

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: AN EVALUATION OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING CAT-DOG RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract. Generally, the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, especially northern Nigeria, is dysfunctional, antagonistic, tense, aggressive, and violent. Thus, management of Muslim-Christian marital relationship in such society requires effective communication and conflict resolution strategies. However, Muslim-Christian interfaith marriages exist and flourish in the country. Therefore, this study evaluates conflict resolution strategies in relationships among Muslim-Christian couples in northern Nigeria. The study is guided by Rational Dialectics Theory (RDT). Triangulation has been employed and the data have been gathered through semi-structured interviews, observation, and field notes with phenomenology as the approach. Using snowball sampling technique, 30 people – 19 females and 11 males who are into Muslim-Christian marriage were interviewed, as participants in the study. The findings revealed that conflict in a relationship is inevitable but the most effective conflict resolution strategies used in managing interreligious marital relationship include embracing dialogic communication, being engaged in positive and supportive communication, interpersonal communication, and then upholding interest, affection, gratitude, and apologies. The present study concludes that conflict in a relationship does not always indicate a problem, rather, it is a means where married individuals can understand themselves better and work towards resolving the differences that cause dispute.

Keywords: interreligious individuals, conflict, conflict resolution, dialogic communication, Northern Nigeria, Muslims and Christians

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1. Introduction

The institution of marriage has increased in popularity over the years and is widely practiced in various societies as an integral aspect of human life. It is essential to note that not all societies or religions mandate marriage as a compulsory part of human existence (Dada and Idowu 2006, Kurttekin 2019). According to Esere, Yusuf, and Omotosho (2011), marriage, dating back to its inception, signifies the union of two individuals to form a couple, regardless of factors such as race, tribe, society, religion, cultural background, or educational status. Munroe (2003) underscores that marriage carries traditional and moral significance, serving as a social safeguard by addressing sexual needs and ensuring the continuity of the human generation. Esere et al. (2011) also highlight the reproductive role of marriage from a Darwinian perspective. Given that interpersonal communication inherently involves interactions between individuals, marriage assumes paramount importance within the realm of interpersonal communication.

Islam and Christianity stand as the dominant religions in Nigeria, and this study focuses on marriages between Muslims and Christians in northern Nigeria. While numerous studies have explored the influence of religion on marriage (e.g. see Hughes and Dickson 2005, Friedberg 2019), relatively few have delved into the communication and relationship dynamics of interreligious couples (Friedberg 2019). Conflict is an inherent facet of all human communication (Wood 2010), and when it comes to marriage, characterized by deep emotional connections, conflict is a natural occurrence. Within this framework, interreligious marriages introduce an additional layer of complexity to the communication and potential conflicts experienced by these couples.

In contemporary Nigeria, the alarming prevalence of marital conflicts resulting in various challenges within couples is evident (Dada and Idowu 2006, Kurttekin 2019). Concurrently, interreligious marriages are on the rise in diverse societies. A prominent catalyst for marital difficulties is the inability to effectively manage conflict. Many families have found themselves in bitter disputes due to their failure to address, manage, or resolve conflicts between couples or families. Interfaith marriages are particularly susceptible to conflict due to the divergence of religious beliefs, which holds profound significance in the lives of Nigerians (Nwabachili and Nwabachili 2015).

Effective interpersonal communication can offer interreligious married couples a platform for dialogue and the mitigation of challenges that could escalate into conflicts. Consequently, it becomes imperative for the researcher to employ Wood's (2010) conflict management techniques in interpersonal communication to comprehend conflict resolution within interreligious marriages. Wood (2010) also provides practical guidance for managing interpersonal conflicts through effective communication. This study is primarily concerned with two aspects: firstly, elucidating the role of religion in interreligious marriages and the associated challenges, and secondly, examining the significance of interpersonal communication in resolving conflicts among interreligious married couples to prevent marital challenges and

breakdown. Despite numerous studies on the causes of divorce (Olaniyi 2015, Esere et al. 2011, Adegoke 2010) and marital conflict (Tolorunleke 2014, Esere, Yeye, Odu, and Oladun 2014) in Nigeria, there is a pressing need to investigate conflict resolution among interfaith couples facing unique challenges. Despite the numerous studies on interfaith marriages across the world, the extent of conflict among Nigerian Muslim-Christian couples, their families, and the society as well as the strategies of managing such conflict are not as yet properly explored. Moreover, while studies on interreligious marriage exist worldwide, there is a dearth of research on interreligious marriage conflicts in Africa. The specific focus of this study is conflict resolution in interpersonal communication among interreligious couples, specifically those comprising Muslims and Christians.

Hence, this study is well-positioned to explore conflict resolution strategies among interreligious couples in northern Nigeria. A comprehensive exploration of religion, conflict orientation, conflict resolution strategies, and the importance of interpersonal communication within interreligious marriages holds value for individuals worldwide, especially among couples in Nigeria where interreligious conflict and tension is predominant. The relationship between Christians and Muslims in the country is dysfunctional, antagonistic, tense, aggressive and violent. It can, at best, be described as cat and dog relationship. Thus, it is pertinent to explore the communication strategies engaged in managing interfaith marital relationship in the country. When individuals learn about others facing similar challenges or circumstances, they can evaluate their own situations with greater insight, often leading to personal growth and influencing their partners positively. This underscores the significance of studying interreligious marriages in northern Nigeria.

2. Literature review

The current study is grounded in the Relational Dialectics Theory, focusing on marriage, interreligious marriage, and conflicts within interreligious marriage.

2.1. Relational Dialectics Theory

This study adopts the Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) developed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996). Relational Dialectics is an interpersonal communication theory that explores contradictions in relationships. Essentially, it delves into the idea that life unfolds, as an open monologue, where human experiences collide with opposing desires and needs within relational communication. Baxter and Montgomery's Theory of Relational Dialectics provides insights into the ongoing tensions inherent in interpersonal relationships. It suggests that conflicts should not always be viewed negatively in interpersonal relationships, as they can sometimes lead to a better understanding of the parties involved. Relational dialectics asserts that conflict should be considered a normal part of interpersonal relationships, with no relationship being entirely devoid of it. This theory elucidates the dynamic interplay of contradictory tendencies in personal relationships, creating a continuous ebb and

flow of opposing forces (Griffin 2012). It can be effectively applied to elucidate the dynamics of conflict in interreligious marriages and strategies for conflict resolution.

2.2. Marriage

Marriage takes various forms worldwide, generally falling into two categories: monogamy (one man, one wife) and polygamy (one man with many wives or vice versa). However, contemporary realities have introduced other forms of marriage, such as same-sex and interfaith marriages (Wood 2010, Friedberg 2019).

Anthropologists have extensively examined different types of marriages, often referring to them as ways of acquiring a mate. These include monogamy and polygamy, with the latter further divided into polygyny (one man with multiple wives) and polyandry (one woman with multiple husbands). Additionally, anthropologists recognize group marriages. In Nigeria, for example, both monogamous and polygamous systems are traditionally recognized, with legal and cultural distinctions categorizing these marriage types.

2.3. Interreligious marriage

Interreligious marriage involves the union of individuals from diverse backgrounds, including religion, ethnicity, or race. Historically, social and religious distinctions have acted as barriers to cross-cultural relationships (Brown and Vaughn 2011). However, interreligious marriages have the potential to break down these barriers and contribute to a more harmonious society, as evidenced by the widespread use of social networking sites across various societal strata (Brown and Vaughn 2011).

The shifting nature of intimate relationships in the world, particularly in Nigeria, has seen significant changes over the past three decades. These changes encompass increased divorce rates, non-marital childbearing, cohabitation, and delayed first marriages (Steinbugler 2014). Cherlin (2004) notes that, during this same period, marriage itself has become increasingly unstable. Factors such as common religious beliefs, immigrant integration, liberal democratic ideals, education levels, diminished racial boundaries, and shared values can all contribute to interreligious marriages. However, research has also identified variables associated with low-quality interreligious relationships that often lead to divorce or separation (Steinbugler 2014, Nwabachilli and Nwabachili 2015). Studies exploring the psychological nature of religious commitment, conducted by Allport and Rose (1967) and Allport (1966), distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations. Intrinsic individuals deeply dedicate themselves to their beliefs, finding a strong sense of identity and purpose in their religion. They tend to be less biased, more open to other viewpoints, and more mature in handling social circumstances. On the other hand, extrinsic individuals see religion as a means to an end, such as personal advantage or social interaction, and may exhibit more prejudice and dependency (Renalds 2011).

2.4. Conflict in interreligious marriage

As previously mentioned in this study, there is a paucity of literature in Nigeria concerning conflict within interreligious marriages. To shed light on this subject, similar studies conducted in other parts of the world have been referenced. Religious homogamy, as a concept, is influenced by various factors. Heaton and Pratt (1990) found a connection between religious denomination, church attendance, belief in the Bible, and marital happiness. Their study encompassed Catholics, Baptists, liberal Protestants, moderate Protestants, nondenominational Protestants, conservative Protestants, and individuals claiming to have no faith. Denominational similarity was significantly linked to marital happiness, with church attendance contributing somewhat, while comparable Bible views showed no meaningful relationship. It is worth noting that these findings challenge Heaton's earlier work from 1984. Recent studies on interreligious households have yielded similar results (Kurttekin 2019, Zhou 2017).

Had Heaton (1990) included a sample of Jewish interfaith marriages to analyse their theological differences, the findings might have been even more robust. This is particularly relevant because Jewish-Christian interfaith marriages may exhibit less religious homogamy compared to unions between moderate Protestants and Baptists. To enhance our understanding of the issues contributing to lower marital satisfaction among Jewish interfaith couples, constructing a questionnaire tailored to address challenges unique to Jewish-Christian marriages could prove beneficial (Kumagai 2015). The hypothesis here is that the closer the resemblance (homogeneity) between partners' specific religious views and behaviours, the higher the levels of marital happiness and relationship stability. Previous studies (Waite and Lehrer 2003, Olaniyi 2015) suggest that interreligious marriages are more likely to result in divorce compared to homogeneous marriages. However, the precise variables at play in these divorces remain unknown. According to Gleckman and Streicher (1990), interreligious married Jews are twice as likely to divorce as Jews who marry within their faith. A 1992 poll by the American Jewish Committee reported a 50% divorce rate for interreligious married couples, compared to 20% for homogeneous Jewish couples. Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) found that a Jewish person marrying outside their faith had a 15% higher probability of divorce compared to marrying within the community. Similarly, Eaton (1994) discovered that a Jewish person in an interreligious marriage had a 17 percent probability of divorce compared to 38 percent when marrying outside the community. Interestingly, the divorce rate among interreligious married Jews is similar to that of the overall US population. Therefore, while interfaith Jewish marriages do not have a higher likelihood of divorce than the average American marriage, homogeneous Jewish marriages are less prone to divorce than the general population. To investigate the link between religious homogamy, stability, and conflict in same-faith and interfaith Jewish marriages, a survey addressing potential religious conflicts unique to Jewish and Christian practices and beliefs was developed (Friedberg 2019). It was designed to be completed by a general college sample of young adults, allowing them to report on the degree of religious homogamy between their parents. This approach was

chosen due to the difficulty in obtaining a survey of mixed couples, which could be biased by the sampling process (e.g. selecting couples from religious institutions might skew the sample towards more religious couples with potentially less religious conflict).

While Heaton's study in 1990 has established a link between religious differences among spouses and marital stability, there is a dearth of empirical evidence explaining how these differences lead to instability (Friedberg 2019). The author suggests that these disparities often serve as a common source of marital conflict, with conflict, at least partially, acting as a buffer between differences and stability. To support this assertion, a more comprehensive examination of various types of interfaith marriages reveals that interreligious marriage encompasses a wide spectrum. Some interfaith marriages, such as those between members of various ecumenical Protestant churches, exhibit relative durability. Conversely, marriages are more likely to face divorce when the parties hold extremely divergent religious beliefs or belong to religious groups with well-defined boundaries. Further research on both Catholics and Protestants indicates that marriages formed through conversion are at least as stable as marriages between couples who were raised in the same faith (Lainiala and Säävälä 2013).

2.5. Conflict resolution in interreligious marriage

Every marriage experiences misunderstandings and disputes. Each married couple brings a wealth of experience on how they navigate conflicts and prevent divorce. Conflict arises when two individuals' viewpoints, beliefs, and goals diverge, and they struggle to find common ground. According to Wood (2010), conflict only arises when disagreements or tensions are acknowledged; if emotions are suppressed or anger and disagreement go unaddressed, conflict does not manifest itself. While partners may differ in their perspectives and emotional reactions to issues in a marriage, it does not imply that these issues cannot be resolved fully. Some couples find themselves repeating the same mistakes, which can be frustrating. Conflict is a natural part of a marriage, but it should always be addressed with a focus on peaceful resolution. Successful couples approach disagreements differently than those who end up divorcing because they have learned to recognize and respond positively to their disputes. Effective communication is key to resolving conflicts and reducing the number of problems in a household. Communication is crucial in marriage, and inadequate communication can hinder the growth and development of many families (Esere, Yeyeodu, and Oladun 2014). When couples interact properly and regularly, they build a strong and healthy relationship. To achieve this, certain attitudes and behaviours are crucial for maintaining a positive and effective relationship:

Interest. Couples must take an interest in each other's lives. Active listening, making signals, eye contact, and expressing acceptance of each other's perspectives are essential.

Affection. Demonstrating affection through physical gestures like holding hands, kisses, and embraces can go a long way in reducing tension and friction during conflicts.

Show gratitude. Expressing appreciation for your partner, even for small things, can have a positive impact on the relationship. When conflicts arise, these expressions of gratitude can make it easier to engage in positive interactions.

Apologies. Learning to apologize when necessary is essential. Accepting responsibility and resolving conflicts without unnecessary confrontation are important skills in conflict resolution.

Berscheid and Peplau (1983) emphasize that effective communication in a marital relationship can be hindered by ineffective interaction. To ensure complete communication, there must be a willingness to exchange ideas openly and lovingly. Several challenges can obstruct effective conflict resolution. Adeniran (2015) explains that one of the factors contributing to the increase in divorce throughout the twentieth century has been the greater social acceptance of divorce. In many societies, divorce is now viewed as a last resort, leading couples to choose it over resolving conflicts through understanding. Not all couples possess the maturity to resolve their differences, and some third parties involved in conflict resolution may inadvertently make the issue irresolvable. However, there are professionals, such as marriage counsellors or psychologists, who are trained to handle conflicts in relationships, especially among couples. According to Esere, Yeyeodu, and Olaolu (2014), counsellors should educate communities, particularly parents, about effective communication styles to promote healthier relationships.

Conflict management skills. To effectively manage conflicts, certain skills are crucial. Wood (2009) outlines these Conflict Management Skills, which include:

Recognizing the significance of the connection. Conflict situations have two levels of meaning: content and connection. While it is important to focus on the content level, understanding the connection level, the emotional aspect of the conflict is equally vital.

Communicating positively. Creating a supportive atmosphere through communication that promotes a win-win approach to conflict resolution is essential. This involves using descriptive, provisional, spontaneous, problem-oriented, empathetic, and egalitarian communication to cultivate a supportive interpersonal climate.

Active listening. Mindful listening is critical in conflict resolution, especially when dealing with opposing views or criticisms. Even when disagreeing with someone's beliefs or perspectives, showing respect by actively listening and attempting to understand them is essential.

Taking responsibility. Using 'I' language to express feelings, ideas, and problems is crucial. Taking responsibility for your emotions and ideas is vital for productive conflict resolution.

Checking perceptions. In conflict situations, perceptions can be easily distorted. Being aware of this and avoiding misinterpretations or biases is important.

Seeking areas of agreement. While addressing differences is important, searching for areas of agreement can facilitate conflict resolution and promote a more positive atmosphere.

Preserving face. In various cultures, 'face' is a significant concept. It represents one's self-image and reputation. While Western cultures focus on protecting one's

own face, many Asian cultures emphasize preserving the face of others. Ensuring that no one feels humiliated or defeated during conflict is essential.

Anticipating future feelings. Consider the long-term impact of your words and actions. Imagine how you would feel if you responded aggressively or if you expressed your displeasure gently. Envisioning the future consequences of your actions can guide you toward more constructive conflict resolution.

These conflict management skills, as outlined by Wood (2009), play a crucial role in resolving conflicts within interreligious marriages and promoting healthier relationships.

3. Research methodology

For the present study, qualitative research methodology has been used. Qualitative research is preferred when holistic data is needed in order to highlight the situation within the qualitative research methodology. Jack and Nina (2003) define qualitative research as a variety of analytic procedures designed to systematically collect and describe authentic, contextualized social phenomenon with the goal of interpretative adequacy. The tradition in qualitative research includes the use of one or more data collection procedures where different sources are involved. Therefore, semi-structured interview, observation and field notes have been employed in the present study. Phenomenology is employed as the approach. Phenomenology is preferred when the focus of the study is a phenomenon. In this study, phenomenon is interreligious marriage between Christians and Muslims.

As Creswell (2014: 42) puts it: “Phenomenological research is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants”. This description culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. This design has strong philosophical underpinnings and typically involves conducting interviews.

3.1. Population and sample selection

Since there is no listed population of interreligious married couples, the universe of the study from which sample is going to be selected is unknown. Thus, snowball sampling which is a form of non-probability sampling is best suited for the present study. Snowball sampling is defined by Shona [2019] as a sampling technique used when the population is hard to access. Therefore, because of the difficulty encountered in accessing the interreligious married participants, snowball sampling has been used to connect with other participants. Jarek (2019) points out that, the adequate number in qualitative study is between twenty and fifty.

In line with the above, thirty (30) interreligious (Muslim-Christian) married individuals participated in the present study through snowball sampling. However, not all the participants are couples due to the nature of the study. Therefore, all the participants are married to either Muslim or Christian partners who were not necessarily in the study.

The data for the study has been collected through semi-structured interviews, observation and field notes. The combination of these three qualitative methods is referred to as triangulation. Triangulation in qualitative research according to Johanna (2018) is the use of multiple methods to gather information for a qualitative study to develop a comprehensive data and to increase the trustworthiness and validity of the study.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews, observation and field notes

Semi-structured interview is one of the methods used to retrieve information under qualitative study. It is important because it allows researchers to obtain first-hand information from the participants. As Meltosh and Morse (2015) present; Semi-structured interview is an interview designed to ascertain responses from persons regarding a particular situation or phenomenon they have experienced. It employs a relatively detailed interview guide or schedule and may be used when there is sufficient objective knowledge about an experience or phenomenon, but the subjective knowledge is lacking.

In the present study, thirty (30) interviews have been conducted via semi-structured questions with interreligious married Christians and Muslims consisting of 11 males and 19 females in northern Nigeria. Specifically, in Abuja and Kaduna – two cosmopolitan cities in northern Nigeria where interfaith marriages are common. In observation, the researcher pays close attention to the participants' both verbal and non-verbal aspects such as listening to participants spoken words, gestures, facial expressions, mood and so on, asking only occasional questions for clarification throughout the interview.

Holiday (2007) sees observation as a data gathering method in qualitative research which involves conscious noticing and detailed examination of participants' behaviour in a naturalistic setting. Observation includes any environment in which the use of language, facial expression mood, and body language are being studied. The role of the observer differs depending on the level of their involvement in the research.

In conformity to the above definition, the researcher in the present research carefully observed the actions, facial expressions and all other verbal and non-verbal expressions of the participants as the interview unfolded. These observations have been used to support the information retrieved verbally through the semi-structured interviews.

Field note is an important data gathering method used by researchers in qualitative research which assists researchers to document important things regarding the interview, participants and the environment. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2008) describes "field notes as the record created by a researcher while observing a culture, setting or social situation. They are also notes prepared by a researcher regarding the behaviours, activities, events and other features of the setting being observed". In this study, field notes have been collected through notetaking of some important occurrences during the interview and the observation process. The field notes have been used to support the collected interview results. Also, since

the research involves the lives and experiences of interreligious married individuals the researcher obtained permission from the Institutional Research and Publication Ethics Board of the Eastern Mediterranean University, Famagusta, Cyprus prior to conducting the interviews. Each participant was served a copy of the consent form for their own record.

4. Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves the use of various methods of reading and interpreting data, to find interesting discoveries that would be used to answer research questions in a qualitative oriented study. There is no perfect or common means of interpreting or analysing it due to the complex nature of qualitative research topics (Quirkos 2020). The data gathered through semi-structured interviews were audio recorded. Transcribed and coded into categories using the thematic analysis and explanation building for qualitative content analysis. These methods provided answers to the research questions raised.

4.1. Background information

Before delving into the study's findings, it is essential to provide some basic demographic information for a more comprehensive understanding. The sample for this study consisted of ten (10) Christian wives with Muslim husbands, six (6) Muslim men with Christian wives, nine (9) Muslim wives with Christian husbands, and Five (5) Christian men with Muslim wives.

Most of the participants were in their forties (middle aged). Out of the total participants, twenty-three (23) had children, while three participants were currently experiencing their first pregnancy. Nine (9) of the participants had grown-up, married children, and seven (7) had children in elementary school. In terms of marital duration, nineteen participants had been married for six to eight years, seven participants for eleven to twelve years, and four participants for over thirty years. This information is presented in Appendix 1.

Furthermore, during the interviews, it became apparent that twenty of the participating couples incorporated facets of their Muslim or Christian faith into their interactions with the researcher. Among these couples, five participants demonstrated an integrated faith that significantly influenced their actions and predispositions. Interestingly, many of the participants had prior experience with interreligious interactions before meeting their spouses. Some mentioned growing up in diverse, heterogeneous environments, while others had dated individuals outside of their religious affiliation before ultimately choosing their current spouses. In contrast, a few participants had limited exposure to culturally diverse settings during their upbringing, interacting primarily within their own ethnic and religious communities. This limited exposure to other cultures appeared to influence their worldviews and, consequently, their marital satisfaction, as they exhibited less competence in interreligious communication. This background information shows that the chosen

participants are appropriate for this study because of their diverse backgrounds concerning interfaith marriage.

5. Results and discussion

The results and discussion of this study is presented thematically, based on the questions as follows.

The first research question: What is the extent of conflict experience of interreligious married individuals; Muslims and Christians in northern Nigeria?

Overall, the participants affirm that they do not experience significant conflicts within their interreligious relationships as couples or partners. However, the majority of participants (17) express their discontent with the segregation they encounter from members of society who do not accept the idea of someone from their religion marrying a person from a different religious background. This high level of intolerance from society members is a leading cause of conflict among individuals in interreligious marriages.

The study revealed that only four respondents acknowledged occasional conflicts with their partners. Table 1 summarizes the extent to which conflict arises due to interreligious marriages in northern Nigeria.

Table 1. Extent of conflict in interreligious married individuals

S/no	Those involved in conflict	Frequency of response	Extend of conflict
1	Between couples	4	Low
2	Among both families	17	High
3	With the society	26	Very high
Total		47	

The first column of Table 1 indicates low level of conflict among interreligious couples. The study finds that 26 participants agree that common understanding mostly bring individuals with different religious orientation to remain as couples. However, 17 participants agree that religious differences can bring friction when being practiced at home. Partners that have not come to terms with their spouse’s religious practices may not like to see it and can cause conflict as Participant 3, 6 and 15 stressed. Participant 5, married to a Muslim husband had a bitter experience: “He was somehow disturbed when we met, because I was a Christian then. I was brought up as a Christian by a Christian aunt, but my parents are Muslims. Meeting my husband as a Muslim was somehow disturbing, because my aunt was against the wedding but since my parents are Muslims, I had to do the wedding in an Islamic way.” The study finds that 24 of the individuals interviewed have not had serious conflict in their marital relationships.

However, literature has revealed that the rate of marital conflicts and divorce have increased significantly especially during the past decades globally and particularly in northern Nigeria. Divorce results in crisis for family members. The issue of disagreement along religious views can result to conflict among interreligious couples as this study discovers. Five of the Participants that have recounted conflict in their relationship mostly attribute it to their conflicting religious views. Participants 2, Participant 8 and Participant 15 note that usually the practical display of different religious rites at home brings about conflict. However, common understanding and submission which is mostly expected from the female partners brings peace at home.

Research question two: To what extent do the couples experience conflict with the families?

Column 2 of Table 1 shows high level of conflict between couples with both families as seventeen participants attest to the claim. Getting married to a Christian woman made Participant 8 to part ways with some of his family members and acquaintances.

According to participant 8,

“Some of my friends until today do not talk to me because I am married to a Christian lady who I now have two children with. I face many challenges with my family as well. Because they said I should not marry a Christian, same problem from my wife’s family too. Her mother also did not support it, same with some of her friends and even church members. However, we understand each other, we love each other. Therefore, we manage our problems.”

In addition, 13 participants agree that it becomes challenging to manage the experience of interreligious individuals when there is a negative perception from the family and within one’s social circle. For instance, Participant 22 notes that:

“My mother said she will not bless my wedding. I love my husband; he has a good character which makes him the perfect man for me. But for him being a Muslim, we had no guarantee about getting married at the beginning. As God will have it, we are married. But since then, it has been from one trouble to another. Any little problem that occurs, my family attribute it to the religion of my husband as the cause. However, we have managed to conquer the challenges.”

Family members who were not comfortable with the union because of religious differences are mostly the people causing conflict. The individuals who know the perception of their family members regarding their relationship usually distance themselves from their families. However, the study finds that relationships that have lasted more than five years with children tend to experience less conflict with their families. The longer the relationship the more understanding appears among interreligious couples.

Research question three: To what extent do interreligious married individuals experience conflict with the society?

The 3rd column of Table 1 reveals that very high level of conflict is being experienced by interreligious couples in relation to the society as 26 participants are all in the affirmation. Twenty-two of these participants live in the same religious diverse environment with their spouses; as such, exposure to other faith is high.

Nine among the female participants whose husbands are Muslims were aware of this before the marriage. Therefore, they are conscious of the fact that they are entering into a new environment different from theirs. For instance, participant 4 claims: “My husband is a Muslim. I know about his religion. We always hang out together at the office before our union”.

Participant 8 responds: “She is a Christian. I knew about her religion before we got married.”

Participant 8 also presents that he faces serious challenges in his community and place of work.

“Most of my Muslim neighbours exhibit negative attitude towards my family because my wife is a Christian, some do not even talk or relate with me or my wife. Likewise, I face similar challenges in my place of work and even the mosque whenever I go to pray because some people in my society think it is a taboo to have a Christian wife. My wife equally faces the same challenges among her Christian community and in the church because they feel that her marriage to a Muslim is absolutely faulty”.

According to Participant 22, it becomes challenging to manage the experiences of interreligious individuals when the perception turns to be negative from family members and within one’s social circle. The study reveals that the society usually discourage interreligious union. Thus, members of in-group find it difficult to integrate through intimate relationship with out-group.

On a general note, most people who agree to go into marriage knowing fully well about their religious difference experience less conflicts in their marriage despite all the external challenges. This owes to understanding established prior to the marriage.

Research question four: What are the conflict resolution strategies used among interreligious married individuals?

Table 2 below outlines the strategies for conflict resolution needed by interreligious couples to manage and reduce conflict in their union since conflict is part of interpersonal communication as indicated by Relational Dialectics Theory, it can never be eliminated. Therefore, couples in distress can adopt these strategies: positive and supportive communication, open interpersonal communication, interest in each other, affection, gratitude and apologies communication, dialogic communication, and embracing communality of differences. The Table shows that majority of the Participants note that interreligious marriage conflict resolution in northern Nigeria is faced with a couple of challenges, including e.g. absence of positive and supportive communication, lack of close interpersonal communication, absence of interest, affection, gratitude and apologies in communication, lack of dialogic communication, and lack of communality of differences. However, participants who lived for over 5 years in their marriage state their strategies of conflict resolution, as noted from the beginning ‘is dialogue’ (Participant 15). “And the two parties talk to reach compromise whenever disagreement arise. If there is a contradiction, one has to endure and let it stand” (Participant 26). (This indicates a win-lose orientation). “If conflict arises, we do sit and dialogue to solve issues” (win-win orientation) (Participant 8).

Another participant responds that, to ensure that religious difference does not bring tension, “we don’t usually talk about our religious differences” (lose-lose) (Participant, 21). However, this is a better strategy if the partners know that their religious views can be offended easily. But 17 Participants equally found that openness in relationship does not affect poor conflict resolution. It therefore means that poor conflict resolution is a major challenge to relationship failure and divorce among Nigerian couples, interreligious couples inclusive.

Table 2. Conflict resolution strategies

S/no	Strategies	Frequency of response
1	Positive and supportive communication	13
2	Open interpersonal communication	17
3	Presence of interest of each other	25
4	Affection, gratitude and apologies communication	18
5	Dialogic Communication	22
6	Embracing Communality of Differences	20
	Total	115

The result in Table 2 reveals that 22 participants unanimously agreed on the effectiveness of dialogic communication in intimate relationships for resolving conflicting ideas and fostering strong bonds. Additionally, twenty interreligious participants emphasized the active use of communication to establish confirming relationships, acceptance of and agreement with their partner’s views, assertiveness within the partnership, respect for diversity in the relationship, rational reasoning, and the adoption of constructive criticism as crucial elements in conflict resolution.

Wood’s (2010) eight strategies for conflict management through interpersonal communication, which were embraced by interreligious couples, include establishing the meaning of the relationship, practicing supportive communication, engaging in mindful listening, taking personal responsibility, verifying perceptions, exploring common ground, preserving each other’s dignity, and considering the potential future emotional impacts. These strategies are highly relevant and effective among interreligious married individuals in northern Nigeria.

Couples who successfully navigate marital tensions tend to focus on their similarities and perceived differences as strengths that broaden their perspectives and enrich their relationships. They engage in careful discussions and negotiations regarding expectations and potential consequences of differing cultures. The strengths within these relationships are derived from spousal support, trust, and belief in one another. Immersing themselves in each other’s cultures can lead to a unique sensitivity and awareness of differences, ultimately broadening their worldviews.

These principles align with the Relational Dialectics Theory, which posits that couples engage in dialogues to reach agreements and compromises on issues that may introduce tension into the home.

Interreligious marriages across different ethnicities may experience varying levels of stress and resilience. However, these complexities can potentially be successfully overcome through careful negotiation and open communication. As one participant aptly stated, “If we don’t communicate, there is no way we can understand ourselves. Hence, we need communication to figure out what is happening between us.”

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This study confirms that conflict is a common occurrence in all types of marriages, including interreligious ones. Interreligious couples face the choice of dealing with conflict constructively or destructively. The unique challenges faced by religiously diverse spouses in managing conflict arise from several factors, including a lack of orientation, opposition from families and society, and deficiencies in interpersonal communication competence.

In conclusion, this study suggests that interreligious couples can proactively employ preventive techniques when discussing marital issues. Individuals who rely on low-context communication may benefit from improving their investigative skills, paying deliberate attention to nonverbal communication, and educating themselves about their religiously diverse spouse’s religion and communication practices. Conversely, those who naturally use high-context communication could practice increased self-disclosure and verbal expression of their beliefs and emotions. Effective communication is essential to the success of a marital union and evolves over time, based on acquired knowledge about oneself and one’s spouse. Understanding each other’s primary language and communication styles is crucial for the well-being of interreligious marriages.

The study stipulates the following recommendation:

i. Those who enter marriage do not usually envisage conflict. Rather, they must have agreed on forging a conjugal relationship. But, in marriage, experience can turn things around. That is, those who try to protect their religious interest may end up creating conflict. Therefore, interreligious couples should be cautious in this regard.

ii. Among the recognized conflict resolution strategies are positive and supportive communication, open interpersonal communication, presence of interest of each other, affection, gratitude and apologies communication, dialogic communication, and embracing communality of differences. When these strategies are carefully observed positive and win-win situation is expected in interreligious marriage.

iii. Competence of communication in intimate relationship has proved to be effective in solving conflicting idea and establishing bond. Interreligious couples agreed that active use of communication to build confirming relationship, acceptance

and confirming partner's view, affirming and asserting yourself as partner in relationship, respect for diversity in relationship and reasoning rationally as well as the adoption of constructive criticism are important in conflict resolution.

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*Appendix 1***Participants' background information**

S/N	Participants	Gender	Religion	Age (years)	Place of residence
1	Participant 1	Male	Muslim	41	Kaduna
2	Participant 2	Female	Christian	35	Kaduna
3	Participant 3	Female	Muslim	32	Kaduna
4	Participant 4	Female	Muslim	29	Abuja
5	Participant 5	Female	Christian	37	Abuja
6	Participant 6	Female	Muslim	31	Kaduna
7	Participant 7	Female	Muslim	28	Kaduna
8	Participant 8	Male	Muslim	43	Kaduna
9	Participant 9	Male	Muslim	47	Abuja
10	Participant 10	Female	Muslim	41	Kaduna
11	Participant 11	Female	Christian	37	Kaduna
12	Participant 12	Male	Christian	45	Kaduna
13	Participant 13	Male	Christian	41	Abuja
14	Participant 14	Female	Muslim	32	Abuja
15	Participant 15	Female	Muslim	24	Kaduna
16	Participant 16	Female	Muslim	28	Kaduna
17	Participant 17	Female	Muslim	35	Abuja
18	Participant 18	Male	Christian	53	Kaduna
19	Participant 19	Male	Muslim	48	Kaduna
20	Participant 20	Male	Christian	37	Abuja
21	Participant 21	Female	Christian	43	Abuja
22	Participant 22	Female	Christian	34	Abuja
23	Participant 23	Female	Christian	53	Kaduna
24	Participant 24	Female	Christian	42	Kaduna
25	Participant 25	Male	Muslim	35	Abuja
26	Participant 26	Female	Christian	31	Abuja
27	Participant 27	Female	Christian	25	Kaduna
28	Participant 28	Male	Christian	42	Kaduna
29	Participant 29	Female	Christian	31	Abuja
30	Participant 30	Male	Muslim	38	Kaduna