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Effect of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on Dysfunctional Cognition Among Couples in Marital Conflicts in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated the effect of cognitive behavioral therapy on dysfunctional cognition among couples in marital conflict in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. Two research objectives and two null hypotheses guided the study. Quasi-experimental design was adopted for the study with a population of sixty-eight (68) couples experiencing marital conflict and have reported their cases in a social welfare center in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. A sample of twenty (20) couples were selected using multistage sampling techniques consisting of purposive and proportionate sampling. A questionnaire was adapted and modified as the instrument for data collection to measure cognitive distortion and unrealistic expectations, specifically for the study's purpose, resulting in the creation of the Dysfunctional Cognition Questionnaire (DCQ). The DCQ was validated by three experts from Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, in the Departments of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling, Measurement and Evaluation. The study employed a pretest-posttest design with a single test group, which participated in nine therapy sessions, each lasting 60-90 minutes. The DCQ, comprising two sections - cognitive distortions and unrealistic expectations - was used to collect data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' cognitive patterns and expectations before and after the therapy sessions. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis, with paired sample t-tests that was conducted at 0.05 level of significance to determine the effect of cognitive behavioral therapy while on both null hypotheses. The findings from the study revealed that: cognitive behavioural therapy does not have any significant effect on unrealistic expectations among couples in marital conflict in Federal capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria ($p = 0.781$, $t\ cal = 0.280$); cognitive behavioral therapy has significant effect on cognitive distortions among couples in marital conflict in Federal capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria ($p = 0.000$, $t\ cal = 10.955$). Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that: Mental Health Professionals with other stake holders working with couples in conflict at various levels in FCT Abuja, Nigeria, should combine CBT with other approach to more effectively address unrealistic expectations

Keywords: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Marital Conflict, Dysfunctional Cognition, Cognitive Restructuring and Unrealistic Expectations.

Introduction

Marriage is a fundamental human relationship and a cornerstone of any society. It is a culturally, religiously, and socially recognized union between two individuals, typically a man and woman, referred to as husband and wife. As the oldest institution since the creation of mankind, marriage is considered one of life's most significant events, alongside birth and death. Across tribes, societies, and religious affiliations, marriage remains an essential aspect

of human life. Through marriage, families are formed, and it is perceived by many as vital, giving meaning to life itself. Consequently, the family becomes a fundamental institution in society, playing an integral role in socializing children, who eventually form their own families through marriage.

Every marriage is unique due to the distinct individuals involved, who come from different family backgrounds with individual personality traits, orientations, and ideas. This uniqueness can sometimes lead to difficulties in relating to one another, making conflict or disagreement an inevitable aspect of marriage. According to Johnson, (2020) Marital conflict refers to the persistent and recurring patterns of negative interactions, emotional disconnection, and unresolved issues that erode the quality and stability of the marital relationship. Marital conflict also denotes incompatibility, views, or clash of interest, disagreement, arguments, tension and crises between married couples (Ogbodu, Nwankwo & Nkoku, 2022). Gottman, (2019) emphasized that marital conflict involves chronic and intense disputes, criticism, defensiveness, and emotional withdrawal, which can lead to feelings of resentment, hurt, and hopelessness in the relationship. Marital conflict is a pervasive issue in Nigeria, with couples in Abuja facing unique challenges in maintaining healthy relationships. Dysfunctional cognition, marked by unrealistic expectations and cognitive distortions, significantly contributes to marital conflict.

Unrealistic expectations refer to beliefs or assumptions about one's partner, marriage, or relationship that are not grounded in reality. According to Galician (2007), these expectations are often based on idealized or romanticized notions of love, relationships, or marriage, and can be influenced by societal norms, media portrayals, or personal experiences. They can be about various aspects of the relationship, such as emotional fulfillment, communication styles, conflict resolution, intimacy and sex, financial management, household responsibilities, or personal freedoms. Unrealistic expectations can significantly contribute to marital conflict when reality fails to meet these high expectations, disappointment and frustration can set in, leading to conflict. Moreover, unrealistic expectations can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications, as partners may assume their expectations are shared or understood. This can create unmet emotional or physical needs, leading to feelings of resentment and conflict, this was ascertained by Skinner (2019) who asserted that unrealistic expectations could create a sense of entitlement in marriage, leading to conflict.

Furthermore, unrealistic expectations in marriage refer to unattainable standards for one's partner or relationship, often based on misconceptions, personal experiences, societal norms, and misunderstandings. These expectations can lead to inconsistencies between what couples expected and what they experience in reality, negatively affecting marital satisfaction and adjustment (Hall & Adams, 2011). When couples have unrealistic expectations, they may experience disappointments and unhappiness, leading to negative labeling and irrational reasoning towards each other. Unrealistic expectations according to Cohen, (2020) can cause disillusionment and dissatisfaction in marriage make partners inflexible, unwilling to compromise or adapt to changing circumstances, leading to conflict. By recognizing and addressing unrealistic expectations, couples can work towards building a more realistic and fulfilling relationship, reducing the likelihood of conflict and strengthening their bond.

Cognitive distortions are faulty or biased ways of thinking about self and the environment. Cognitive distortions are beliefs and thought patterns that are irrational, false, or inaccurate, and have the potential to cause serious damage to the sense of self, confidence, and ability to succeed. Cognitive distortions, includes overgeneralization, blame-shifting, and catastrophizing. These distorted thoughts and beliefs can be subtle and difficult to recognize, making it challenging to change. Cognitive restructuring, helps individuals

identify and challenge negative thought patterns and behaviors that contribute to marital conflict, promoting more constructive communication and problem-solving skills (Epstein & Zheng, 2020). Cognitive distortions are unhelpful patterns of thinking that do not accurately represent what is happening. Although it's normal to make sense of situations through cognitive distortions and can lead to negative emotions, maladaptive behaviors, and intimacy problems. The first step in addressing a distortion is to look at thinking rather than looking through thinking. Then, consider if there's a better way of seeing a situation. CBT was developed by Aaron Beck in the 1960s, as a psychological approach that combines psychotherapy and behavior therapy to change negative thought patterns and behaviors. According to Schwart (2019), CBT is based on the concept that human thoughts and feelings, physical sensations and actions are interconnected, and that negative thoughts and feelings can trap the individual in vicious cycles. Consequently, CBT aims to help individuals manage symptoms that can lead to a more productive lives by emphasizing the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, (Halford & Snyder (2020).

The effectiveness of CBT in specifically targeting unrealistic expectations and cognitive distortions among couples in marital conflict in Abuja remains unexplored. Given the high divorce rate among couples in Abuja and the prevalence of marital conflict in Nigeria, dysfunctional cognition is likely a significant contributing factor. Since CBT has shown efficacy in improving relationship satisfaction globally, this study aims to investigate its effectiveness in addressing dysfunctional cognition, specifically unrealistic expectations and cognitive distortions, among couples in marital conflict in Abuja, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Marriage is often entered into with high expectations of love, happiness, and fulfillment. However, couples in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria, experience persistent conflict, which can contribute to various problems in marital conflicts, including communication breakdown, Unrealistic expectations, dysfunctional cognitions, misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and hurtful comments. It can be recalled that an Abuja-based lawyer, Annnebrafa, Esq took to her Twitter handle on February 2020 to claim that "over 4,000 couples applied for divorce in the Federal Capital Territory in less than two months, "4,000 divorce applications in Abuja already and the year just started. Some of these marriages were less than a year old couples.

Marital conflict is usually as a result of unresolved issues caused by cognitive distortions and can prevent couples from addressing and resolving underlying issues, leading to ongoing conflicts, when there is conflict, trust becomes the order of the day and the unrealistic expectations will bring about stress and frustration that can erode trust, making it challenging to rebuild. Exaggeration of minor issues can cause small misunderstandings to blow up into huge arguments, causing unnecessary stress and frustration. Unrealistic expectations can lead to assumptions that one partner should always know what the other wants or needs without communicating, while misconceptions about roles and responsibilities can result into unfair assumptions about who should handle household chores or financial decisions. Additionally, cognitive distortions like overgeneralization, emotional reasoning, jumping to conclusions, magnifying or minimizing, personalization and blame-shifting can further fuel conflicts, leading to defensiveness, hurt feelings, emotional disconnection, lack of intimacy and trust and feelings of frustration, despair and hopelessness.

Despite the importance and severity of marital conflicts, the role of cognitive distortions in causing these conflicts to have not fully explored the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring through cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) as a solution in effectively reducing marital conflict by addressing unrealistic expectations and dysfunctional cognitions among couples in Abuja. Therefore, this study aims to bridge

this knowledge gap by investigating the effectiveness of CBT in reducing marital conflict, with a specific focus on its impact on unrealistic expectations and dysfunctional cognitions among couples

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study was to determine the effect of cognitive behavioral therapy on dysfunctional cognition among couples in marital conflict in Federal Capital Territory Abuja. The specific objectives were to:

1. examine the effects of cognitive behavioral therapy on unrealistic expectations towards marriage
2. assess the effects of cognitive behavioral therapy on cognitive distortions among couples in marital conflict in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant effect of cognitive behavioral family therapy on unrealistic expectation among couples in marital conflict in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja Nigeria.

2. There is no significant effect of cognitive behavioral therapy on cognitive distortions among couples in a marital conflict in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja Nigeria.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest design employing only a test group. The pretest - posttest design is a research design used to evaluate the effect of an intervention or treatment on a dependent variable. The pretest aspect assessed the participants before the intervention. The initial measurement served as a baseline that was used to establish the participants' initial status. After the pretest was the intervention/treatment stage to the respondents which was aimed at changing the dependent variable. After the intervention was the posttest. At the posttest level, participants were assessed again after the intervention (post-test). This final measurement evaluates the effect of the intervention on the dependent variable

Population for the Study

The population of the study consisted of 68 couples who had reported their partners for established marital conflicts to a social welfare center in Abuja, between 2015 and September 2019.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

A sample of twenty (20) couples were selected from the population using multistage sampling techniques consisting of proportionate and purposive sampling methods.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument for Data collection was a questionnaire on unrealistic expectation and cognitive distortion that was adapted and modified to suit the purpose of the research. The questionnaire was in two sections stated as follows:

Section A: Unrealistic Expectations: this was designed to measure respondents' responses on unrealistic expectations towards spouse and marriage.

Section B: Cognitive Distortions: the inventory of Cognitive Distortion (ICD) was adapted from Ditomassio & Yurica (2002) and was modified to suit the objective of the study. It was designed to measure responses to cognitive distortions. Individual cognitions were assessed by aggregating responses to ten question items (11-20) that illustrates how cognitive distortions can contribute to marital conflict.

Procedure for Data Collection

Three (3) research assistants were trained on the nature of the research before the commencement of the study. The study was conducted within nine (9) sessions for 60 - 90 minutes per session and the time of the next session was determined at the end of each session. Breakdown of activities for the period was announced, the researcher informed the participants that each session involved group therapy, feedback and discussions based on previous and present sessions with homework at the end of each session.

Breakdown of Activities for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on Couples in Marital Conflict

Week and Session	Areas Therapy and	Summarized Description of Content In each the Sessions	Objectives of each Session and Assignn
1	Familiarization and General Orientation	Questionnaire were administered for pretest in this session after familiarization with researcher	a) To familiarize with the participants, explaining the methods and the goals of t sessions. b) To create a conducive atmosphere for discussion sessions. c) To administer pre-test questionnaire.
2	Cognitive behavioral therapy and Marital relationships	General discussion on cognitive behavioral family therapy and unrealistic expectations, (beliefs and fanciful imaginations) in the marital relationships	a) the researcher started by explaining th each participant has two minds, these bei the conscious and the subconscious. The conscious mind belongs to the individual the present or current state while the subconscious mind belongs to the indivic earlier or previous environment. The late include learned attitudes from one's pare friends and the home environments that she had previously lived. To achieve this, person must deliberately think positive thoughts towards oneself, and others irrespective of one's past experiences or t labeling of one by others.
2b			b) Participant s were made to identify th thought patterns are linked to their feelin and feelings are further linked to behavic actions, which are linked to their feelings Feelings are further linked to behaviors o actions, which inadvertently lead to their —trouble spots‖ i. The expectations that couples bring int marriage or individuals ii. Harmful and helpful expectations iii. How to cope when initial expectations
	Unrealistic expectations towards partner and marriage		
3&4	Cognitive Distortions and Restructuring	In cognitive restructuring, beliefs, interpretations, individual self - talk and distorted cognitive processes will be intervened.	a.) to identify ineffective cognitive distortions b. to teach participants the logical and organi thinking methods

Procedure for Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis, with paired sample t-tests used to test the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance

Results and Discussion

Results of the data generated are presented in the tables below:

Table 1 shows a list of statements about unrealistic expectations among couples in marital conflict responses, before and after a test. Each statement was rated on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. The first column shows the statements, the second column shows the average rating (X) for each statement before the test, and the third column shows the standard deviation (SD) for those ratings. The fourth and fifth columns show the average rating and standard deviation for each statement after the test. The first statement: "I could not accept it if my partner disagreed with me." Before the test, the average rating for this statement was 3.100 with a standard deviation of 0.89. After the test, the average rating decreased to 1.75 with a standard deviation of 0.79. This means that, on average, participants were less likely to strongly disagree with this statement after the test compared to before. One significant finding is that, after the test, participants showed a decrease in their agreement with the statement "I could not accept it if my partner disagreed with me" (average rating decreased from 3.10 to 1.75). This suggests that the test (intervention) was effective in reducing participants' tendency to expect absolute agreement from their partner, a common unrealistic expectation that can contribute to marital conflict.

Table 1: Pre-test and Post-test Mean Responses of Couples in Marital Conflict from Unrealistic Expectations before and after therapy sections

S/n	UNREALISTIC EXPECTTIONS ITEMS	PRE-TEST		POST TEST		DECIS
		X	SD	X	SD	
1	I expect my partner to never disagree or argue with me, and if they do, it's a sign of a major problem in our relationship.	3.10	0.89	1.75	.79	Retain
2	I would get very upset if my partner did not recognize how I was feeling.	2.80	0.59	2.50		Retain
3	A good sexual partner can get him/herself aroused for sex whenever I desire.	3.18	1.64	3.10	.89	Retain
4	People who have a close relationship can sense each other's needs as if they could read each other's minds.	1.95	1.53	3.30		Retain
5	I believe my partner should intuitively know my thoughts, feelings, and needs without me having to communicate them explicitly	1.48	1.48	2.30	1.01	Retain
6	I think my partner and I should always understand each other without having to talk about it.	2.65	1.53	2.60	.93	Retain
7	I believe my partner and I have a special connection that lets us know what the other is thinking or feeling without asking.	3.325	1.24	2.55	.79	Retain
8	My partner would fit my ideal standards of physical beauty/handsomeness.	3.375	1.50	2.70	.76	Retain
9	When i got married, I expected that i could spend a lot of time with my spouse.		1.60	3.20	.79	Retain
10	I do not expect to have a great deal of conflict with my husband/wife	2.700	1.442	3.05	.81	Retain

Table 2 shows the summary of the descriptive and inferential statistics of cognitive-behavioral therapy on Unrealistic Expectations among couples in marital conflict in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. The computed means of Unrealistic Expectation are 36.125 and 36.500 by couples before and after exposure to cognitive behavioral family therapy, indicating a decrease with 0.375 in the mean after the exposure which implies that cognitive behavioral family therapy has no effect on Unrealistic Expectations of couples in marital conflict towards marriage in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria.

Table 2: Descriptive and Inferential Statistics of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy on Unrealistic Expectations among Couples in Marital Conflict in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria.

Variable	Test groups	N	Mean	STD	Mean diff	Df	T cal	P value
Unrealistic Expectation	Pretest Unrealistic Expectation	40	36.13	6.58	0.38	39	-.280	0.78
	Post Test unrealistic Expectation	40	36.50	3.89				

P value > *0.05, t cal* < *1.96 t crit at df 39*

Table 3: presents the descriptive statistics summary of cognitive-behavioral therapy on Cognitive Distortion among couples in marital conflict in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. The computed group means for Cognitive Distortions before and after exposure to cognitive behavioral therapy are 33.750 and 23.225 respectively for couples, indicating a significant reduction of Cognitive Distortion by a mean of 10.525 after exposure to the therapy. This suggests that cognitive behavioral family therapy has a positive effect on couples' cognitive distortion levels in marital conflicts within the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria.

Table 3: Pre-test and Post-test Mean Responses of Couples in Marital Conflict from Cognitive Distortions of couples before and after therapy Sections

S/N	Cognitive Distortions	Pre-Test		Post Test		Decision
		X	SD	X	SD	
1	My partner can only say nice things to me because (s) he wants something or because he wants to flatter me	2.45	1.23	2.30	.89	Rejected
2	When my partner continues to come back late from work, it therefore means that (s) he must be having an affair	2.35	1.44	1.35	1.04	Rejected
3	When my partner turns me down for a date on Saturday night, it therefore means I am rejected and will always be	2.00	1.13	1.45	1.01	Rejected
4	I believe my partner is always thinking about me in a negative way	1.75	1.26	1.45	.93	Rejected
5	When my partner reads my text and doesn't reply, I interpret it to mean that he does not care about me and that usually hurts me badly.	1.67	0.97	1.25	.79	Rejected
6	My feelings are always an accurate reflection of the way things work in our marriage	1.80	0.91	1.35	.79	Rejected
7	When my partner forgets to kiss me on arrival from a trip, it there means that his love for me is no more.	2.25	1.60	1.35	0.79	Rejected
8	I need a lot of praise from my partner to feel very good about myself	1.90	0.99	1.25	0.89	Rejected
9	Whenever anything goes wrong in our relationship, my partner is usually the one that is responsible.	2.40	1.40	1.25	0.81	Rejected
10	1 make decisions concerning my partner on the basis of my feelings	2.77	1.76	1.73	0.81	Rejected

Table reveals that the p-value is 0.000 and the p-value for a level of significance is 0.05, indicating that there is a significant effect of cognitive behavioral therapy on Cognitive Distortion among couples in marital conflict in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. The null hypothesis stating no significant effect was rejected since the p-value of 0.000.

Table 4: Descriptive and inferential Statistics of Effect of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy on Cognitive Distortion among Couples in Marital Conflict in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria

Variable	Test groups	N	Mean	STD	Mean diff	Df	T cal	P value
Cognitive Distortion	Pretest Cognitive Distortion	40	33.750	4.133				
					10.525	39	10.955	0.000
	Post Test Cognitive Distortion	40	23.225	3.332				

P value < 0.05, t cal > 1.96 t crit at df 39

Discussion of Findings

The finding in table 3.are contrary to those reported by Güven and Sevim (2007), who revealed that unrealistic expectations in marriage may lead to disappointment and unhappiness between spouses. However, it seems that married couples are so attached

to their own views about marriage despite its potential negative impact. These tenacious attachment to unrealistic expectations towards marriages regardless of the detrimental effect to their lives and relationship may be due to societal portrayals through mass media promoting unrealistic expectations as standard romantic behavior models.

The finding in table 3 supports Grohol's discovery (2016) which revealed that inaccurate thoughts reinforce negative emotions causing conflict in marriage. The findings from the study is also in line with Goldberg (2017) which found that cognitive restructuring methods can help identify and change inaccurate negative thinking leading to marital conflict. The findings have also supported Halford and Snyder (2020) which shows that CBT can help couples identify and modify maladaptive patterns of thinking, feeling and behavior that contribute to relationship distress.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings, it was concluded that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is very effective in reducing cognitive distortion among couples in marital conflicts. However, it showed no efficacy whatsoever when applied towards lowering unrealistic expectation levels of couples in marital conflicts in Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. These findings suggest that CBT may be tailored to specifically address unrealistic expectations while continuing to address cognitive distortions.

The following recommendations were made:

1. Mental Health Professionals such as therapists, counselors, or psychologists in Family and child Development should combine CBT with other approaches to more effectively address unrealistic expectations.
2. Stakeholders in marriage and marriage-related issues should encouraged couples experiencing marital conflicts to undergo regular Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) sessions as a proactive approach that can address negative thought patterns at the earliest signs of conflict.

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