The Influence of Gender-Role Strain and Marital Intimacy on Spousal Perception of Marital Conflict among Ghanaian Dual Career Couples

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Abstract
Theoretical work on marital conflicts, suggest that perception plays a crucial role in influencing spouses' attitude towards marital conflict. However, relatively little research exists on psychological factors influencing spousal perception of marital conflicts. This study examined the influence of gender-role strain and marital intimacy on spousal perception of marital conflict. Using dual career couples as the target population, 88 respondents answered questionnaire that consisted of the following scales: Gender-Role Conflict Scale I, Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships and Spousal Perception of Marital Conflict Scale. Three hypotheses were formulated to test the relationship between gender-role strain, marital intimacy and spousal perception of marital conflict. Data was analyzed using hierarchical and standard multiple regression methods. Contrary to expectations, none of the hypothesis was supported. However, the study revealed that a higher level of marital intimacy positively influenced spousal perception of marital conflict. These have implications for marital interactions and the development of interventions for couples dealing with marital conflicts.
Keywords – Gender-role strain, marital intimacy, spousal perception of marital conflict.

1. Introduction

Marriage has been described as the most important and fundamental human relationship because it provides the primary structure for establishing a family relationship and rearing the next generation (Rosen-Grandon, Myers & Hattie, 2004). It is so unique that many people agree it holds a high place above all other relationships, because it binds spouses together in a common life in a way unavailable in other relationships. In the Ghanaian society, marriage plays such a significant role both socially and culturally, that, individuals who do not get married after a certain age, experience either overt or subtle pressure from friends and family members to do so as early as possible and thereafter, the couple is expected to enjoy the blessed and harmonious relationship of the marriage, bound together by ties of love, affection, companionship, duties and obligations "till death do them part".

Yet, while marriage seems to be a highly desirable relationship, statistics indicate that marital satisfaction is not easily achieved because it does not always experience the "live happily ever after" syndrome that characterizes most fairy love tales as well as romantic novels and movies. A lot of marriages go through trauma, distress, separations and other equally unpleasant experiences that sometimes live either a partner or both partners emotionally and psychologically scarred if not physically as well. Among the many causes of marital distress and marital disruptions that the literature on marriage has identified is the issue of marital conflict.

Beuhler, Krishnakumar, Stone, Anthony, Pemberton, Gerard, and Barber (1998) define marital conflict as the existence of high levels of disagreements, stressful and hostile interactions between spouses, disrespect and verbal abuse while Cummings (1998, p.60) interprets it as "any major or minor interpersonal interaction that involved a difference of opinion, whether it was mostly negative or even mostly positive." In marital relationships, not all disagreements can be taken as conflict, but all conflicts involve some measure of disagreements. According to Cummings (1998), everyday marital conflict refers to daily interactions, whether major or minor, in which couples have a difference of opinion. Thus, everyday marital conflict includes a range of tactical and emotional expressions, both positive and negative with marital aggression being on the negative extreme of a continuum of marital conflict which includes varying degrees of violent behaviours, comprising of both verbal and physical acts (Cummins, 1998).

Ashford, Lecroy and Lortie, (2006), have postulated that every marital relationship is as unique as the individuals it contains and some degree of conflict is actually necessary to keep a marriage dynamic rather than static. Yet, while conflicts have been associated with negative tendencies such as bitterness, disruption of relationships, poor mental health and sometimes violence, conflicts have also been known to greatly improve the lives of people by challenging their potential and abilities, making them innovative, more open-minded, and generally improving their interpersonal and communication skills. In addition to the discovery by some researchers that a strong relationship exists between productive conflict behaviours and marital satisfaction (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Greef & Bruyne, 2000), other studies have also demonstrated a troubling number of "reversal effects" indicating that greater conflict is a predictor of improved marriage (Fincham & Beach, 1999).

Considering the different outcomes being associated with marital conflicts and its implications for mental, physical, and family health, Fincham (2001) in agreement with other investigators, argues that the role of conflict in marriage should be reconsidered.

Marital conflict could result from a relatively simple issue like how to squeeze paste out of the toothpaste tube to relatively serious issues like extramarital affairs, jealousy and interferences from external family members. Other sources of conflict include differences in perception, verbal and physical abusiveness, personal characteristics and behaviours, perceived inequity in a couple's division of labour, power, problematic drinking and drug use (Abane, 2003; Fincham, 2001). Although conflicts have been found to be notable predictors of marital quality and marital outcomes, several researchers have established that it is not necessarily what happens in the marriage, but how the partners perceive and define what has happened that is critical (Fincham, Bradbury, & Arias, 1997; Gottman, 1999; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994). Perception therefore plays a major role in influencing, understanding and defining conflicts in marriage. There are several factors such as gender, culture, values, experience, personality and race that influence the process of perception such that in a conflict situation, what is actually meant, sometimes eventually gets lost in a firestorm of responses to perceived wrongs (Mackey & O'Brien, 1998). In addition, several studies have revealed that our varying cultural backgrounds influence us to hold certain perceptions about the social structure of our world, as well as the role of conflict in that experience (Acitelli, Douvan & Veroff, 1993). Conflict could therefore be interpreted as either positive or negative depending on the parties involved. Our different backgrounds also influence how we value and perceive substantive, procedural and psychological needs which subsequently tend to influence our willingness to engage in various conflict behaviours. A person's conception, engagement and reaction to conflict therefore are as a result of the process of socialization. Since perception has been identified as playing a critical role in determining marital quality and marital outcomes (Acitelli et al., 1993; Mackey & O'Brien, 1998), it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptual factors at play in marital conflicts. The focus of this study therefore, is to investigate how spouses in dual-career marriages perceive marital conflict through the lenses of gender role strain and marital intimacy.

Another important consideration in this study is the emergence of dual career couples which is gradually becoming an increasingly common feature in the Ghanaian society. It is a recent phenomenon that has been observed in other countries as well and Haddock, Zimmerman, Ziemba and Current (2001) describe it as one of the most significant social transformations taking place in our societies today. According to some researchers, there has been a consistent increase in dual career couples within the past four decades and with dual-career couples now comprising the most common family type, it is important for mental health professionals, employers, and policy makers to understand the unique challenges of this population (Haddock et al., 2001; Saginak & Saginak, 2005). Studies conducted with dual-career couples outside Ghana revealed that many of them experience role strain because of the gendered stereotypes they have adapted from societal expectations and norms (Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2002). It has also been confirmed that even with women entering the labour force, many dual career couples still maintain traditional family roles and the pressure of having to deal with the many competing and conflicting roles they experience have led to negative consequences for them (Faulkner, 2002; Fincham, 2001; King, 2005). With this development comes a myriad of conflict related issues and this phenomenon has also been linked to spouses' perceptions of the quality of their marriages. Considering the fact that most societies in the world are patriarchal, and traditions and culture have greatly influenced a lot of social institutions including marriage, a contemporary phenomenon such as dual career marriages which embody concepts, attitudes, values and behaviours that seem to defy tradition is worthy of attention especially where the concepts of gender and marital conflicts are concerned.

Considering the physical and psychological implications of marital conflicts on couples, Fincham (2001), advocated that in order to deepen understanding on how conflict is experienced by individuals, more studies be conducted on other factors such as the psychological processes involved in the conflict process. This study therefore seeks to discover if gender role strain and marital intimacy can influences spousal perception of marital conflict.

1.1 Objectives of the study
This study sought to achieve the following objectives:
1. To examine the influence of gender role strain on spousal perception of marital conflict.
2. To examine the influence of marital intimacy on spousal perception of marital conflict

1.2 Significance of the study
This study seeks to provide an understanding of how conflict is experienced, understood, interpreted and treated by spouses through the perceptual lenses of gender role strain and marital intimacy. It will also add to the existing literature on marital conflicts among dual career couples as well as providing useful information for marriage and family therapists, educators, and researchers. Finally, it could be used as the bases for developing

interventions for couples struggling with marital conflicts.

2. Literature review

A study conducted by Silverstein, Auerbach and Levant (2002) on gender role strain experienced by fathers who were members of dual-career couples indicated that culture's rigid definition of what is masculine and what is feminine are destructive to the well-being of both men and women. Virtually all the men who participated in their study were found to have experienced significant levels of stress by trying to fulfill both the primary provider role and the nurturing involved father role. All these fathers therefore experienced gender-role strain because the demands on them to fulfill both roles were unattainable. According to Silverstein et al., (2002), their study also confirmed what other researchers (Garnets & Pleck, 1979; O'Niel, 1981a,b, 1982; Pleck, 1981) had observed about the negative effects associated with rigid adherence to traditional gender norms and expectations.

In another related study, Vogel, Wester, Heesacker and Madon (2003) discovered that in spite of women being actively involved in paid labour, many male members of dual-career couples still bore the brunt of the financial responsibilities and pressures of the household whiles the women also bore the caretaker and homemaker responsibilities of the household. As a result of adherence to these gender stereotypes, the female participants reported gender-role strain of having to do majority of the childbearing and household responsibilities while working full-time. The men also reported gender role strain because of the pressure on them to be the primary breadwinners of the home. Vogel et al. (2003) also found that, the men felt isolated from their wives, children and families because of the time they had to spend away from home with work responsibilities.

A similar study by Perrone and Worthington (2001) however, revealed that dual-career couples that negotiate worker and family role responsibilities tended to experience the benefit of decreased role strain. In agreement with Perrone and Worthington (2001), Haddock et al. (2001) also reported that dual-career couples that experience degendered role responsibilities and more egalitarian roles are likely to stay married and maintain higher marital satisfaction. Additionally, Haddock et al. (2001) also confirm that gender stereotypes and role demands create role strain and decreased well-being for couples.

Verhofstadt, Buysse, Devoldre and De Corte (2007), in their study on the influence of personal characteristics and relationship properties on marital support, discovered that relational variables such as intimacy and marital conflicts influence spousal support perception and support behaviours in marriage. According to them, lack of support, inequitable support transactions and disappointed expectations concerning a partner's behavior during support interactions are a major source of conflict that precipitates marital and personal distress in marriage. In support of their prediction, the study revealed that the level of intimacy in the relationship was strongly linked with both husbands' and wives' support perceptions and actual support behaviours. Higher levels of intimacy in a marital relationship resulted in higher levels of perceived support, more positive support behaviours and less negative support behaviours in wives. Likewise, husbands reporting higher levels of intimacy reported higher levels of perceived support and higher levels of positive support behaviours. However, contrary to their expectations, marital conflict was significantly related to husbands support behaviours. The level of marital conflict in a relationship was however a significant predictor of wives' behavior during supportive interactions. Higher levels of marital conflict were associated with lower levels of perceived support in both husbands and wives. The association between the level of intimacy spouses experience in their relationship and support in their relationship proved to be consistent across gender and across the different components of spousal support that were included in the study.

2.1 Statement of hypotheses

For the purposes of this study, the following hypotheses were investigated:
1. A higher level of gender role strain will negatively influence spousal perception of marital conflict.
2. A higher level of marital intimacy will negatively influence spousal perception of marital conflict.
3. Gender-role strain and marital intimacy will interact to influence spousal perception of marital conflict.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research setting

The targeted population for the study was all dual career couples within the Greater Accra Region. Even though dual career couples are likely to be found in all the ten regions of Ghana, the Greater Accra Region was selected primarily by virtue of it being the capital town of Ghana and hence more likely to be inhabited by people who hail from all over the ten regions. Secondly, the Greater Accra Region has a greater number of institutions and organizations in which career people can be found.

3.2 Sample size and technique

Convenience sampling technique was used to select some institutions and organizations within the Greater Accra Region from which a total number of 88 respondents, made up of 44 dual-career couples in a heterosexual marriage which has been contracted customarily, legally or by ordinance were purposively selected.

3.3 Design and instruments

A simple descriptive correlational research design was employed in this study. A 3-part standardized questionnaire including Gender-Role Conflict Scale I (O'Niel, Helms, Gable, David & Wrightsman, 1986), the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (Schaefer & Olson, 1981), and Spousal Perception of Conflict Scale (an adaptation from the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC) developed by Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1992) was used.

4. Results

Multiple regression method was used to test the hypotheses in this study. The first hypothesis states that a higher level of gender role strain will negatively influence spousal perception of marital conflict whilst the second hypothesis also states that a higher level of marital intimacy will negatively influence spousal perception of marital conflict. Hierarchical multiple regression was used in order to determine the amount of variance in the dependent variable accounted for by each of the independent variables as well as the unique relationship that exists between the independent and dependent variables. In addition, Standard regression was used to determine the significant contribution of the independent variables to the model (i.e. perception of marital conflict) in the study.

The prediction that "A higher level of gender role strain will negatively influence spousal perception of marital conflict" was not supported (β= -.06, p>.05), although gender role strain accounted for 0.3% of the variance in perception of marital conflict. This finding confirms the expected direction of the hypothesis, but the result is not statistically significant.

The second hypothesis which states that, ""A higher level of marital intimacy will negatively influence spousal perception of marital conflict" was not supported by the results of this study, however, the expected negative direction was found (β= -.07, p>.05). This finding suggests that increase in marital intimacy resulted in decrease in perception of marital conflict and decrease in marital intimacy resulted in increase in perception of marital conflict. Marital intimacy accounted for 0.5% of the variance in perception of marital conflict, but this variance was not significant in predicting perception of marital conflict.

Finally, the prediction that, gender role strain and marital intimacy will interact to influence spousal perception of marital conflict was not supported (β=.01, p>.05). The interactive term alone accounted for 0.3% of the variance in perception of marital conflict.

To test for the predictive power of the overall model, standard multiple regression was used to test for the predictive effect of gender-role strain and marital intimacy on perception of marital conflict.

The results indicated that gender role strain as well as marital intimacy, did not relate significantly with perception of marital conflict. Thus, the overall model was not significant. Specifically, marital intimacy and gender role strain were not significant in predicting spousal perception of marital conflict (F=.36, p>.05).

5. Discussion

This study investigated the influence of Gender-Role Strain and Marital Intimacy on Spousal Perception of Marital Conflict. The purpose of the study was to discover if gender-role strain and marital intimacy had any influence on spousal perception of marital conflict.

The first hypothesis which states that, "A higher level of gender role strain will negatively influence spousal perception of marital conflict" was not supported (β= -.6, p>.05). Although the finding confirmed the expected direction of the hypothesis, the result was not statistically significant. The theories underlying gender-role strain explain that gender role expectations have negative consequences for the individual and cause them to experience stress because these gender role expectations, conflict with naturally occurring tendencies or personal desires (O'Niel et al., 1995). The literature on marital conflict has also revealed that some marital conflicts have been linked to unfulfilled gender-role expectations (Faulkner, 2002; Perrone & Worthington, 2001) hence giving some support to the negative consequences associated with strict adherence to traditional gender roles. Based on the above arguments, there may be several reasons responsible for the hypothesis not being supported.

Given the fact that the finding in this current study confirmed the existence of the expected relationship between the two variables, howbeit insignificant, suggests that probably, a bigger sample size might have given a clearer picture. There is also the likelihood that cultural, traditional and religious influence which this study did not directly address might have had an influence on the relationship between the two variables hence reducing the negative impact of gender-role strain on spouses' perception of marital conflict. This is because the acceptance and observance of cultural, traditional and religious expectations as well as practices

associated with marital interactions have been known to reduce marital conflict. According to Rosen-Grandon et al. (2004), marital relationships in which there are shared values are those in which conflicts are managed, gender roles are traditional and high priorities are placed on religiosity and parenting. Their findings indicated that relationships in which couples maintained shared values were singularly influenced by adherence to traditional gender roles. Thus, partners who were found to be satisfied with traditional gender roles and the level of conflict management in their marriages as well as shared a common set of values with their spouses, tended to be satisfied in their marriages. Their findings also supported earlier studies (Craddock, 1991; Greenstein, 1995) which found that there is less conflict when spouses subscribe to traditional gender roles.

Another probable reason for the rejection of the hypothesis could be based on the findings of Saginak and Saginak (2005) who reported that gender stereotypes and family and work responsibilities are becoming redefined by society as it moves forward from its outdated gender perceptions. It is therefore possible that the respondents in this study, by virtue of their gender orientation, educational background and other socio-economic characteristics might have learnt to deal with their gender-role strain in terms of re-defining their gender-role expectations as well as accessing some forms of social support hence reducing its impact on their perception of marital conflicts. Also in consistency with the findings of Perrone and Worthington (2001) and Haddock et al. (2001) it is possible that couples in this current study have learnt to negotiate worker and family role responsibilities or experience degendered role responsibilities and also probably possess more egalitarian views of a marital relationship hence their observed high role strain did not significantly influence their perception of marital conflict.

The second hypothesis which states that "A higher level of marital intimacy will negatively influence spousal perception of marital conflict" was not supported by the findings in this study. However, the expected negative direction was found (β= -.7, p>.05). This finding suggests that increase in marital intimacy resulted in decrease in perception of marital conflict and decrease in marital intimacy resulted in increase in perception of marital conflict.

Previous studies have found that couples who experienced a high level of marital intimacy usually perceived less marital conflict. According to Fincham (2001) and Strackbein (2001), a higher level of marital intimacy is positively associated with higher marital quality thus indicating either the absence of or the existence of low levels of conflict. Other studies also reported that couples who experience higher levels of marital intimacy tend to exhibit more positive affect, show higher levels of trust, commitment, satisfaction and interdependence, and are generally happy and positive about their relationship (Bellah et al., 1985; Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Such couples were also found to have a positive attitude towards conflict.

Though the findings in this current study indicate a positive relationship between a high level of intimacy and a positive perception of marital conflict, it was not significant. The role that marital intimacy plays in reducing both the actual presence and the perception of marital conflict as found in previous studies, may have been responsible for the rejection of the hypothesis. As described by Schaefer and Olson (1981), the process of attaining marital intimacy encompasses certain components including, open communication, acceptance, readiness to apologize and forgive, tenderness and mutual trust. The development and exercising of these elements in the marriage in order to attain and maintain marital intimacy, are likely to make couples go beyond their personal interests to pursue whatever works best for their marital relationship. Thus it could be possible that couples in this study who experience high levels of marital intimacy may have created an appropriate platform for dealing with their differences in a way that enabled them not to perceive conflict negatively.

The findings of this study did not support the third hypothesis that, gender role strain and marital intimacy will interact to influence spousal perception of marital conflict (β=.01, p>.05). The interaction between gender role strain and marital intimacy accounted for only 0.5% and 0.3% respectively of the variance in perception of marital conflict. This implies that the overall model cannot be used in predicting spousal perception of marital conflict.

Based on the findings that have already been discussed, it could be likely that the hypothesis was rejected based on the same reasons that hypotheses 1 and 2 were rejected. It is therefore possible that factors other than the variables studied, such as culture, religion and even demographic characteristics may play a more influential role in determining spousal perception of marital conflict.

6. Recommendation
The scope of the study was limited to only dual career couples in the Greater Accra Region. This implies that the findings cannot be generalized to other populations. Apart from the need for the replication of this study, future researchers should also consider the role of spousal or social support in influencing the impact of gender-role strain on perception of marital conflict. Finally, future researchers could also consider using the variables investigated in this study with dual-earner couples, couples with one income earner as well as the uneducated folks in the Ghanaian setting.

7. Conclusion

The issue of marital conflict has received much attention from researchers because of the critical role it plays in the determination of marital outcomes. The extant literature on the subject has also revealed the causes of conflict as well as the techniques for managing them. In spite of the many interventions available to couples to deal with marital conflicts, many marriages continue to suffer the plagues associated with it hence creating the need to study other processes involved in the conflict interaction. This study therefore provided a unique opportunity to study the individual and interactive influence of gender-role strain and marital intimacy on spousal perception of marital conflict. The study was also targeted at dual-career couples which is becoming a growing phenomenon in Ghana.

The results of the study indicate that although there was evidence of the negative influence of gender-role conflict on the perception of marital conflict, it was not statistically significant. Also, some of the findings of the study gives an indication of the positive role that marital intimacy plays in influencing spouses to have a positive attitude towards marital conflict. This study thus provides additional useful information that could be used for further studies on the subject or for the development of other forms of interventions that could help couples dealing with marital conflicts. Further research is therefore needed to further explore the relationship among the variables and their impact on marital conflicts.

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