

Understanding psychosocial factors that motivate married couples to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships in Lusaka, Zambia: A Counselling perspective

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Abstract

The study sought to understand psychosocial factors that motivated married couples to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. An intrinsic case study design was used to guide the study. Typical case purposive sampling procedure was used to select sample size of 38. Non participants observation checklist and semi structured interview guide were used to collect the data. Thematic analysis helped to analyse the data. Findings of the study were that the need for monetary and material gain, emotion, procreation, peace in marriage, sex and security motivated married couples to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships a behaviour they chose to give them desired satisfaction. The study therefore, recommends that married couples should have continuous marriage counselling to help them cope with basic needs expected to be met in marriage. Further, married couples must cultivate a sense of security in each other so that none should feel insecure.

Keywords: psychosocial factors, counselling, multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, married couples

Background to the study

Despite being in marriage, some married couples in Zambia engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. In order to effectively counsel such couples, it became imperative to conduct a study and understand psychosocial factors that motivate them to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. The paper therefore, shares findings that may be of help in counselling married couples that engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. The term multiple concurrent sexual partnership refers to a situation where a sexual partner has two or more sexual partnerships during the same period. Such behaviour, prompted the researchers to inquire what could motivate married couples to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. In being inquisitive in this paradox, the researchers wondered if the behaviour of married couples engaging in multiple concurrent sexual partnership was only common to Zambia. To the contrary, Epstein and Morris (2011) reported that there was evidence of multiple concurrent sexual partnerships in Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Haiti, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Swaziland, Zambia, Cote d'Ivoire, Tanzania and Uganda. As a result, they concluded that among others, high rates of multiple concurrent sexual partnerships were the major drivers of AIDS epidemic. Similarly, in the United States of America, multiple sexual partnerships exist. For instance, The National Survey of Family Growth conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2021) provides statistics from 2015–2019 for people who have had sex with a partner of a different sex. It reports that the median number of sexual partners was 4.3 for women and 6.3 for men. For Zambia, what was intriguing were assumptions that being in marriage, one's psychological and social needs were met. Additionally, it was assumed that since pre-marital and marriage counselling are offered in Zambia at a minimal or no fee at all, instead of engaging in extra marital affairs, married couples could have sought counselling to help them overcome the motivation for engaging in the multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. Tuchili and Ndhlovu (2016) observed that students who received counselling performed better than their counterpart in interpersonal and problem solving skills. Since counselling is synonymous with orientation, Mudenda and Ndhlovu (2021) argued that

orientation was meant to help in adjusting to new life, such as marriage life. It became imperative therefore, to understand psychological and social factors that motivate married couples to engage in such behaviour. An understanding of the motivating factors may help to effectively use counselling as a behaviour change mechanism on such a clientele.

Literature Review

A study conducted in Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe by Soul City Institute Regional Programme (2008) reports that some men in monogamous or polygamous marriages fail to satisfy their only wife or wives sexually. In such situations women had extra-marital affairs to get material support and sexual satisfaction. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, Mugweni et al. (2015) found that relationship dissatisfaction was one of the main reasons for people engaging in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships with either a sex worker, casual sexual partner, a regular girlfriend or boyfriend. Could these also be the motivating psychosocial factors for engaging in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships among married couples in Lusaka? In Botswana similar results were found by Soul City Institute (2008). Emotional and sexual dissatisfaction were also reported as contributing factors for men and women in Tanzania to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships (Cox et al., 2014).

Infertility was also found to be a recipe for ridicule and multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. A study done in Malawi reports that women perceived as infertile were unable to follow a normative path to achieving adult status, were presumed to be sexually transgressive and considered useless. In terms of men, their masculinity was questioned due to infertility (Bornstein et al., 2020). Could such perception and treatment also motivate married couples in Lusaka, Zambia to engage in multiple concurrent partnerships? We eagerly await to see the findings in relation to infertility.

In Uganda, various reasons for engaging in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships were also reported. Ssekamate et al., (2020) conducted a study with a sample of 744 males and females. Of the sample, 78% were males and 28% were females. The reasons both males and females for engaging in multiple concurrent sexual relationships were; sexual satisfaction (52.6%), pleasure (50.0%), peer pressure (26.8%) and earning money (24.8%). Of those who engaged in multiple sexual partnerships, 89% of the females and 1% of males did so because of money, 62.7% of males and 25.6% of females did so for sexual satisfaction, while 61.8% of males and 18.3% of females did so for pleasure. These reasons can clearly be associated with the basic human needs for survival or self-preservation, love or belonging, power or self-worth, freedom or independence and fun or enjoyment articulated in Choice theory (Glasser, 1998). Such reasons provoke critical thinking that maybe we further need to understand why sex is core to meeting human needs.

Studies have found that having quality sexual activity may have positive effects on the partners. The Lastella et al., (2019) in the United States of America found that orgasm due to sexual activity improved sleep in partners. Ramadhan and Hashim (2021) reports that there was improved immune function in participants who had sex more than three times per month compared to those who had none or once per month. In addition, sexual intercourse releases oxytocin, a hormone that helps to manage stress, anxiety and how to process negative experiences. Since the presence of oxytocin due sexual activity may cause relaxation, there may also be reduction in cortisol, a hormone if increased can have negative effects on a person's physical and psychological health resulting into stress. Quality sexual activity as an exercise is also reported to improve physical health and life expectancy in sexual partners (Smith, et al., 2019). Could these be some of the motivating psychosocial factors motivating married couples to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships?

On negative side literature shows some negative effects of multiple concurrent sexual relationships. For

instance, Cox et al., (2014) reports that in a study conducted in two high HIV prevalence cities in Kenya and Zambia, it was estimated through deterministic modelling that at least 25% of HIV infections among married men were from concurrent partners outside marriage. There was need therefore, to understand why despite the negative effects on multiple concurrent sexual partnership married couples still engaged in such behaviour.

Violent marriages may promote loss of sexual desires in couples. For instance, Bodenmann et al., (2010) found that cognitive and emotional experiences, such as high stress, low self-esteem, negative mood, and/or depressive symptoms had potential to downregulate sexual desires in partners. Krinke et al., (2022) indicate that sex hormone cortisol if elevated due to violence may negatively affect learning and emotional memory formation and was associated with post-traumatic stress disorders in couples. As suggested by Smith, et al., (2019), stress may contribute to dysfunctional sex life in couples. Therefore, violence in marriage must be avoided and instead couples must promote peace between them.

Theoretical underpinning

The Choice theory developed by William Glasser in 1998 formed the theoretical underpinning for the study. It explains that all human behaviour is a choice and choices are driven by internal instincts and basic needs (Glasser, 1998). Key in the Choice theory is that individuals create their “quality world” or “picture albums” of things that they value such as relationships, beliefs, and cultural ritual (Duba et al. 2009). A picture album is an ideal picture of a world in which an individual aspire to live. In marriage, partners create picture albums of their idealised marriage relationship. According to Glasser, the basis of misery for many people is failure to have a healthy relationship with people in one’s picture album. In marriage for instance, marital discord is a sign of incongruence or lack of commonality between the picture albums of husband and wife.

Glasser also articulates that every picture album has five basic needs intrinsic in all human beings. In hierarchical order, at the base but core to human needs is the need for survival or self-preservation. It is followed by the needs for love or belonging, power or self-worthy, freedom or independence and fun or enjoyment. Glasser further points out that some people have a greater need for one of their basic needs than the rest of the needs but strive to satisfy each need according to the degree of its requirement. If a person perceives that he is not getting the desired satisfaction, he may choose a certain behaviour that will help get the desired satisfaction. This theory was chosen because of its relevance to marriage counselling in particular, why married couples engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships.

Methods

The constructivism philosophical paradigm guided the methodology. The researchers believe that ontologically, knowledge is subjective. As such a nominalist ontology was used with the belief that what we know is subjective knowledge and in terms of epistemology or how we know what we know, knowledge is socially constructed. In terms of axiology, consistent with Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), the researchers hold a belief that reality/knowledge exists in the experiences of people in this case, married couples who engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. As such, interviews and document analysis were appropriate methods for generating data to help understand why married couples engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. An intrinsic case study design was used to guide the study. In line with Stake (2006) case studies are divided into three types: intrinsic-a single case (an individual, group, organization, event, or other entity) that is important in its own right, not necessarily because of its potential predictive theoretical powers; instrumental-a single case where the focus is on going beyond the case to

understand a broader phenomenon of interest; and collective – a multiple case version where the focus is on learning about a phenomenon. An intrinsic case study design was chosen because its outcomes are intended to inform the researchers about psychosocial factors that motivate married couple to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. This implies that the outcomes shall be internalised to the particular case, understanding psychosocial factors that motivate married couples to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. Typical case sampling procedure was used to come up with a sample size of 17 females and twenty-one males.

In terms of instruments for data collection, semi-structured interview and observation checklist were used in the study to collect data. Semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data from the participants while observation checklist was used to collect data from the courts. As such, interviews were conducted with the informants. This procedure allowed for follow up questions to gain in-depth understanding about why married couples engaged in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. Listening to court cases also allowed for understanding why married couples engage in multiple concurrent sexual relationships. In terms of data analysis, in line with Maguire and Delahunt (2017) thematic analysis was used and data was analysed by following the six major stages that include familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and report writing.

Findings

This section addresses the knowledge gap that necessitate the study. There was need to understand psychosocial factors that motivated married couples to engage in multiple concurrent partnerships. Findings indicate that married couples were motivated to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships in order to meet their basic human needs.

Monetary gain: One of the reasons men and women got into multiple concurrent sexual partnerships was an anticipation that they would gain financially. One lady of 34 years was quoted saying, *“I knew that he is 60, far older than me but I got into extra marital sexual relationship with him for his money. I get sexual satisfaction from my husband.”* (F# 2). Similar responses were reported from four men.

Financially or emotionally neglected: These needs mostly affected women. The women who engaged in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships reported that either because they were financially or emotionally neglected by their husbands. One lady was reported to have said that, *“things started when my husband got a job and had money. He spent his money on other women and I felt neglected. I also found a man who met my financial and emotional needs, and that was it.”* (F#4)

Barrenness or impotence: Other factors found were barrenness of wives or impotence in husbands. One of the men said *“I asked my wife to allow me have a second wife because she could not give me a child but she refused. In search of a child, I ended up in an extra marital sexual relationship”* (M# 1)

On impotence, one of the ladies was quoted saying *“due to a medical condition, my husband has no erection. But I still need sex. So I ended up engaging in extra marital relationship.”* (F# 6)

Gender based violent marriages: It was also found that marriages with fights and quarrelling between couples contributed to loss of sexual feelings for each other and resulted in concurrent sexual relationships. One of the males said that,

because of fighting and quarreling, I have no sexual feelings for my wife. I ended up having a girlfriend. She made me feel I was a man. I feel bad but what can I do. I have no sexual feelings for my wife but for my girlfriend. (M#5)

A wife also reported that *“my husband bits me severely to the point of fainting. As a result, I felt not loved. I ended up in extra marital affairs with another man. He loves me and tells me I am beautiful and good”* (F# 11).

Sex deprivation: Both wives and husbands attested to the fact that deprivation of sex lured them in extra marital sexual affairs. One of the ladies was reported to have said, *“we are in a commuter marriage where my husband is in another province. This often deprives me of sex with him. To compensate this, I ended up engaging in sex with another man.”* (F#12).

For men, one report read, *“my wife often gives excuses when I want sex. It takes us months to meet. Temptations came and it was very difficult to resist.”* (M# 14)

Insecurity in spouses: Husbands and wives reported feelings of insecurity when a spouse threatened them with divorce or knew that a spouse was having extra marital affairs. In a case of men one report read, *“since my wife got promoted, she often told me that she could do without me. I felt insecure and I took precaution by finding myself another lady who loves me the way I am.”* (M#16)

Discussion

Understanding psychosocial factors that motivate married couples to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships is important for effective provision of counselling to such a clientele. The authors consider the concept ‘engaging’ as a choice behaviour. As such the Choice theory was considered appropriate to guide the discussion in this paper. In addition, the Choice theory has been widely used in research on marriage counselling and it attributes human behaviour to be a choice driven by the following five basic needs; survival or self-preservation, love or belonging, power or self-worthy, freedom or independence and fun or enjoyment (Glasser, 1998). Driven by the basic needs, human beings create picture albums or an ideal world to meet their needs. If a wife or husband for instance, perceives that her or his needs are not met as desired in the picture album (marriage relationship), may choose a certain behaviour that will bring desired satisfaction. In agreeing with the Choice theory, we found that married couples chose or engaged in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships to meet their basic needs from sources outside their marriage. Thus, the need for monetary and material gain, emotion, procreation, peace in marriage, sex and security motivated married couples to choose behaviour that possibly gave them desired satisfaction.

Monetary gain

One of the reasons men and women got into multiple concurrent sexual partnerships was an anticipation that they would have financial gain from such an extra relationship. Younger women chose to engage in extra marital affairs with older men with a lot of money so that they could financially enjoy themselves in life. A similar motive was found in younger men who engaged in extra marital affairs with older women with a lot of money. At play here was the basic need for fun and enjoyment which was not satisfied in marriage but with other men outside marriage.

Financially or emotionally neglected

Financial and emotional neglect was commonly expressed by wives who got into extra marital affairs. Wives who were financially or emotionally neglected by their husbands were more prone to engage in extra marital affairs to meet their needs. Cox et al, (2014) also reported that emotional dissatisfaction led women in Tanzania into multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. Lack of income increases a woman’s dependence on her partner or another man for financial assistance. The situation was similar in Kampala Uganda where Ssekamate et al., (2020) reports that 52.6% of the female participants reported to have entered into multiple

sexual partnerships because of need for money. The need for money and emotional satisfaction should not be neglected. Even King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes chapter 10 verse 19 that “A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes merry: but money answers all things.” However, excessive love of money must be restrained as Timothy advised in 1 Timothy chapter 6 verse 10; “for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith.”

Barrenness in wives and impotence in husbands

The purpose of marriage is procreation. That is why even if men and women keep sisters or brothers at home they still have need for marriage and children. In reference to the Choice theory, infertility destroys the picture album of becoming a mother or father. As a result, the basic human need of self-worth is also threatened. In Malawi infertility in women caused them to be treated as useless and in men to have a questionable masculinity (Bornstein et al., 2020). Infertility and the way society treat those perceived to be infertile may motivate married couples to choose engaging in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships.

Gender based violent marriages

Fights and quarrelling between couples in marriage contributed to loss of sexual feelings for each other and resulted in concurrent sexual relationships. Fights and quarrels elevates cortisol and may result in dysfunctional sexual relationships. Krinke et al., (2022) indicate that sex hormone cortisol when elevated was associated with post-traumatic stress disorders in couples. In Zimbabwe this was also a motivator for multiple concurrent sexual partnerships also known as revenge sex (Mugweni et al.,2015). There is need for married couples to strive for peace between each other.

Sex deprivation

Another motivator to multiple concurrent sexual partnerships was sex deprivation either by being in commuter marriage or spouse denying the other sex for various reasons. This was also common in Southwest Nigeria (Smith et al. 2019). Men and women attested to the fact that they had experienced sex deprivation by their spouses and ended up in extra marital affairs. This is a possible topic for premarital and marriage counselling so that spouses understand the importance of sex in marriage. Sex is known to improve sleep (Lastella et al, 2019) and to be deprived of it, may leave the human basic needs unsatisfied. Picture album of a spouse that is deprived of sex may also get distorted. As a result, the Choice theory becomes at play. A partner deprived of sex may choose to get sex outside marriage in order to meet the basic human needs for sex and sleep.

Insecurity in spouses

Husbands and wives both reported feelings of insecurity when spouses threatened divorce or when a spouse knew that she or he has extra marital sexual relationship. Extra marital affairs also pushed couples into revenge sex. Revenge sex was reported in Zimbabwe (Mugweni et al.,2015). Insecurity in marriage also contributed to relationship dissatisfaction in married couples in Zimbabwe and Tanzania (Mugweni et al., 2015) and (Cox et al., 2014). In reference to the Choice theory and in particular the picture album expected to be created by spouse when entering marriage. Insecurity may destroy the whole picture album or expectations of self-worthy and enjoyment in marriage. Spouses therefore, need to be considerate and ensure to cultivate security in each other towards their marriage relationship.

Implications to research and practice

The findings of the study have helped to understand psychosocial factors that motivate married couples to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. Further implication to practice is that counsellors should

understand that human behaviour is a choice aimed at getting desired satisfaction in line with the picture albums they created before entering marriage. Counsellors must also understand that at the core of marriage is sex and quality sex improves sleep, immune function, reduces stress and health related problems and thereby improving longevity in spouses. On the basis of this understanding, it is hoped that counsellors will provide relevant counselling services to married couples who engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships.

Conclusions

On the basis of the findings it is concluded that wives and husbands made choice behaviour to engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships due various motivators. Engaging in multiple concurrent sexual partnership was a purposively chosen behaviour to meet their human basic needs. These include the need for monetary and material gain, emotion, procreation, peace in marriage, sex and security. These needs are within the standard human basic needs articulated in the Choice theory (Glasser, 1998). In agreement with the Choice theory, presence of the need for monetary and material gain, emotion, procreation, peace, sex and security in marriage is a sign of lack of commonality between the picture albums of husband and wife. As a result, premarital and marriage counselling must include these needs for purposes helping couples understand how to meet each other's expectations in marriage.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following is recommended;

1. Married couples needs lifelong marriage counselling to help them understand causes of discords in marriage and how to address them.
2. In case of infertility, married couples must consider child adoption and/or medical care
3. Married couples must cultivate a sense of security in each other to help them cope with marriage needs.
4. Counsellors must have empathy or understanding about why married couples engage in multiple concurrent sexual partnerships.

Future Research

Future research should focus on Ways of addressing the behaviour of multiple concurrent sexual partnerships in married couples by engaging those involved. There is also need to focus on the use of basic needs genogram to understand how current and past generation patterns influence the formation of married couples' picture albums.

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