

Relationship Between Love Maps and Marital Quality Among Members of Karura Community Chapel in Nairobi City County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The family is known as the basic unit of society and marital quality plays a significant role in its functioning because marriage is a partnership between a husband and a wife –a core feature of many family formations. Understanding a partner’s inner world, or “Love Maps,” has been theorized to strengthen emotional bonding and enhance marital outcomes. This study examined the relationship between Love Maps and marital quality among members of Karura Community Chapel (KCC) in Nairobi City County, Kenya. Guided by the Gottman Method Couples Therapy framework, the research employed a correlational research design. The target population consisted of 375 married individuals, from which a sample of 194 respondents was selected using stratified sampling method. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using correlation and regression analysis in SPSS 29. Results indicated a significant positive relationship between Love Maps and marital quality, with Love Maps explaining 33% of the variance in marital quality. The study highlights the importance of integrating Love Maps with broader marital interventions and suggests avenues for further research into additional predictors of marital satisfaction. Cultivating an intimate understanding of a partner’s inner world is an important factor in promoting marital quality. Counsellors should intentionally guide couples in developing their love maps at an early stage by facilitating structured activities that help partners explore each other’s emotional needs, beliefs, values, expectations, and long-term goals. Married couples are encouraged to actively prioritize the development of love maps by intentionally seeking a deeper understanding of each other’s thoughts, emotions, aspirations, and personal experiences.

Keywords: Marital Quality, Gottman Method, Love Maps, Faith-based Communities

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is acknowledged the world over as an important social unit that avails emotional support, companionship, and a stable foundation for family life (Sim & Sim, 2020). Across various cultures, marriage is considered as a legally and socially sanctioned union expected to provide love, care, and long-term stability between spouses (Tavakol et al., 2020). Marital quality is therefore critical not only for the well-being of couples but also for families and societies at large (Li et al., 2022). Scholars such as Gottman and Silver (2015) emphasize that marital quality is a key determinant of overall family well-being. Yet despite its significance, maintaining a satisfying and healthy marital relationship remains a challenge for many couples. Conflicts, unmet expectations, emotional disconnection, and lack of companionship often undermine marital harmony (Eslami et al., 2020; Barton et al., 2021). When marital expectations remain unfulfilled, spouses may experience disappointment and relational strain. Over time, what initially appeared as love and commitment may deteriorate into marital disillusionment when intimacy and fulfilment decline (Mardani et al., 2023).

The scholarly world links marital quality to the interpersonal processes within marriage rather the length of the union. Goudarzi et al. (2022) argue that emotional divorce is more strongly associated with weakened relational components than with the duration of marriage. When spouses lack adequate understanding of each other’s inner worlds, emotional bonds deteriorate, increasing the possibility of disillusionment. These perspectives underscore the significance of studying relational mechanisms that sustain marital quality. Within this discourse, the concept of love maps has emerged as a critical relational construct (Tarkeshdooz et al., 2021). Love maps are defined as

a spouse's intimate knowledge of their partner's feelings, thoughts, preferences, and life experiences (Fahimi & Taghvaei, 2022). Gottman and Silver (2015) identify love maps as one of the core elements of interspousal friendship that underpin marital quality. Empirical evidence suggests that couples who consistently display affection, respect, and positive interactions are more likely to experience satisfying and enduring marriages (Tavakol et al., 2020; Chonody et al., 2020).

Research highlight that strong spousal friendship enhances marital quality by fostering trust, commitment, and emotional safety. Sadeghzadeh et al. (2023) for instance posited that couples who relate to each other within a framework of friendship report higher marital quality. Trust enables vulnerability and openness, which are essential for deepening emotional bonds (Lee et al., 2021), while commitment reflects a long-term orientation toward the relationship, even during challenging periods (Gottman & Silver, 2017). For this reason, scholars advocate for focused exploration of interspousal friendship dynamics, including love maps, as pathways to healthier and more fulfilling marriages (Keverenge et al., 2020).

In the contemporary world, rising divorce rates have intensified concern about marital instability and its negative consequences for individuals and families (Ipsos, 2020). In Kenya, efforts such as premarital programs, marital enrichment initiatives, and mediation in divorce cases point to a growing recognition of the need to strengthen marital relationships. However, despite the acknowledged importance of friendship and emotional understanding between spouses, limited empirical research has examined how love maps specifically relate to marital quality within faith-based communities. This study sought to address the limited understanding of the relationship between love maps and marital quality within the context of Karura Community Chapel in Nairobi City County, Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marital quality has been extensively examined through the lens of interspousal friendship, with particular emphasis on love maps as conceptualized by Gottman and Silver (2015). Love maps refer to spouses' cognitive representations of each other's inner worlds, including emotions, aspirations, stressors, and life experiences (Navarra & Gottman, 2018). Empirical studies from clinical and experimental settings support the importance of love maps and admiration in marital quality. Mardani et al. (2023), using a quasi-experimental design among 20 conflicted couples, found that expressing admiration and exploring love maps significantly strengthened marital bonds. Similarly, Fahimi and Taghvaei (2022) observed that avoiding monotony and emotional disengagement is crucial in preventing marital disillusionment.

Life-course perspectives extend discourse by linking intimate partner knowledge to evolving marital quality. Gabb (2022) demonstrated that sexual intimacy and satisfaction deepen with age and increased familiarity between spouses. This contrasts with Tavakol et al. (2020), who caution that couples may become less intentional about maintaining love maps as marriages progress. Although these findings suggest that love maps evolve over time, empirical research remains sparse on how life transitions such as parenthood, career changes, and ageing shape love maps and marital quality. This temporal gap underscores the need for studies that examine love maps across different stages of marriage.

Gender differences have also been explored in relation to understanding, love, and marital satisfaction. Yoo and Joo (2021) found that understanding each other was positively associated with marital satisfaction, with men reporting higher perceptions of love but greater difficulty understanding their spouses' needs. Women exhibit a stronger desire for emotional affection, often compensating for men's emotional withdrawal. A key feature of this is empathy, which has emerged as a closely related construct to love maps in explaining marital quality. Thalia et al. (2022) and Gottman and Silver (2015) emphasize empathy as the capacity to understand and respond to a partner's emotional world. Deborah et al. (2023), focusing solely on men, found that unmet emotional needs negatively affected their marital quality. In contrast, Aloyce et al. (2022) in Tanzania linked declining empathy to jealousy and intimate partner violence.

From a relational systems perspective, Gottman's Sound Relationship House (SRH) theory integrates love maps, fondness and admiration, and turning toward as foundational elements of marital friendship (Navarra & Gottman, 2018; Gottman & Gottman, 2017). Empirical support by Davoodvandi et al. (2018) shows that the

first three levels of SRH enhance emotional intimacy and couple communication. However, most SRH-based studies examine the model holistically rather than isolating love maps as an independent predictor. In African contexts, limited empirical studies have examined love maps directly. Aseka et al. (2021) highlight that shared lifestyles and mutual dependency contribute to marital enrichment, while Wanyeki (2023) emphasizes intimate partner knowledge in coping with marital stressors.

While extant research converge on the view that deep partner knowledge fosters emotional intimacy and relationship satisfaction, they are largely based on secular contexts. Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence on how love maps function in faith-based settings. While churches play a significant role in marital formation and enrichment, there is limited evidence on how love maps relate to marital quality among church members. This contextual gap in literature provided the impetus for the current empirical enquiry.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a quantitative correlational research design. This research design facilitated the identification and measurement of the strength and direction of relationships between the variables within the context of respondents' natural setting (Roemer et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2012). The adoption of quantitative methods enabled objective measurement and statistical analysis, allowing the estimation of changes in marital quality based on love maps using standardized instruments (Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2022).

The target population comprised 375 married individuals actively involved in the Family Life Ministry at Karura Community Church (Karura Community Chapel, 2023). Eligibility criteria required respondents to have been married for at least one year and not separated or in the process of divorce. A sample size of 194 respondents was selected using purposive sampling to capture relevant and diverse perspectives aligned with the study objectives (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Data were collected using a standardized questionnaire developed by the Gottman Institute, specifically the Sound Relationship House instrument, focusing on the love maps dimension through a 5-item dichotomous scale assessing spouses' knowledge of each other's inner worlds (Gottman & Gottman, 2017).

Data analysis involved systematic examination and interpretation of the collected data to answer the research questions (Kombo & Tromp, 2018). Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between love maps and marital quality (Treiman, 2009). These analytical procedures ensured rigorous testing and reliable interpretation of the study findings (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

Various ethical protocols were observed throughout the study cycle. These included research permission from the leadership of Karura Community Church as well as head of Family Life Ministry, informed consent of the respondents, and confidentiality measures (Saunders et al., 2019). Sensitivity was also exercised in light of the personal nature of marital issues to minimize psychological discomfort (Cash et al., 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the 194 individuals approached, 172 participated, yielding a response rate of 88.7% which was adequate. The distribution was fairly balanced across gender, with females accounting for 53% of the respondents while males were 47%. Most respondents were middle-aged, with the largest proportion aged 30–39 years. In terms of marital duration, the largest group had been married for 11–15 years (27.5%), and overall, 62.7% had been married for more than a decade. Regarding family size, most respondents had two children (34.9%) or three children (24.4%). Educational attainment was notably high, with the majority having university education (65.2%).

Respondents were asked to indicate whether the love maps statements in Table 1 were true or false. The table presents the percentage distribution of respondents who agreed with the statements as true with respect to their marital relationships.

Table 1 Descriptive Analysis of Love Maps Items

Love maps statements	Percentage True
I can tell you some of my partner's life dreams.	95.3%
I can list my partner's major aspirations and hopes in life.	91.9%
I can list the relatives my partner likes the least.	90.7%
I know my partner's major current worries.	87.2%
My partner is familiar with my current stresses.	81.4%
Love maps aggregate score	89.3%

The results in table 1 show that 95.3% of respondents reported that they could identify some of their partner’s life dreams, suggesting that most couples have developed a shared cognitive and emotional framework regarding long-term goals. This affirms the Love Maps concept within Gottman’s Sound Relationship House Theory, which posits that intimate knowledge of a partner’s inner life enhances emotional bonding and relational stability. Similarly, 91.9% of respondents indicated that they could list their partner’s major aspirations and hopes in life, implying that couples actively engage in meaning-making processes that foster mutual purpose and alignment. This reinforces the emphasis that shared aspirations contribute to perceived relational value and secure emotional attachment, thereby strengthening marital quality. Further, 90.7% of respondents reported being able to name the relatives their partner liked the least, reflecting a nuanced understanding of their partner’s social relationships and emotional boundaries. This means that awareness of relational dynamics within extended family networks is crucial for navigating marital issues. Likewise, 87.2% of respondents stated that they were aware of their partner’s major current worries, indicating a high level of emotional attunement and empathy within the relationship. The implication of this is that recognizing a partner’s concerns facilitates supportive behaviors and strengthens emotional closeness. In addition, 81.4% of respondents indicated that their partner was familiar with their current stresses, suggesting reciprocal emotional awareness and responsiveness. The aggregate score of 89.3% across all love map indicators reflects a consistently high level of intimacy and emotional understanding among the couples in the study. The obtained scores are summarized into love maps classification as shown in figure 1.

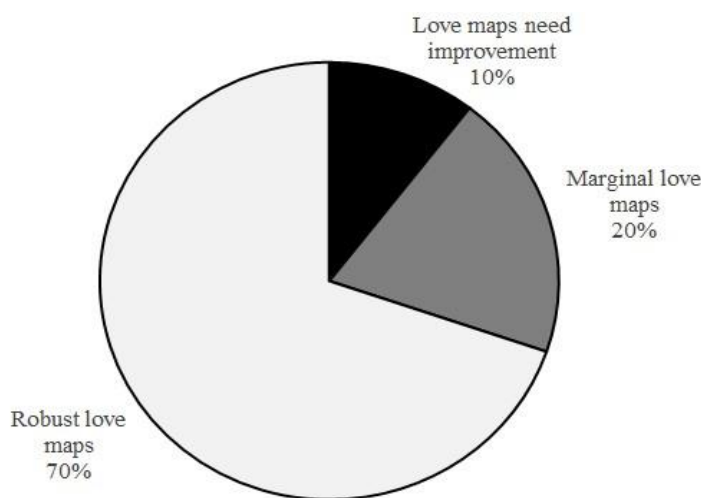


Figure 1 Distribution of Respondents by Love Maps Classification

Figure 1 shows that 70% of the respondents had robust love maps. This suggests that most couples possess welldeveloped knowledge of their partners’ inner worlds, including their emotions, aspirations, and daily experiences. This finding aligns with the notion that secure emotional bonds are strengthened when partners are

deeply attuned to each other’s inner experiences. This result is consistent with Chonody et al. (2020), who identify spousal friendship and knowledge of each other's world as a critical determinant of marital satisfaction. The finding is also in line with Kamali et al. (2020), who suggest that couples who invest time in developing a deep emotional connection and mutual understanding of each other’s inner world are more likely to report higher marital satisfaction. The figure however reveals that 20% of the respondents had marginal love maps while 10% of the respondents had love maps that needed improvement. The insufficient emotional knowledge among these two respondent categories can undermine their marital quality and increase susceptibility to conflict and marital disillusionment. The distribution of the respondents by their marital quality score is displayed in figure 2.

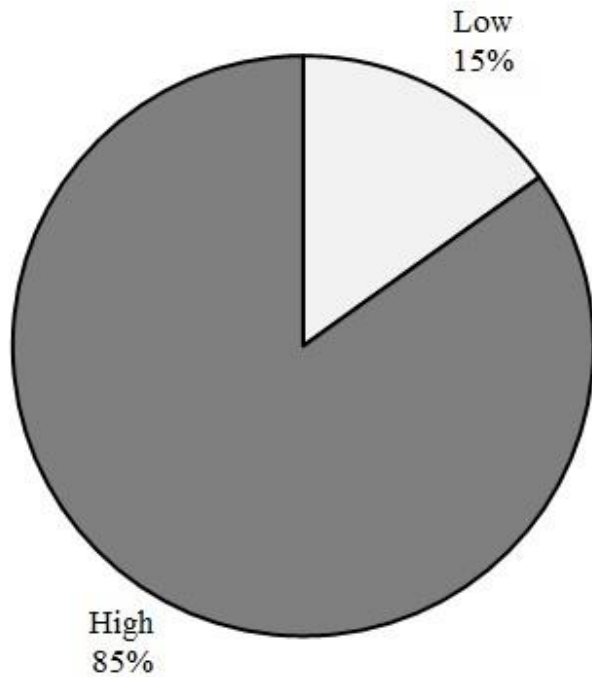


Figure 2 Distribution of Respondents by Overall Marital Quality

Figure 2 reveals that a large majority of respondents (85%) reported high levels of overall marital quality, whereas a smaller proportion (15%) perceived their marital quality as low. These findings are consistent with

Gottman and Silver’s (2015) view of marriage as a deeply intimate relationship marked by strong emotional bonds between spouses. Such bonds, built on love, trust, and affection, are fundamental to sustaining and enhancing marital quality. Similarly, the results align with Baghkasi et al. (2020), who emphasize that deep emotional closeness, supported by mutual respect and understanding, plays a crucial role in promoting positive marital outcomes and overall relationship wellbeing.

Correlation analysis was performed to test the statistical significance of the relationship between marital quality and love maps. Table 2 presents Pearson Correlation output at $p < .01$.

Table 2 Correlation between Love Maps and Marital Quality

		Marital Quality	Love Maps
Marital Quality	Pearson Correlation	1	.573**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	172	171
Love Maps	Pearson Correlation	.573**	1

	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	172	172
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

The results show a significant positive correlation between marital quality and love maps ($r = .573, p < .001$). This indicates that higher levels of knowledge about one’s partner (as measured by love maps) are associated with higher levels of marital quality. This finding corroborates the work of İnce and Işık (2022) who argued that deep knowledge of one’s partner (through love languages) fosters emotional intimacy and marital success. The strong positive relationship suggests that understanding and awareness of a partner’s inner world is an important factor in enhancing marital satisfaction. This is in line with recent research in Kenya by Muriithi (2023) which found that expressing fondness towards each other through touch can significantly strengthen marital bonds. The results imply that exploring each partner's "love maps" greatly improves understanding within the marriage while making concerted efforts to connect is essential for maintaining healthy marital relationships. Marital quality was further regressed on love maps to establish the explanatory power of love maps on marital quality. Table 3 presents the model summary, the ANOVA results, and the coefficients.

Table 3 Regression of Marital Quality on Love Maps

Model Summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.573 ^a	.329	.325	.76939		
a. Predictors: (Constant), Love Maps Composite Mean Score						
ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	48.964	1	48.964	82.715	.000 ^b
	Residual	100.042	169	.592		
	Total	149.006	170			
a. Dependent Variable: Marital Quality Composite Mean Score						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Love Maps Composite Mean Score						
Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.771	.261		6.796	.000
	Love Maps Composite Mean Score	.515	.057	.573	9.095	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Marital Quality Composite Mean Score						

As shown in table 3, love maps significantly predicted marital quality, with the model explaining 32/9% of the variability in marital quality, $R^2 = .329$, $F(1, 169) = 82.72$, $p < .01$, suggesting that love maps contributed significantly to the prediction of marital quality. Further, the regression coefficients revealed that love maps had a positive and significant effect on marital quality, with an unstandardized coefficient of $B = .515$ ($SE = .057$) and a standardized beta of $\beta = .573$, $t(169) = 9.10$, $p < .01$, revealing that a unit change in love maps was associated with 51.5% change in marital quality. These findings suggest that married individuals who possess deeper knowledge and understanding of their partners' inner worlds tend to experience materially better marital quality. This affirms the theoretical assumptions that cognitive and emotional attunement between partners plays a critical role in enhancing marital quality. The study findings elicit numerous practical and theoretical implications. From a practical viewpoint, couples' engagement in activities that deepen their understanding of each other's thoughts, feelings, and life goals promotes marital quality. This underscores the importance of emphasizing intentional conversations that update and strengthen love maps, helping couples remain emotionally attuned to one another. This can be particularly beneficial for preventing relational dissatisfaction over time, as it fosters stronger emotional connections as discussed by Vowels et al. (2021). Encouraging couples to regularly discuss their inner world to maintain intimacy and connection is essential for marital quality and longevity.

The positive correlation between love maps and marital quality supports Gottman's assertion that having detailed knowledge of each other's inner world is foundational for emotional intimacy (Gottman & Gottman, 2017). This study confirms that love maps enhance marital stability by fostering deeper empathy and communication, which is critical in managing conflict and building a strong relationship. Love maps also serve as the foundation for further intimacy and emotional support in the relationship (Hosseinpoor et al., 2022). Similarly, the strong correlation between fondness and admiration, and marital quality underscores the role of positive regard in sustaining marital satisfaction as discussed by Navarra and Gottman (2018). This finding aligns with Gottman's theory that admiration and fondness buffer against negativity and contempt, which Yuan et al. (2022) identify as key predictors of marital dissatisfaction and divorce. By consistently expressing respect, couples build a positive foundation that strengthens their relationship, enabling them to manage conflicts more effectively and maintain long-term marital happiness.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cultivating an intimate understanding of a partner's inner world is an important factor in promoting marital quality. Couples who possess detailed knowledge of their partner's thoughts, emotions, values, and life experiences are more likely to report stronger and more satisfying marriages. This awareness enables spouses to respond more sensitively to each other's emotional and psychological needs, thereby strengthening intimacy, trust, and mutual understanding. Among the married individuals in the study, there were high levels of intimate knowledge and emotional attunement toward one another. Well-developed Love Maps were evident, reflecting a strong understanding of each other's dreams, aspirations, concerns, and social preferences. This deep awareness promotes mutual responsiveness, emotional closeness, and relational stability. Furthermore, knowledge of both personal and relational dimensions of a partner's life supports secure attachment, effective navigation of marital challenges, and overall marital quality.

Married couples are encouraged to actively prioritize the development of love maps by intentionally seeking a deeper understanding of each other's thoughts, emotions, aspirations, and personal experiences. The aim of this is to intentionally strengthening areas of their relationship with the greatest room for improvement, particularly mutual awareness of each other's current stresses and worries. Although couples demonstrated strong knowledge of their partners' life dreams, aspirations, and relational preferences, the comparatively lower score on familiarity with current stresses suggests that they may not consistently share or understand day-to-day emotional pressures. Therefore, married individuals are encouraged to engage their partners in regular, open conversations about ongoing challenges, emotional states, and creating safe spaces for honest self-disclosure and empathetic listening. Counsellors should intentionally guide couples in developing their love maps at an early stage by facilitating structured activities that help partners explore each other's emotional needs, beliefs, values, expectations, and long-term goals.

Although the regression model showed that love maps significantly predict marital quality, the R^2 value of .329 indicates that only about 33% of the variability in marital quality is explained by love maps, leaving about 67% of the variation unexplained. This suggests that while understanding a partner's inner world is an important factor in marital quality, other factors potentially play a more substantial role. The relatively large unexplained variance highlights the complex, multifaceted nature of marital quality, signifying that love maps is just one component of a broader gamut of factors that contribute to higher marital quality. Therefore, interventions aiming to improve marital quality should consider multiple dimensions of the relationship beyond love maps alone

In retrospect, the large unexplained variance in marital quality opens avenues for further research to explore additional factors that contribute to higher marital quality. Future studies can investigate the roles of emotional intelligence, shared values, and social support networks in moderating marital quality. A longitudinal study can also examine how love maps interact with this collection of factors over time to influence marital quality. In addition, exploring cultural, socioeconomic, and life-stage differences could reveal whether the impact of love maps varies across diverse socioeconomic classes. A purely qualitative design can provide a deeper understanding of how love maps translate into daily behaviours that promote marital quality.

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