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# **Roles of Non-Verbal Communication and Attitude in Marriage Instability Among the Igbo-Ethnic Group of Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This article explored the roles of non-verbal communication and attitude in the instability of marriages among the Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria. It examines how non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, tone, and silence, alongside individual and collective attitudes, contribute to marital dynamics. The research highlights the challenges of misinterpreting non-verbal signals and the impact of traditional versus modern attitudes on relationship stability. Through a review of Igbo cultural expectations and the influence of communication practices, the article underscores the importance of emotional intelligence, open communication, and counseling in fostering marital harmony. Additionally, the involvement of elders and religious institutions in conflict mediation is discussed as a crucial strategy for marital stability. The article concludes with practical recommendations for enhancing communication, promoting positive attitudes, and bridging the gap between traditional values and modern expectations, ultimately contributing to stronger and more stable marriages within Igbo communities.

**Keywords:** Non-Verbal Communication, Attitude, Marriage Instability, Igbo Culture, Marital Counseling

### **Introduction**

Marriage, as an institution, is of immense cultural and emotional significance across various societies worldwide, and this is especially true among the Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria. In the Igbo culture, marriage is considered more than just a union between two individuals; it is viewed as a binding contract that extends beyond the couple to their families and communities. Traditional Igbo marriages are often characterized by social expectations, familial duties, and a strong emphasis on unity and

procreation (Okwudishu, 2015). Marriage is seen as a cornerstone of both individual identity and societal stability. However, despite its importance, marital instability in the form of conflict, separation, and divorce is increasingly becoming a challenge. As such, understanding the underlying factors that contribute to marital instability is crucial, particularly in the context of non-verbal communication and attitude within the Igbo marriage system.

Non-verbal communication encompasses a wide range of non-linguistic cues, such as gestures,

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facial expressions, tone of voice, and even silence. These forms of communication convey emotions, intentions, and attitudes that may not be expressed verbally (Knapp & Hall, 2010). Non-verbal communication is particularly important in close relationships like marriage, where couples often communicate through subtle cues. In the context of Igbo marriages, non-verbal communication plays a significant role in how partners convey affection, dissatisfaction, or hostility without necessarily using words. Misunderstandings or misinterpretations of these cues can lead to conflict, which may contribute to instability in marriage.

In addition to non-verbal communication, attitude; which refers to an individual's disposition, emotional tone, and behavior, is another fundamental factor influencing marital relationships. A partner's attitude toward the marriage, expressed through actions and emotional states, can either strengthen the relationship or create friction. Negative attitudes such as resentment, hostility, or disregard for a partner's needs, can lead to emotional disconnect and eventual instability (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Conversely, positive attitudes; marked by empathy, respect, and openness, are vital for fostering healthy and enduring relationships. The role of attitude in shaping marital dynamics cannot be overstated, especially in a cultural setting like that of the Igbo community, where social expectations often dictate how individuals express emotions and engage in conflict resolution.

Marriage in the Igbo context also carries distinct cultural expectations. Traditional gender roles within the Igbo marriage system often define the responsibilities of both partners. The husband is typically expected to be the provider and protector, while the wife is expected to manage the home and nurture children (Nwachukwu, 2016). These gendered expectations shape how couples communicate and relate to each other, with deviations from these roles potentially causing tension. As the Igbo community undergoes significant social and cultural changes due to globalization and evolving gender norms, the traditional dynamics of marriage are being challenged, leading to new forms of marital conflict (Ugwu, 2020).

While marriage is universally acknowledged as a central aspect of life, the instability of marriages is a reality that many couples face globally. In Nigeria, and particularly among the Igbo people, marriage remains one of the most important social institutions. However, changing socio-cultural dynamics, along with modern influences, have placed significant pressure on marital relationships, leading to heightened rates of divorce and separation. Understanding the causes of marital instability requires an in-depth examination of the subtle dynamics at play within a relationship. Non-verbal communication and attitude are often the silent contributors to marital strife. Research by Gottman & Levenson (2000) indicates that negative non-verbal cues; such as lack of eye contact, physical withdrawal, or hostile gestures, can significantly predict the

likelihood of divorce. In contrast, positive non-verbal communication fosters closeness, emotional intimacy, and understanding, all of which contribute to a more stable marriage. Similarly, attitudes of empathy, respect, and emotional support strengthen the marital bond, while negative attitudes such as contempt or indifference contribute to conflict and instability. In the Igbo cultural context, the traditional roles that define the husband and wife's obligations can shape the attitudes and behaviors that are expressed within a marriage. However, with globalization and changing gender dynamics, there is a growing shift in these roles. These evolving roles may create tension as both partners navigate new expectations in their marriage. This shift calls for a reevaluation of how non-verbal communication and attitudes align with these changing norms. As gender roles continue to evolve, understanding how attitude and non-verbal communication contribute to marital stability is vital in addressing the challenges that contemporary marriages face.

This article therefore, explored the roles of non-verbal communication and attitude in contributing to marital instability among the Igbo-ethnic group of Nigeria. By analyzing the impact of gestures, facial expressions, body language, and attitudes such as resentment, disrespect, or affection, the article seeks to understand how these factors influence the emotional and social stability of marriages.

In addition, this article seeks to bridge the gap in understanding the impact of non-verbal

communication and attitude on marital stability within the Igbo community, highlighting both the challenges and potential solutions. By investigating these factors within the context of Igbo cultural expectations, the article aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on marriage stability in contemporary African societies.

### **The Institution of Marriage in Igbo Culture**

Marriage is a central aspect of life in Igbo culture, representing not only a personal union between two individuals but also a significant socio-cultural event that binds families and communities together. It is considered an essential institution in Igbo society, serving as a foundation for social organization and cultural continuity. The institution of marriage in Igbo culture is deeply embedded in traditional values, gender roles, and the communal expectations of marital harmony. The expectations and responsibilities tied to marriage are not only about the couple but also encompass the wider family and societal networks, reflecting the collective nature of Igbo culture.

#### **1. Traditional Igbo marriage values and expectations:**

In traditional Igbo society, marriage is not simply a romantic relationship between two people but a social contract that creates alliances between families. This union is seen as a responsibility to the community, as well as a means to ensure the continuation of the family line and the preservation of cultural traditions. One of the core values of Igbo marriage is the expectation of procreation, with the birth of children seen as a

vital part of a successful marriage (Nwachukwu, 2016). The Igbo community places great emphasis on the role of children as both carriers of family heritage and contributors to the larger community.

Bride price is a significant aspect of traditional Igbo marriage, and it is viewed as a formal acknowledgment by the groom's family of the bride's value and the commitment to the union. This practice is embedded in the idea of respect, where the groom's family compensates the bride's family for the loss of their daughter. The ceremony of marriage, with rituals such as the Igba Nkwu (traditional wedding), symbolizes the integration of the bride into the groom's family, marking a pivotal moment of acceptance within the wider community (Okwudishu, 2015). The marital union is not seen merely as a private affair but a celebration of societal values and customs.

## **2. Gender roles and responsibilities:**

Gender roles in traditional Igbo marriage are distinctly defined, with specific duties and expectations placed on both the husband and wife. The husband, traditionally, is seen as the provider and protector of the family. His responsibilities include ensuring the financial stability of the household, managing resources, and safeguarding the welfare of the family. The husband is also the one responsible for making important family decisions and maintaining the social reputation of his household. The role of the husband is deeply tied to notions of leadership and authority within the family and the community at large (Chinwe, 2017).

On the other hand, the wife's role has traditionally been to manage the home, raise the children, and ensure the emotional and physical well-being of the family. She is expected to be a nurturing figure, keeping the home in order and providing support for her husband in his social and economic endeavors. In Igbo culture, the wife's role also extends to the extended family, with duties including maintaining relationships with in-laws and participating in community events (Nwachukwu, 2016).

Despite these traditional roles, modern influences and evolving gender dynamics have led to changes in how these roles are interpreted and enacted in contemporary Igbo marriages. Today, many Igbo couples share responsibilities more equally, with both partners contributing to household finances and decisions. The traditional roles, according to Ugwu, (2020), while still important, have been increasingly adapted to suit modern realities, with a growing recognition of gender equality in many Igbo communities.

## **Cultural importance of marital harmony and stability:**

The stability of marriage holds profound cultural significance in Igbo society. A successful marriage is viewed not only as a personal achievement but also as a reflection of a family's honor and dignity. Marital harmony is highly valued, as it represents a smooth and respectful union between two individuals, in which there is mutual love, understanding, and cooperation. In the opinion of Chinwe, (2017), this harmony is essential not only for the emotional well-being of

the couple but also for the welfare of the children and the broader community.

In Igbo culture, divorce is generally seen as undesirable and is often viewed as a failure to maintain the integrity of the marital bond. However, divorce can occur in cases of infidelity, abuse, or failure to fulfill marital duties, and the stigma attached to divorce within Igbo culture emphasizes the high cultural value placed on marital stability (Okwudishu, 2015). For the Igbo people, marriage is often seen as an intergenerational contract, where each couple's union is expected to provide a stable foundation for future generations.

The extended family system plays a critical role in supporting the stability of marriages. The presence of extended family members such as parents, siblings, and in-laws in the marital relationship is central to ensuring harmony. The involvement of the extended family often provides emotional support, mediation in times of conflict, and a source of social capital to help maintain marital stability (Ugwu, 2020). In many cases, the wisdom of elders in the family or community can help resolve marital disputes before they escalate, fostering a sense of unity and cooperation.

### **Understanding Non-Verbal Communication in Igbo Marriages**

Non-verbal communication plays a pivotal role in the interactions between married partners in Igbo society. Unlike in some cultures where verbal exchanges dominate, Igbo marriages often hinge on non-verbal cues, such as gestures, facial

expressions, posture, and silence, to convey emotions, respect, affection, and dissatisfaction. Understanding these non-verbal forms of communication is essential for navigating relationships in the Igbo cultural context.

#### **Non-verbal communications commonly used:**

Non-verbal communication in Igbo marriages encompasses a variety of physical signals, gestures, and cultural practices that are imbued with meaning. These types include:

**Facial Expressions:** Facial expressions are vital in conveying emotions such as joy, sorrow, anger, and affection. For instance, the expression of joy may be accompanied by a smiling face or softened gaze, while disapproval or anger may be indicated by a frown or scowl (Nwoke, 2017). Facial expressions communicate what is often left unsaid in a marriage.

**Gestures:** Physical gestures, such as bowing or kneeling, are traditional signs of respect, especially in the context of Igbo marriages. The act of kneeling by a woman in front of her husband is a form of respect and acknowledgment of the husband's role as the head of the family. This gesture reinforces the patriarchal norms prevalent in Igbo culture (Chinwe, 2018).

**Posture and Body Language:** A wife's posture often signals her emotional state in a marriage. Submissive behavior, such as lowering one's gaze or sitting with folded hands, is a sign of respect in public settings, while aggressive body language, like crossed arms or refusal to engage, may signal marital tension (Okwudishu, 2016).

**Silence:** Silence in Igbo marriages can be a powerful form of communication, often used to express frustration, discontent, or emotional withdrawal. For instance, a wife's silence after a dispute might be interpreted as dissatisfaction or a form of passive protest. In this context, silence is not always the absence of communication but rather an alternative, non-verbal way to express emotions (Ugwu, 2020).

**How Non-verbal cues convey emotions, respect, or dissatisfaction**

Non-verbal communication is particularly important in expressing respect, emotions, and dissatisfaction within Igbo marriages. Each non-verbal cue, from facial expressions to body language, serves as an emotional signal that can either reinforce harmony or highlight conflict in the relationship.

**Respect:** In Igbo marriages, respect is paramount and is often communicated through non-verbal actions. The kneeling of a wife before her husband or her use of honorifics such as "Nze" or "Onowu" signals deference and acknowledgment of the husband's authority. This type of behavior reflects the gendered expectations within Igbo society, where women are expected to show submission to their husbands (Nwoke, 2017).

**Emotions:** Non-verbal communication also serves to convey emotions that might otherwise be difficult to articulate. For instance, a hug or touch can communicate love or affection, while a withdrawn posture or refusal to engage can signal emotional distress or unhappiness in the relationship. The tone of voice, when

accompanied by facial expressions, can also emphasize feelings of affection, frustration, or anger (Chinwe, 2018).

**Dissatisfaction:** When partners are dissatisfied in their marriage, non-verbal communication may take the form of body language that reflects emotional withdrawal. The act of avoiding eye contact, crossing arms, or physically distancing oneself from one's spouse often signals a desire for separation or a refusal to engage in conflict resolution (Okwudishu, 2016). This silence or distancing is sometimes misunderstood as a lack of interest or indifference.

**Misinterpretation of non-verbal cues in marriage**

While non-verbal cues are essential for expressing emotions and maintaining relationships, they are often misinterpreted, leading to conflict or marital instability. In many cases, the failure to understand or properly decode these cues may escalate tensions between partners.

**Silence:** Silence is one of the most misinterpreted non-verbal cues in Igbo marriages. While silence might signify the wife's need for emotional space or time to process her feelings, it is often misconstrued as anger or withdrawal from the marriage. A husband may perceive the wife's silence as disrespect or defiance, even though it may be her way of avoiding a confrontation (Ugwu, 2020).

**Body Language:** Misreading body language can also lead to misunderstandings. For example, a wife's reluctance to hold hands or make eye

contact after a disagreement may be seen as a lack of affection or commitment, even though it might simply reflect her emotional need for time and space. Similarly, a husband's sharp tone or rigid posture may be interpreted as domineering behavior when he may simply be trying to assert his authority or lead the family in line with traditional expectations (Nwoke, 2017).

### **Role of traditional expectations in interpreting non-verbal behavior**

In Igbo culture, traditional norms and expectations significantly influence how non-verbal cues are interpreted in marriage. These cultural expectations dictate what is considered respectful or disrespectful behavior and shape how partners communicate without words.

**Cultural Norms of Submissiveness:** The traditional role of the wife as a submissive partner in Igbo marriages means that her body language and gestures often reflect deference to the husband. For example, the practice of kneeling before the husband in the presence of elders or guests is an expression of respect that reinforces the patriarchal structure of the Igbo family (Chinwe, 2018).

**Gender Roles:** Igbo society has deeply rooted gender expectations, and non-verbal cues are often used to reinforce these roles. The wife's silence during disagreements, for instance, may be seen as a sign of compliance or obedience, while the husband's open body language and assertive gestures may be interpreted as leadership and strength. These traditional expectations influence how behaviors are

perceived and understood, and sometimes creating tension when one partner challenges these roles (Okwudishu, 2016).

### **Attitude and Its Influence on Marital Stability**

Attitude plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of any marital relationship, and the Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria are no exception. Personal attitudes, influenced by both individual traits and cultural norms, can significantly impact the stability and longevity of marriages. Attitudes such as pride, submissiveness, and stubbornness shape how individuals interact within their marriages, affecting everything from communication to conflict resolution. Additionally, the influence of modernity and exposure to broader societal values can alter marital attitudes, leading to potential clashes between traditional and contemporary views. Understanding how these attitudes influence marital stability is crucial for navigating the complexities of modern relationships while respecting traditional expectations.

#### **How Personal Attitudes Impact Marriage**

Personal attitudes such as pride, submissiveness, and stubbornness can either enhance or destabilize a marriage. These attitudes affect how partners perceive one another, communicate, and resolve conflicts.

**Pride:** An overly proud attitude, where one partner refuses to apologize or admits to wrongdoing, can lead to prolonged conflicts and emotional distance. In Igbo marriages, where

respect and humility are highly valued, pride can become a barrier to emotional intimacy and mutual understanding (Chinwe, 2018). A proud partner might resist compromise, leading to unresolved issues and marital tension.

**Submissiveness:** While submissiveness is culturally promoted in traditional Igbo marriages, especially from wives toward their husbands, excessive submissiveness can lead to self-silencing or emotional neglect. In some instances, over-submissive attitudes may prevent open communication about needs or issues within the marriage, resulting in frustration and resentment (Okwudishu, 2016).

**Stubbornness:** Stubbornness often creates friction between married partners. In cases where one partner is unwilling to compromise or refuses to adapt, it may result in stagnation or an inability to solve marital problems effectively. Such rigid attitudes, especially in a society that values adaptability and mutual respect, can undermine the emotional well-being of both partners (Ugwu, 2020).

### **Influence of Modernity and Exposure on Marital Attitudes**

Modernity and exposure to global ideas, through media or education, have introduced new perspectives on relationships and marriage. In many Igbo marriages, the younger generation, who are more exposed to modern values, may begin to challenge the traditional roles that have long governed marital life.

**Gender Equality:** Modern attitudes towards gender equality and individual rights may

influence couples, particularly women, to seek more independence or assertiveness within the marriage. This can sometimes conflict with traditional Igbo cultural norms that emphasize a patriarchal structure, where men are seen as the head of the family (Chinwe, 2018). These shifting attitudes can lead to tension and even marital instability if not properly negotiated between partners.

**Technology and Social Media:** The exposure to different marital norms via technology and social media has also influenced attitudes. The increasing presence of global cultures and practices, often promoting individualism and self-fulfillment, can conflict with the communal and collective expectations of traditional Igbo marriages. Couples may struggle to balance personal desires with societal expectations, leading to emotional strain or disputes over values (Okwudishu, 2016).

### **Clashes between Traditional and Modern Attitudes**

The clash between traditional and modern attitudes often presents a significant challenge to marital stability, particularly among couples where both partners have different perspectives on marriage roles.

**Traditional Attitudes:** In Igbo culture, marital harmony has traditionally been rooted in the clear delineation of gender roles. Men are expected to be the providers and heads of the household, while women are seen as caretakers, nurturing both the family and the cultural legacy (Chinwe, 2018). Adherence to traditional values is deeply



ingrained in many marriages and can create stability when partners understand and respect these roles.

**Modern Attitudes:** The advent of modern marriage concepts, where gender equality and shared decision-making are emphasized, can lead to tension between partners. For instance, a wife who has been empowered by education or career opportunities may seek to challenge traditional gender expectations by asserting more authority in decision-making, leading to conflicts when her husband's traditional mindset is unable to reconcile with these new dynamics (Ugwu, 2020).

However, these contrasting attitudes require a delicate balance, with both partners having to engage in continuous negotiation, understanding, and compromise to preserve marital stability.

#### **Impact of Individual and Collective Attitudes on Conflict Resolution**

Attitudes are instrumental in how conflicts are managed within a marriage. Individual attitudes; such as the willingness to compromise or accept responsibility, directly affect conflict resolution strategies. When one partner approaches disagreements with an open attitude and a willingness to listen, it can lead to resolution and greater marital satisfaction.

**Collective Attitude:** The collective attitude, which includes the family and community, also influences how conflicts are resolved. In Igbo marriages, extended family and community involvement often play a crucial role in conflict mediation. For example, elders may intervene to

help resolve disputes, reinforcing cultural norms and values. In some cases, however, external interference can create pressure or resentment if both partners disagree with the intervention (Okwudishu, 2016).

However, attitudes toward forgiveness and reconciliation are essential in determining whether marital issues are resolved or allowed to fester. Partners who hold attitudes that emphasize patience, humility, and forgiveness are more likely to overcome challenges and restore harmony (Chinwe, 2018).

#### **Interplay between Non-Verbal**

#### **Communication and Attitude in Marriage**

The interplay between non-verbal communication and attitude in marriage plays a critical role in shaping the dynamics of relationships, particularly within the context of Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria. Non-verbal communication encompasses the use of gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and silence to convey emotions, thoughts, and intentions without the use of words (Knapp & Hall, 2010). These non-verbal cues are often influenced by individual and cultural attitudes, and they function as powerful tools in conveying affection, dissatisfaction, or even emotional distance. In this context, non-verbal communication serves as both a reflection and a determinant of the emotional state and attitude of the partners involved.

### **How attitudes shape non-verbal expression in marriage**

Attitudes profoundly shape how individuals express themselves non-verbally within a marriage. The attitudes and emotional dispositions of partners influence the type of gestures, tone, and body language they exhibit, which can either foster intimacy or create emotional distance.

**Positive Attitudes:** In marriages characterized by trust, affection, and mutual respect, non-verbal cues often mirror these positive attitudes. Smiling, affectionate touches, eye contact, and relaxed body posture are common in relationships where partners feel emotionally secure and connected (Hargie, 2011). These behaviors signal warmth, care, and openness, which help to nurture and maintain harmony in the relationship.

**Negative Attitudes:** Conversely, negative attitudes such as resentment, pride, or disdain may manifest through non-verbal cues such as avoidance of eye contact, crossed arms, tense body posture, and irritated facial expressions. Such non-verbal reactions often indicate emotional withdrawal or frustration, which can erode intimacy and contribute to instability in the relationship (Okwudishu, 2016).

Attitudes toward authority, gender roles, and respect within Igbo marriages also significantly influence non-verbal communication. For example, a wife may express deference or submissiveness non-verbally by averting her gaze or adopting a humble posture when speaking to her husband, in accordance with traditional Igbo

expectations of respect (Chinwe, 2018). On the other hand, if attitudes shift, due to modern influences, the once-passive non-verbal expressions may be replaced with more assertive gestures, creating potential tension between partners with differing views on gender roles.

### **Non-verbal reactions to emotional or psychological stress in the relationship**

Non-verbal cues are often the first sign of emotional or psychological stress within a marriage. Emotional distress; whether caused by unresolved conflicts, financial stress, or interpersonal issues, often leads to non-verbal expressions that reveal inner turmoil, even when verbal communication is absent or insufficient.

**Facial Expressions:** A partner experiencing emotional stress may display non-verbal signs such as frowning, clenching their jaw, or narrowing their eyes, which can signal frustration or anger. In contrast, feelings of sadness or helplessness may be expressed through downcast eyes, slumped shoulders, or lack of energy in movement (Knapp & Hall, 2010). These non-verbal signs often communicate more about a person's emotional state than words alone.

**Silence and Withdrawal:** Silence is a common non-verbal response in times of stress or conflict. A partner may withdraw emotionally or physically, refusing to engage in conversation or avoiding eye contact. Such behaviors signal emotional discomfort or dissatisfaction, often making the issue more difficult to address directly. Silence can indicate resignation or discontent, and when prolonged, it can lead to

emotional distance and marital instability (Hargie, 2011).

**Body Language and Tension:** Heightened tension within a relationship, such as during unresolved disputes or ongoing emotional stress, can manifest through rigid body language or non-verbal withdrawal, such as sitting with arms crossed or avoiding physical closeness. These signals not only indicate stress but can also perpetuate the cycle of emotional alienation in marriage (Okwudishu, 2016).

**Cultural limitations in expressing affection or dissatisfaction verbally**

In traditional Igbo culture, there are cultural limitations on how affection or dissatisfaction can be expressed verbally. These restrictions often create a situation where non-verbal communication becomes the primary channel for expressing emotions, including love, respect, and discontent.

**Affection:** In many traditional Igbo marriages, overt verbal expressions of affection such as frequent "I love you"s may not be common. Instead, affection is often communicated through non-verbal means such as providing care, performing duties, or using gestures of respect like kneeling or bowing (Chinwe, 2018). While this indirect communication is culturally valued, it can be difficult for partners who are more accustomed to open verbal expressions of emotion, often creating a disconnect between partners who may not understand the other's affectionate intentions.

**Dissatisfaction:** Similarly, dissatisfaction may be communicated through non-verbal cues rather than direct confrontation. In Igbo marriages, particularly with respect to wives, openly expressing dissatisfaction or anger can be considered disrespectful (Ugwu, 2020). As such, dissatisfaction may be masked by body language or silence. When a partner is dissatisfied but unwilling or unable to speak about it openly due to cultural constraints, non-verbal cues such as avoiding eye contact, withdrawing physically, or displaying irritability may be used instead. Such indirect methods of expressing dissatisfaction can lead to confusion or misinterpretation, further complicating communication within the marriage.

**Impacts on Marriage Stability**

The stability of marriage is significantly influenced by various interpersonal dynamics, with communication and attitude playing central roles. When communication breaks down and negative attitudes take root, the consequences can reverberate through the relationship and affect broader family structures. In Igbo-speaking cultures, where tradition places a high value on respect, communal harmony, and emotional expressions, these dynamics are crucial. The inability to express emotions or resolve conflicts effectively can result in marital instability, affecting not only the couple but also their children and extended families.

### **Communication breakdown due to unspoken conflicts**

Communication is the foundation of a stable marriage. When conflicts are left unspoken or unresolved, the emotional distance between partners grows, resulting in a breakdown of communication. In Igbo marriages, there may be cultural pressures that discourage open confrontation, especially regarding issues related to authority or gender roles. As such, unspoken conflicts may linger, with partners avoiding direct discussions to prevent further tension or maintain the appearance of harmony (Okwudishu, 2016). Over time, these unresolved issues can lead to emotional withdrawal, resentment, and a loss of intimacy between partners, which weaken the marriage foundation. Non-verbal communication, as discussed earlier, plays a significant role in how these conflicts are expressed. However, without open verbal exchange, partners may misinterpret each other's cues, leading to further misunderstandings (Hargie, 2011). For example, silence, avoidance of eye contact, or tense body language may indicate dissatisfaction, but if left unaddressed, such communication forms can intensify the underlying issues and lead to emotional disengagement, which negatively affects marital stability.

### **Attitude-related disrespect, emotional distance, or power struggle**

The attitudes held by spouses towards each other, shaped by both individual and cultural factors, profoundly impact marital stability. In particular,

negative attitudes such as pride, arrogance, resentment, and entitlement can manifest as disrespect and power struggles between partners, which create tension and undermine the relationship. In many Igbo marriages, the expected gender roles and authority dynamics can lead to power struggles, especially when one partner attempts to assert dominance over the other (Chinwe, 2018). This power imbalance often results in a breakdown of mutual respect, with partners displaying contemptuous behaviors such as dismissing each other's opinions, belittling, or controlling actions.

Such attitudes not only create emotional distance but also harm the emotional well-being of both spouses, eroding the marital bond. When there is an ongoing attitude of disrespect, it may be difficult for partners to approach each other with empathy or willingness to compromise, thus escalating conflicts rather than resolving them (Ugwu, 2020). Furthermore, as spouses engage in power struggles, they may neglect the fundamental cooperation that a healthy marriage requires, leading to dissatisfaction and potential separation.

### **Effects on children and extended family relations**

Marital instability often has significant implications for children and extended family relationships. Children growing up in an environment marked by emotional conflict, disrespect, or neglect may develop emotional insecurity and may struggle with forming healthy relationships in their own lives. They may

internalize dysfunctional communication patterns or come to view conflict as something negative that should be avoided at all costs. In Igbo culture, where family ties are considered vital, the emotional and psychological repercussions for children can be far-reaching.

Moreover, extended family members often play an influential role in marriage dynamics, especially in traditional Igbo settings. Tensions within the couple can spill over into relationships with in-laws and other relatives, causing rifts and adding external stress. Cultural expectations around marriage in Igbo society place pressure on both spouses to maintain stability for the sake of family honor, but when issues are unresolved, they may affect the wider community. Extended family members may intervene, either to mediate or exacerbate conflicts, which can influence the stability of the marriage further (Chinwe, 2018).

### **Role of poor conflict resolution in marital breakdown**

Effective conflict resolution is one of the cornerstones of a stable marriage. In cases where poor communication and negative attitudes dominate, the absence of conflict resolution strategies often leads to marital breakdown. Partners may avoid dealing with the real issues, opting instead for temporary fixes or simply ignoring the underlying problems. Such avoidance often results in accumulated frustrations, which explode later in more severe forms of emotional outbursts or verbal confrontations (Hargie, 2011). In Igbo culture, where conflict resolution may be guided by

tradition and authority figures like elders or family members, the reluctance to confront problems head-on can lead to unresolved disputes that undermine the relationship.

Anyway, ineffective conflict resolution can manifest as silent treatment, stonewalling, or even verbal abuse, which harms emotional connection and reduces the willingness to compromise or negotiate. The inability to resolve conflicts healthily can directly affect marital satisfaction and increase the likelihood of separation or divorce (Okwudishu, 2016).

### **Strategies for Improving Marital Stability**

To address the challenges that affect marital stability among the Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria, especially those rooted in non-verbal communication and attitude, several strategies can be employed. These strategies involve enhancing communication, promoting emotional intelligence, integrating counseling services, and utilizing cultural and religious structures to mediate conflicts. Below are some of the key strategies aimed at improving marital stability in this context.

#### **Promoting emotional intelligence and open communication**

One of the most critical strategies for improving marital stability is the promotion of emotional intelligence (EI), which involves the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's emotions, as well as the emotions of others. Partners with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to navigate difficult situations, resolve conflicts amicably, and maintain healthy

communication. In the context of Igbo marriages, fostering EI can help partners communicate their needs and emotions more openly and effectively, reducing misunderstandings caused by non-verbal cues.

Open communication is important to ensuring that partners address their concerns early before they escalate into larger issues. Encouraging couples to express their feelings verbally, rather than relying on non-verbal signals that may be misinterpreted, can improve understanding and reduce tension. Both partners should feel empowered to communicate their desires, fears, and frustrations without fear of judgment or retaliation (Goleman, 2006). Emotional intelligence can also help to manage the complex power dynamics that sometimes arise in Igbo marriages, allowing for more egalitarian relationships and promoting mutual respect.

#### **Counseling and marital education (Pre-marriage and In-marriage)**

Marital counseling and education are essential in providing individuals with the tools they need to navigate marriage successfully. Pre-marital counseling equips couples with important information about expectations, communication skills, and conflict resolution before they enter marriage. This is particularly relevant in the context of Igbo culture, where traditional expectations of gender roles and marital duties can sometimes create misunderstandings between spouses. Pre-marital counseling can provide couples with a clear understanding of their roles, their partner's expectations, and effective

strategies for communication and emotional regulation (Amato & Previti, 2003).

In-marriage counseling, on the other hand, helps couples work through challenges as they arise. Regular sessions with a qualified counselor can address issues like miscommunication, disrespect, and emotional distancing. Additionally, marital education programs can teach couples techniques for conflict resolution, stress management, and emotional support. These programs can also provide insight into how attitudes, such as pride or submissiveness, affect marital stability and help couples adjust these attitudes to maintain a balanced and healthy relationship (Johnston & Campbell, 2007).

#### **Cultural sensitization and re-orientation on communication**

Given that communication styles in Igbo marriages are heavily influenced by traditional cultural expectations, cultural sensitization is an important strategy for improving marital stability. Education around modern communication techniques alongside traditional practices can help couples navigate the tension between traditional values and the demands of contemporary life.

Re-orienting individuals to appreciate the value of open, direct communication while respecting cultural norms can reduce misunderstandings. For example, younger couples may need guidance on how to balance respect for elders with the need for self-expression within the marriage. Additionally, sensitizing both men and women to the emotional needs of their partners,

as well as the importance of empathy, can encourage a more supportive environment for effective communication (Okwudishu, 2016).

Training programs that combine traditional values with modern communication practices can enhance mutual respect and understanding in the marriage, allowing both partners to feel heard and valued.

### **Role of elders and religious institutions in conflict mediation**

In Igbo culture, elders and religious institutions traditionally play a key role in mediating conflicts and providing guidance to couples. Elders are often viewed as the custodians of cultural values and can serve as mediators when conflicts arise between spouses. Elders can offer a neutral, respectful space for dialogue, helping couples navigate difficult issues in a way that honors both the marriage and the community's values. Their role is particularly important in cases where emotional intelligence and communication have broken down, and both parties may need external guidance to reconcile their differences (Akani, 2016).

Similarly, religious institutions provide spiritual guidance and support to couples, emphasizing the importance of commitment, loyalty, and forgiveness. Churches and other religious organizations often offer marriage counseling services, conduct marital education programs, and encourage couples to seek **divine intervention** during challenging times. Religious teachings also stress the importance of compassion, selflessness, and communication,

which can help strengthen the marital bond (Okwudishu, 2016).

By leveraging the wisdom of elders and the spiritual authority of religious leaders, Igbo marriages can find additional support systems that promote healthy conflict resolution, emotional healing, and marital stability.

### **Conclusion**

Non-verbal communication and attitude play significant roles in marital stability, particularly within the context of Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria. The intricate relationship between non-verbal cues, such as body language, facial expressions, and silence, alongside individual attitudes, like pride, submissiveness, or stubbornness, can either strengthen or destabilize marital relationships. As demonstrated, misinterpretations of non-verbal cues, often influenced by cultural expectations, can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts, ultimately threatening the stability of marriages.

Furthermore, attitudes shaped by both traditional values and modern influences can create tension between spouses, leading to emotional distance or power struggles that may disrupt marital harmony. The need for open communication, emotional intelligence, and a balance between traditional and contemporary expectations is crucial for fostering understanding and resolving conflicts.

To mitigate these challenges, strategies such as promoting emotional intelligence, offering marital education and counseling, sensitizing individuals to modern communication practices

while respecting cultural norms, and leveraging the support of elders and religious institutions are essential for improving marital stability. These measures can help couples navigate the complexities of their relationships more effectively, fostering greater emotional connection, mutual respect, and long-term stability in Igbo marriages.

Ultimately, by addressing both the communicative and attitudinal factors that contribute to marital instability, couples and the larger community can work together to create healthier, more resilient marital bonds, ensuring a positive impact on individual lives, families, and the society at large.

### **Recommendations**

1. It is essential to incorporate emotional intelligence training for couples, as it can help individuals better manage their emotions, understand their partner's feelings, and foster effective communication. Marital counseling should emphasize developing these skills to address conflicts constructively.
2. Couples should be encouraged to communicate openly, especially about emotional needs and concerns. Training programs should focus on enhancing verbal communication, reducing over-reliance on non-verbal cues, and ensuring clarity in expressing thoughts and feelings.
3. Offering comprehensive pre-marital and in-marriage counseling programs can

help couples understand each other's expectations, roles, and communication styles. These sessions should also address issues of respect, power dynamics, and conflict resolution techniques.

4. There is a need for cultural sensitization programs that bridge the gap between traditional Igbo values and modern communication practices. Educating couples about the importance of balancing both cultural and modern communication expectations will contribute to more harmonious relationships.
5. Both individuals and communities should address negative attitudes that hinder marital harmony, such as pride, stubbornness, and emotional distance. Education on fostering positive attitudes toward marriage and partners can improve mutual respect and cooperation.
6. Marital issues should be viewed holistically, considering not just the couple but also the extended family and community dynamics. Encouraging a collective approach to conflict resolution can provide additional support for couples facing difficulties in their relationships.

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