

Conflict in Marriage: A Philosophical Search For an Authentic Existence

Ejikemeuwa J. O. Ndubisi

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies Tansian University, Umunya, Anambra State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Conflict among human beings is an existential reality. When two or more persons are in a relationship, there is a possibility of conflict. It is an existential truism that conflict exists in marriage. Sometimes conflict in marriage can be very disastrous; it can lead to divorce or death. The pertinent questions now are: What are the basic causes of conflict in marriage? Is authentic existence a possibility in marriage? Therefore, employing the philosophical methods of phenomenology and hermeneutics, this study attempts to answer the above and the related questions. This study observes that though conflict is a natural phenomenon, no marriage can authenticate its existence in conflict. It further observes that conflict in marriage must come; but on no account should the happiness of the couple be jeopardized. The paper argues that conflict is antithetical to authentic human existence. Therefore, this study makes some recommendations on how to eliminate the negative effects of conflict in marriage in order to affirm and maintain an authentic existence in marriage.

Keywords: Conflict, Marriage, Authentic Existence, Conflict Resolution

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a union of a man and a woman as life partners. This is the general notion about marriage. It is the coming together of two people as husband and wife. Simply put, marriage is a social institution whereby spouses engage in a contract that establishes rights and obligations between them. This implies that marriage entails intimate relationship between spouses. A husband and a wife are expected to interact with each other in a deeper level. But experience has shown that as spouses interact and try to find meaning in their marriage, they oftentimes disagree about issues and also quarrel about certain things. Conflict in marriage is the aspect of reality that stares everybody in the face. It is what we witness every day. We have witnessed series of conflict between husbands and wives. The talk about marital conflict is simply stating the obvious. Our contemporary society has

witnessed different levels of marital conflict. It is a historical fact that there are some spouses who killed their partner as a result of marital conflict. Also, we have witnessed some spouses sustaining indelible injury and some marriages broken because of improper handling of marital conflict.

Conflict in marriage is an existential reality. But the pertinent questions that disturb the mind of the researcher are: Does marriage authenticate its existence in conflict? What actually is authentic existence in marriage? The attempt to address these and the related questions is the thrust of this study. The study presents a general notion of conflict and marital conflict; it analyzed, in brief, some common factors for marital conflict. The study further discusses on the authentic existence in marriage. It points out some tips for authentic existence in marriage and later ends with a conclusion.

CONFLICT AND MARITAL CONFLICT: A BRIEF EXPOSÉ

From its etymological understanding, the term, conflict, is derived from the Latin word “confligere” which simply means to clash or to strike together. The implication of this etymological understanding is that conflict occurs when two things or more clash. Conflict is a phenomenon that we observe each day. Both the living and the non-living things experience conflict in varied ways and degrees. However, our concern here is the type of conflict that exists among human beings.

Conflict has to do with the clash of interests between two or more persons. Conflict is also a kind of contradiction that arises among people that share varied ideological systems, religious beliefs, cultural values, family and social backgrounds, among others. It is a struggle between two or more opponents. Kriesberg (1993)[1] sees conflict as a “relationship between two or more parties who feel they have incompatible goals’ (p. 17). This implies that when there are mutually exclusive goals, conflict is bound to arise. In this sense, conflict is also referred to as an act of antagonism, strife, or hostility. Conflict arises

when people have opposing views about a particular thing. Ojiji (2009)[2] observes that “Conflict is said to occur when one party perceives the action of another as blocking the opportunity for the attainment of a goal” (p. 117). The fact is that when two persons strive for something which both of them cannot have, conflict abounds. Conflict oftentimes arises when two persons or more stick to different methods for dealing with a particular situation. Conflict is that aspect of reality that stares everybody in the face. It is a result of human interaction and interrelationship. It means that we cannot talk of any human interaction that is absolutely devoid of conflict.

Conflict in marriage is a kind of disagreement or deep misunderstanding that exists between a husband and wife. Nwude (1995)[3] sees marital conflict as a kind of struggle that exists between spouses. Conflict arises in marriage as a result of improper handling of family and other related issues. Omeje (2014)[4] opined that “Marital conflict is not just a difference or disagreement of opinion. Rather it is a series of events that have been poorly handled in a marriage relationship” (p. 10). Marital conflict can be very destructive or constructive depending on how it is handled. This means that the nature of conflict is not all about negativity. Marital conflict, if properly handled, has the capacity to bring about growth and development between a husband and a wife.

COMMON FACTORS FOR CONFLICT IN MARRIAGE

Every spouse is a unique and distinct being. And so no two married couple are exactly the same. The way and manner a particular married couple interact may not be exactly the way and manner another married couple interact. What may constitute a factor for conflict in one family may not be given any significant consideration in another family. The fact is that factors for conflict in marriage vary; they are highly dependent on the individual couple and their environment. This notwithstanding, it has been observed that there are some common factors for conflict in marriage. We shall make attempt to highlight some of them below:

DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS

Traditionally, a man and a woman that unite in marriage are not likely to come from the same family background. They may not even come from the same cultural, education., or social background. So for the fact that they share varied views about things and issues in life constitute a factor for conflict. History records of a Christian man marrying a Moslem woman; a Nigerian marrying an American.

PREJUDICE

This is another factor for marital conflict. Prejudice has to do with preconceived idea about the other person. It also has to do with misunderstanding of the actions of the other person without any rationally justifiable basis. Experience has shown many conflict situations in marriage that lingered for years because of prejudice. In this type of scenario, the man would think that the woman is not sincere to him; and so he finds fault in whatever the woman does; and vice versa. Prejudice also has to do with the act of being judgmental about the behaviours of another. The major problem of prejudice is that it blurs the vision of the prejudiced and makes him/her not to see things as they really are. This is a serious factor for marital conflict.

INFIDELITY

Another major factor for conflict in marriage is infidelity. This has to do with a situation whereby either the husband or the wife engages in extramarital affair. It is a breach of marital contract. At wedding, both husband and wife promised to be faithful to each other. So any attempt to break the promise brings about a situation of marital conflict. Infidelity, it has been observed, is a potential time bomb. Experience shows that infidelity could be as a result of keeping wrong company, denial of sex by either the husband or the wife, maintaining intimacy with an old friend, a colleague or a business partner; lack of self-control, lack of affection, lack of sexual fulfilment from the spouse, lack of active sex life,

lack of emotional intimacy, among others. The point is that no matter the cause, infidelity is a serious factor for many broken marriages in our contemporary society.

FINANCIAL PROBLEM

It is said that the love of money is the root of all evil. The same can be said of marital conflict. Love of money is a factor for conflict in marriage. Anderson (2011)[5] observes that financial problem is an age-long factor for marital conflict. She noted that “if left unchecked, financial problems can ultimately destroy a marriage” (para. 1). Financial problems occur when the spouses do not practice joint-spending or when a particular spouse does not want the partner to know about his/her income. This brings about suspicion which triggers marital conflict. Other issues relating to financial problems in marriage include living above one’s income, careless and unplanned spending, being too materialistic, economic hardship, etc. The fact is that the way financial issues are handled can either make or mar marriage relationship. Fox, Benson, De Maris and Van Wyk (2002)[6] and Benson, Fox, De Maris and Van Myk (2003)[6] argued that financial problems engender serious marital conflict especially among young couples.

EXTERNAL INFLUENCE

One of the easiest ways for conflict to arise in marriage is through the external influence. External influence could be in-laws, brothers, sisters, friends, colleagues, etc. These people, if not properly checked, can constitute a serious factor for conflict in marriage. They interfere in the affairs of the spouses and oftentimes wield unnecessary influence. But the fact is that they can only interfere if the spouses allow them.

INFERTILITY / LATE ARRIVAL OF CHILDREN

It is a general belief among African people that one of the reasons for marriage is procreation. So as soon as a marriage is contracted and there is delay in the arrival of children, misunderstanding may ensue. Late arrival of children could be as a result of infertility or some medical problems. It could also be as a result of ignorance on the part of

the couple. Experience has shown that there are some couples that lack adequate knowledge about ovulation and the related issues. This lack of proper knowledge may constitute a cause for late arrival of children. Be it as it may, infidelity / late arrival of children, if not properly handled, can lead to marital breakdown.

MALE-CHILD PREFERENCE

There is this general notion that a male-child is preferred to a female-child. This preference, according to Seager (2009)[7] is attributed to religious, cultural and economic factors. And as such, every couple, especially in Nigeria, would like to have a male-child. So the inability to have a male-child has constituted a major factor for marital conflict. Omeje (2014)[4] argues that this attitude of male-child preference “is more common in Igbo culture in particular than in any other part of Nigeria. In extreme cases, the husband is tempted to abuse, maltreat and send his wife to her father’s house as a result of not meeting with his sex of a child desire. With this ugly situation in place, marital conflict becomes evident” [8].

So far we have been able to outline some common factors for marital conflict. But one particular question is still unanswered: Is marriage existentially authenticated in conflict? The attempt to address this particular question is the concern of the next subtopic

AUTHENTIC EXISTENCE IN MARRIAGE

Authentic existence is a very well-known expression in existentialism. Existentialism is a school of thought in philosophy that is concerned with human existence. Omoregbe (2003)[9] states that existentialism is “a philosophy preoccupied with what it means for a human being to exist” (p. 38). For the existentialists, authentic existence simply means a way of life that actually asserts one’s own individuality and freedom[10],[11].

For the existentialists, human existence does not simply mean ‘being there’, human existence is a drama in which every individual is an actor. To exist is to be personally involved in the drama of life as an actor rather than as a passive spectator. To exist means to be personally committed to a freely chosen way of life; it means being conscious of the problems of human life with all the choices open to man and freely opting for a certain way of life

while assuming full personal responsibility for it. To exist is to be at the helm of one's affairs, personally directing its main course. It means really living one's own life the way one has freely chosen and assuming responsibility for it [9].

From the analysis of Omoregbe above, one can easily deduce that authentic existence has to do with an individual living a life that is characterized by free choice and also assuming responsibility for the choices made. Authentic existence is all about being real with life. It means not doing things simply because others are doing them or because it is customary to do so, but because one is convinced and has chosen to do so. Authentic existence means defining one's own life by oneself.

In marital life, authentic existence is the actualization of peace and happiness of the spouses. It is an existential fact that there are many factors for conflict in marriage (as discussed earlier), but I wish to make bold to say that authentic existence in marriage is not in fanning the flames of conflict; it is not in generation of conflict. Authentic existence in marriage, in the position of this study, hinges on marital conflict resolution and management. This means that both parties have to, individually, choose to make their marriage work despite the existing factors for conflict. Authentic existence in marriage is not in counting the number of times spouses quarreled, but on how the quarrel was resolved. For sure, there must be conflict in marriage, but conflict is not the goal of marriage; persistent conflict cannot authenticate marital relationship.

Authentic existence in marriage implies that married couples have to be actively involved in resolving their conflict. The approach to conflict situations has to be based on one's personal conviction. It therefore presupposes that from the outset, the union between a man and a woman in marriage has to be based on individual freedom. For sure, conflict in marriage is a given; but to existentially authenticate marriage relationship, we must find a way of either resolving the conflict or make effort to manage it. Conflict resolution has to

do with employing practical means to address conflict situation. It presupposes that conflict exists, and therefore makes effort to eliminate it. Miller (2003)[12], observes that conflict resolution deals with “a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems ...” (p. 8). In a marriage relationship, conflict resolution is most desirable. However, in a situation where a particular marital conflict cannot be practically resolved, it can as well be managed. Conflict management, as distinct from conflict resolution, is an attempt to control a conflict situation in order to reduce its negative and destructive effects. This is where the advice of professionals in the field of conflict resolution and management should be sought for.

Marriage has to do with friendly relationship. This is possible only when the spouses choose to make it so. The existential fact is that, essentially, it is not in the hands of anybody outside the married couple to authenticate their marital existence. This is practically the work of the spouses themselves. Therefore, in order to truly affirm and maintain authentic existence in marriage, we shall look at some tips in the next subtopic that follows.

TIPS FOR AUTHENTIC EXISTENCE IN MARRIAGE

To help married couples experience authentic existence in marriage, the following recommendations have to be heeded to:

- Married couples have to learn to accept and adjust to their individual and background differences.
- They have to learn to forgive each other; no one should keep record of offences.
- Both parties have to be disposed to learn from each other objectively. They must learn how to respect each other's point of view and also differ with another's viewpoint without insulting each other.
- They have to share their problems and also seek for solutions together.

- There is need for married couples to be properly educated on the basic marriage principles; they should constantly attend workshops, seminars and other related programmes on marital relationship.
- They should not allow external influence (in-laws, friends, etc.) to constantly and unduly interfere in their marital relationship.
- They should always create time for each other and be truly committed to the marital relationship.
- Each party has to be seen to be transparent; they should not give room for suspicion of any kind.
- Spouses should not use derogatory words about the personality of the other.
- Do not form the habit of reading your partner's mind; it is better to ask a direct question rather than presuming the action of the other party; this can lead to misinterpretations.
- Always remember that your marital relationship is very vital; so do everything humanly possible to keep it.
- Spouses should be able to discuss their sexual preferences with each other and be sexually contented with each other.
- They have to go for medical treatment together, in case of late arrival of children and also abide by professional medical advice.
- Married couples should be willing to accept the gift of a child irrespective of the sex.
- They have to learn to manage their finances together and also practice prudent spending.
- Above all, married couple MUST truly love each other.
- If spouses are believers in God, they should cultivate the habit of constantly praying together.

CONCLUSION

So far, we have been able to discuss some common factors for marital conflict. I must say that

the ability of one to understand the common factors for conflict in marriage will dispose one to know that conflict is a must-come in marriage. Conflict in marriage is a reality. However, we must note that conflict in marriage, if not properly handled, is antithetical to authentic marital relationship. Therefore, I wish to state categorically that the authentic existence of married couples is not in generation of conflict, but in knowing how best to properly handle any form of conflict with ease. Yes, conflict is inevitable in marriage, but no marriage can authenticate its existence in conflict. This is an existential fact that must not elude us in this existential world.

It is the strong belief of this study that if the few suggestions outlined above are adhered to, married couples will experience authentic existence. Therefore, there is need for every married couple to work together in order not to lose sight of the goal of the human person - happiness (and the fullness of happiness - peace). The existential implication of the above viewpoint is that whatever may try to constitute a cog in the wheel of a happy and peaceful married life should be discarded from its root. We must remember that human beings are not perfect beings. It is also an existential fact that there is no perfect match in marriage. Conflict in marriage must come, but on no account should the happiness of the spouses be jeopardized or compromised. This is an existential fact that should not be ignored if we really need to have authentic existence in marriage in our society.

REFERENCES

1. Kriesberg, L. (1993). "Ethnicity, Nationalism and Violent Conflict in the 1990s" in *Peace Studies Bulletin*.
2. Ojiji, O. (2009). "Conflict Handling Styles" in Shedrack Gaya Best (ed.). Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited. Pp. 116 - 129.
3. Nwude, O. (1995). *Aims and Purpose of Marriage*. Benin City: Etio Computers.

4. Omeje, L. N., (2014). *Dominance, Educational Level and Child-sex as Predictors of Marital conflict in Nsukka L. G. A.* (An Unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Psychology, University of Nigeria Nsukka).
5. Anderson, S. (2011), "5 Financial Mistakes that ruin your marriage". Retrieved from www.fobes.com (accessed: 11th September, 2016).
6. Fox, G. L., Benson, M. L., De Maris, A. and Van Wyk, J., (2002). "Economic distress and intimate partner violence: Testing family stress and resources theories." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 64; Pp. 793 - 807.
7. Seager, J. I. (2009). *The Penguin Atlas of Women in the World*. New York: Penguin Group
8. Benson, M. L., Fox, G. L., De Maris, A. and Van Wyk, J., (2003). Neighbourhood disadvantage, individual economic distress and violence against women in intimate relationship" *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, vol. 19; Pp. 207 - 235.
9. Omoregbe, J. I., (2003). *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy*, vol. 3. Lagos: Joja Educations and Research Publishers Limited.
10. Heidegger, M., (1973). *Being and Time*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell
11. Satre, J-P, (1969). *Being and Nothingness*. London: Metheun
12. Miller, C. A. (2003). *A Glossary of Terms and Concepts in Peace and Conflict Studies*. Geneva: University for Peace.