatisfaction, emotional distress, and even marital breakdown. Therefore, cultivating strong communication skills should be a priority for couples, marital counsellors, and family life educators.

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