

ATTENDING SKILLS: TOOLS FOR IMPROVING COMMUNICATION AMONG MARRIED COUPLES

BY

BILHATU KUMAH DAGARI (Ph.D)
Counselling Centre
Student Affairs Division,
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

ABSTRACT

Observations from counseling revealed that married couples attend ineffectively to each other in communication. This often evokes marital problems such as misunderstanding, strained and tense relationship. Based on these observations, the researcher ventured to use attending skills counseling to improve married couples communication and ascertain or reject its effectiveness. An experimental design of post-test only control group was used to gather data for the study. Thirty married couples within Kaduna metropolis participated in the study. They were randomly assigned into two groups: treatment and control groups. A validated instrument titled "couples' communication skills inventory" (CCSI) of attending skills was administered to the two groups after the experiment. A two-tail t-test was used to analyse the data. Results showed that the treatment packaged on attending skills was effective in improving communication of couples. Based on the finding, attending skills counselling treatment was recommended for marriage enrichment programme.

Introduction

The perception of marriage as an institution varies from culture to culture and from individual to individual. Hastings (1973) defines marriage as the union, made permanent by intention of a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation, rearing of children, mutual companionship and assistance. Akinboye (1982) stressed that marriage seems essentially a bargaining, negotiating and cooperating institution. The spouses in this relationship are both sensitive to the attributes of human interpersonal relationship such as changes in moods, feelings and beliefs. Each spouse aims at modifying their interaction to make a significant difference in the life of the other partner.

Communication is vital in any human relationship. Omojola (1973) has described communication as the life-wire of marriage

relationship. Staying married and being happy is a difficult task for many. Ige (1990) opined that there are lots of married couples in the society today whose attitudes to each other are not better than that of co-tenants in the home. Gottman (1994) reports that couples use negative communication patterns. Complaints of ineffective communication is a strong indicator of an unhealthy relationship that could threaten the harmony of the family. The consequences of these would be poor attending to each other.

Attending skills is one of the fundamental skills for interpersonal communication. It is the way a spouse orient himself/herself physically and psychologically to a partner thereby contributing to his/her presence. Egan (1994) opines that attending refers to the ways in which spouses can be with their partners both physically and

psychologically. Simply being with another person even without saying something is extremely important. Attending is communication through body posture or position. It conveys to the other person the level of your presence or absence in the relationship (Egan, 1994). Rick (2005) reports that attending skills are the body language skills which involve open and relax body frame, maintaining eye contact that communicates acceptance and paying attention. There is also appropriate body motion that responds to a partner's movements, that is, ability to read bodily reactions helps to communicate appropriate messages. Hence, this study employed attending skills as a technique to help married couples improve their communication. Indeed, if couples are able to stay in touch with how they present themselves to each other and become aware of and at home with body language cues, communication can reflect an inner peace with each other.

Statement of the Problem

The researcher observed from counseling interaction with some married couples that concern is raised on why some couples do not attend effectively. As a result, poor attending attitudes are often experienced by most married couples. The communication among couples is often through poorly chosen verbal and non-verbal body language. Such conveys unclarified assumptions which when not understood would result in use of inappropriate response. At other times, vague and ambiguous messages are sent through body movement and posture to partners, these evoke poor attending attitudes as spouses lose meaning and respond negatively. Thus, couples attending attitudes are poor and so ineffective. All these negative habits evoke problems in marital relationships.

The above problems pose a great threat to communication with partners. From the above, the purpose of this study therefore is to stimulate positive behavioural change in attending so that effective communication is experienced by couples in their relationships.

Research questions

The following research question was set for the study:

Does exposure to attending skills improve the level of communication between married couples? The corresponding research hypothesis states that:

Ho: There is no significant difference in the level of communication between married couples exposed to attending skills treatment and those in control group.

Methodology and Procedure

Research Design

The design adopted for this study is true experimental design of post-test-only control group for data collection. This design emphasis the random (R) assignment of subjects to a treatment (X) group and control (O) group. According to Kolo (2003), it is graphically represented as follows:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} R & x & O_1 \\ R & & O_2 \end{array}$$

- R – Represents random assignment of subjects to groups or conditions either experimental or control thereby making the subjects to be equivalent.
- X - Represents treatment for the group.
- O - Represents post-test which involves the administration of the instrument for data collection.

In this design, the researcher can form more than two groups if the treatments are more

than one. There is no pre-testing of the subjects before treatment. The data of treatment group is compare with that of control group which serves as the pre-test.

However, the subjects must be randomly assigned to either the treatment or control groups for the design to qualify to be a true experimental design. The advantages of this design include:

- It controls for most of the threats to internal validity, as such it is a powerful design.
- It provides confidentiality of the subjects because there is no pre-test.
- It eliminates pre-test sensitization of the subjects.

Population of the Study

The population of the study consists of all male and female married couples in Kaduna metropolis. The participants were drawn from places of worship and within the community. The couples came voluntarily in response to an advertisement to join the group. The population of the study is 4768 married couples in subsistence relationship.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

A total of 30 couples (60) were selected randomly from a population of 4768 and assigned to treatment and control groups. Each experimental and control group consisted of 15 couples (30).

Research Instruments

The research instrument used for data collection was titled "couples communication skills inventory (CCSI) of attending skills questionnaire". It consisted of two sections which are biodata or demographic section and attending skills section. Attending skills section contained 25 items which was rated on a likert four point scale of 1, 2, 3, and 4 with a reliability coefficient of 0.795. For the 25 items, the

highest possible score a subject could get was 100 (4 x 25) while the lowest score was 25 (1 x 25). The interpretation of the scores is: a score from 01-50 means serious problems in attending skills which implies that couples are experiencing communication problems and so need to seek treatment on communication. A score of 51 - 75 means you possess average or moderate attending skills in communication which implies that your attending skills in communication can be improved. A score of 76 - 100 means high attending skills in communication that implies excellent attending skills variety.

However, it is a known fact that this state of communication without problems in marriage is utopic. Married couples do experience communication problems in their relationship from time to time. Therefore, there is need to seek counseling.

Research Procedure

The couples that received the treatment were those in the experimental group. The group was exposed to attending skills counseling as a marriage enrichment programme which entailed acquiring skills on how to attend to words and feelings of a partner so as to improve their communication processes. The treatment programme lasted for seven weeks. It was carried out through counseling, focus group discussion, and teaching, role-play and take home assignments. The attending skills counseling adopted a participatory approach in addition to assignments that related to the subsequent teaching. The teaching was arranged in sequential manner in that one lecture built on the next. The opening session oriented the participants to the entire programme. The participants were trained on such topics as:

Wk1: Définition of Communication

The participants brainstormed on the definition of communication and the researcher made clarification and define communication.

Wk2: Forms of Communication I: Define Verbal Communication

The participants brainstormed on the various ways people can communicate verbally. The researcher made clarification and expanded on the points outlined by participants. There were explanations on speaking methods and rules of effective speaking.

Wk3: Forms of Communication II: Define non-verbal Communication

The participants brainstormed on the various ways people communicate non-verbally. The researcher made clarification and explained the following: body language, facial expressions, body posture and movement, vocal sounds and tone of voice.

Wk4: Skills Required in Effective Communication

The participants brainstormed on the skills required for effective communication. The researcher made clarification and explained the following skills: our manner of speech, simplicity of message, self-confidence, and attitude towards the listener. The researcher guided discussion on the importance of these skills to good communication.

Wk5: Attending skills I: Non-verbal aspects of attending skills

The participants brainstormed on how to attend to another in communication. The researcher made clarification and guided discussion on attending skills as follows, use

of eye contact, body language and vocal qualities.

Wk6: Attending skills II: Non-verbal aspects of attending skills-use of SOLER

The participants brainstormed on how to attend to another in communication. The researcher made clarification and guided discussion by explaining the following: how to pay attention to each others words, give and receive feedback, make emphatic statements, paraphrasing to explore and clarify issues and summarizing what a partner had said. There was discussion on attending posture and movement of body under the acronym SOLER.

Wk7:

Administration of attending skills questionnaire to both the experimental and control groups.

Data Analysis

The data obtained were subjected to a two tail t-test analysis to determine the relative effectiveness of the independent variable (attending skills) on the dependent variable (communication) of married couples.

Results

In this section, the result of the test of the only hypothesis for this study is presented. The hypothesis states that there is no statistically significant difference in the level of communication between married couples exposed to treatment on attending skills and those in control group. That is, comparing data of experimental group with control group. The result of the analysis of data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Two-tail t-test on effect of attending skills communication: of experimental vs control groups

Status	N	X	SD	t	df	P
Experimental group (attending skills)	30	54.1000	7.68496	4.296	58	0.00
Control group (attending skills)	30	65.5488	8.82562			

Critical at 1.98

Table 1 above revealed that subjects exposed to attending skills counseling treatment had a lower score in communication than the control group. The t-value of 4.296 is significantly higher than the critical t-value of 1.98 at 58 degree of freedom and the level of significance of 0.00 is less than 0.05 ($P < 0.05$). Therefore, the hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference in the level of communication between married couples exposed to attending skills treatment and those in control group is rejected. Thus, the null hypothesis is not accepted.

Discussion

The study has established a significant difference in level of communication between married couples expose to treatment and those in control group. The subjects in the experimental group score lower marks while the control group scores higher marks. The subjects in experimental group demonstrated their understanding and usage of attending skills in communication over the control group. The experimental group subjects benefit from the content of the treatment package which included counseling teachings on how to speak, rules of effective speaking, observation of body movements and posture, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. when attending to others in communication. These procedures could have gone a long way in assisting couples to rate their communication moderately, thereby enhancing their marriage relationship. Thus, the subjects in

experiment group improve their communication. The control group on the other hand, received no skill training, this might explained the higher scores obtained. A possible explanation could be that most Africans particularly Nigerians, believed so much in covering their problems instead of seeking for help. Oberg (2003) maintains that "many of us know little of the process of communication and lack skills for communicating more effectively." Robert, Straus, and Sayles (1967) observed that when communication is at the peak of efficiency, words are often superfluous. In contrast, Navran (1967) reported that couples who engage in communication:

- Talk more to each other
- Convey the feeling that they understand what is being said to them.
- Have a wider range of subjects available to them to converse about
- Preserve communication channels and keep it open.
- Show more sensitivity to each others feelings
- Personalize their language symbols.
- Make more use of supplementary non-verbal techniques of communication.

Egan (1994) also reported that the quality of your human presence to your partner is very important.

A possible explanation for the effectiveness of couples communication could be attributed to the content of the treatment

package which included teachings on how to attend to each other by observing the use of body posture and movement, the use of the acronym SOLER when attending to others in communication. These procedures could have gone a long way in assisting the couples improved in their communication thereby enhancing their marriage relationship. The control group on the other hand, received no skill training. This probably explained why the control group performance was higher as they rated themselves superficially.

Lastly, the finding of this study have also revealed that there is need to call for further marital counseling to help couples improve their level of communication using attending skills. The procedure for treatment and the significant improvement in couples' communication shows that the treatment strategies could easily be taught to couples. This implies that couples could become "para-counselors" to others as they have imbibed the skills and techniques of attending. Thus, the programme package becomes a marriage enrichment programme for would-be couples and even those already in the marriage institution.

Recommendations

From the finding above, the following recommendations are made:

- Married couples should seek counseling in communication to enable them experience effective attending in communication thereby enriching their relationship.
- Families should seek counseling in communication. This would greatly enrich family interaction and generate respect and acceptance.
- Counselors should refresh themselves by studying more about

communication to make their work effective.

References

- Akinboye, J. O. (1982). "How to be happy in Marriage." *Psychology for Everyday Living. A Nigerian Journal of Applied Psychology*.
- Egan, G. (1994). *The Skilled Helper*. California. Monterey Brock, Cole.
- Gottman, J. M. (1994). *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail and How you can Make yours last*. New York. Simon and Schuster.
- Hastings, A. (1973). *Christian Marriage in Africa*. London. William closnes and sons Ltd.
- Holmes, D. W. (2004). *Grow Your Communication Skills*. Benin. Pinnacle of Grace Publishers.
- Ige, P. F. (1990). *The perception of conjugal happiness among newly and old wedded couples in Lagos metropolis*. Unpublished M.Ed. Thesis. University of Lagos.
- Oberg, B. C. (2003). *Interpersonal communication: How to sell yourself, your message and get result*. Benin religious Broadcasting Inc.
- Omojola, E. B. (1993). *Effective communication in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Agape Publications.
- Robert, N. W., Strauss, G. & Sayler L. R. (1967). *Personnel: The problems of management*. London. Prentice Hall. 2nd ed.
- Rookswear, E. & Pergola, J. (1992). *Heart to Heart: Strengthening Families*. Cooperative Extension, institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, P. 52. Accessed 22nd February, 2007.