AFRICAN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY (PSYCHOLOGY/EDUCATION)

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MANUSCRIPT PARJ-2026-0945809 | DOI 10.68258/ajpsb_educpsy.63731

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE | OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 1 | ISSUE 3 | YEAR 2026 | PAGES 1-24 | ARTICLE TYPE Education_Compass

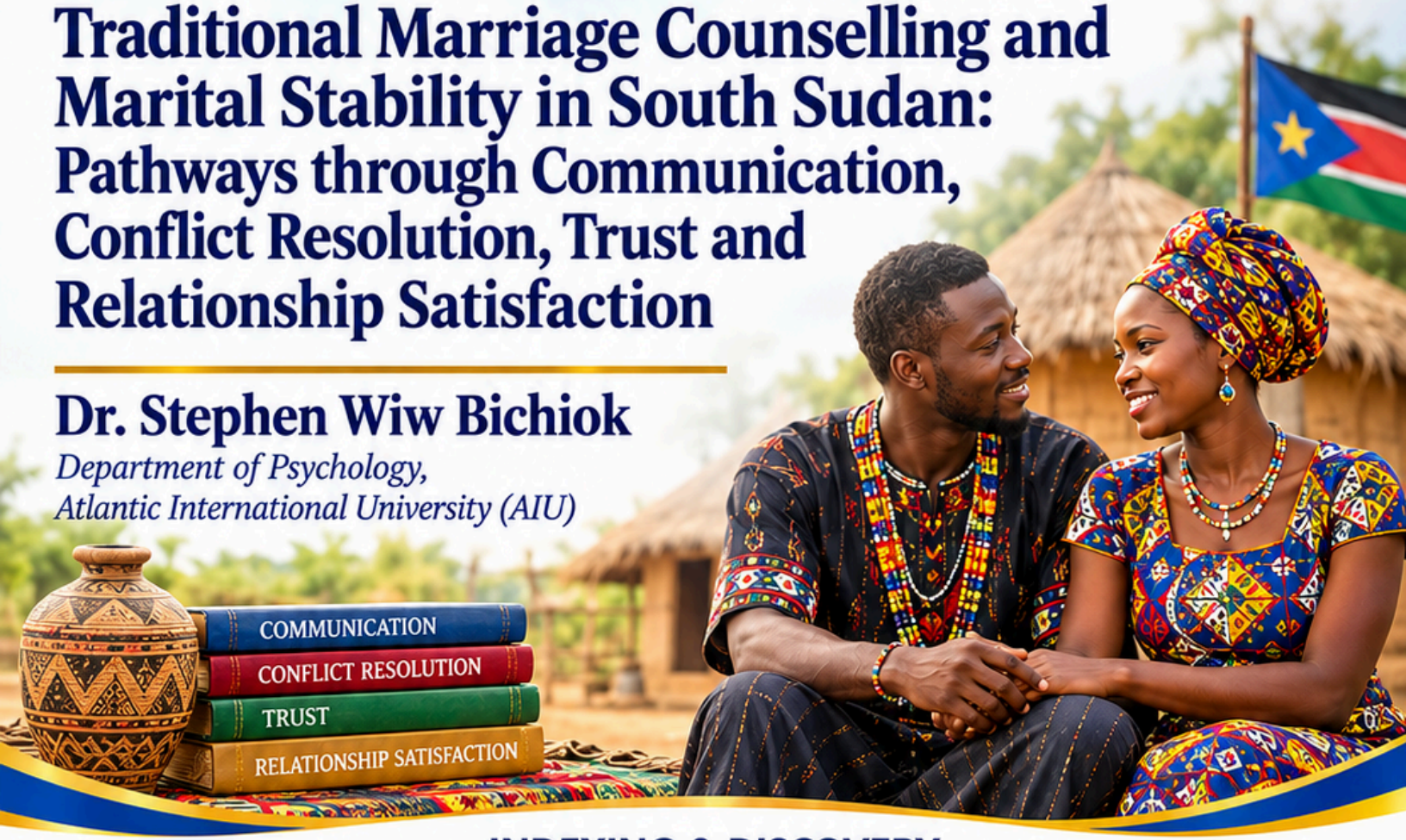
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Received: 30/07/2026 | Revised: 07/09/2026 | Accepted: 19/09/2026 | Published: 29/09/2026

Traditional Marriage Counselling and Marital Stability in South Sudan: Pathways through Communication, Conflict Resolution, Trust and Relationship Satisfaction

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Traditional Marriage Counselling and Marital Stability in South Sudan: Pathways through Communication, Conflict Resolution, Trust and Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

Traditional marriage counselling remains an important source of relational guidance in South Sudan, yet its contribution to marital stability operates within rapidly changing social, economic and cultural conditions. This article examines perceived pathways linking traditional counselling to marital outcomes, with particular attention to communication, conflict resolution, trust, social support and relationship satisfaction, while also analysing the contemporary factors that constrain the effectiveness and continuity of indigenous counselling.

The article draws primarily from Objectives 3 and 5 of a mixed-methods, descriptive cross-sectional doctoral study. Two hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed and 242 were returned, yielding a 96.8% response rate. Quantitative evidence showed that poor communication was the most strongly endorsed marital risk factor (M=4.27, SD=1.14), followed by economic difficulties (M=4.06, SD=1.16), limited access to counselling (M=3.90, SD=1.22) and cultural expectations (M=3.86, SD=1.14), while social support was strongly endorsed as beneficial to marital satisfaction (M=4.20, SD=0.96). Open-ended responses associated successful marriage most frequently with respect, communication and trust (48.8%), and identified economic hardship (37.2%), communication problems (29.8%) and infidelity, jealousy or lack of trust (21.9%) as leading sources of conflict. Family interference, dowry and polygamy-related pressures, substance use, violence, trauma and limited counselling support were also reported.

The findings indicate that traditional counselling may support marital stability by creating culturally legitimate settings for dialogue, mediation, accountability, reconciliation and social support. Its effectiveness is nevertheless conditional: social change, unequal authority, weak confidentiality, severe violence, trauma and complex psychological problems can exceed the competence of community-based mechanisms. The article concludes that traditional counselling should be understood as a context-sensitive relational resource rather than as a universal remedy. Strengthening communication, trust and conflict-management functions while establishing confidentiality, safeguarding and referral boundaries offers a more defensible route for culturally responsive marriage support in South Sudan.

Keywords: traditional marriage counselling; marital stability; communication; conflict resolution; trust; relationship satisfaction; South Sudan; family support; indigenous counselling

1. Introduction

Marriage in South Sudan is simultaneously an interpersonal relationship and a social institution embedded in kinship, customary authority, religious life and community expectations. This social embeddedness means that marital difficulties are rarely interpreted only as private disagreements between spouses. Relatives, elders, clan authorities, religious leaders and other respected community actors may be expected to advise, mediate, reconcile or mobilise support when relationships become strained. Such practices reflect the wider African understanding of marriage as a relationship that links families and social networks rather than only two autonomous individuals (Mbiti, 1969; Gyekye, 1996; Amoateng & Heaton, 2015). In this setting, traditional marriage counselling functions as a relational institution through which social norms, expectations and conflict-management strategies are transmitted and negotiated.

The continued relevance of traditional counselling does not imply that marital stability is determined by culture alone. Contemporary South Sudanese marriages operate under economic pressure, displacement, urbanisation, changing gender expectations, new communication technologies, religious plurality and exposure to global models of intimacy and individual choice. Ecological and family-systems perspectives are therefore useful because they locate marital experience within interacting personal, family, community and structural environments (Bowen, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A disagreement about money, for example, may be experienced at once as a household budgeting problem, a stress reaction to unemployment, a dispute over wider kin obligations and a challenge to culturally expected marital roles. Traditional counselling may help couples interpret and manage such tensions, but its ability to do so depends on the nature and severity of the problem.

This article focuses on the pathways through which traditional counselling is perceived to relate to marital stability. The central pathways are communication, conflict resolution, trust, social support, accountability, reconciliation and relationship satisfaction. These dimensions are consistent with wider couple and family research, which identifies constructive communication, emotional connection and conflict-management capacity as important features of durable relationships (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Snyder, Castellani, & Whisman, 2006; Gurman, Lebow, & Snyder, 2015). They are also strongly represented in the underlying South Sudanese data. Respondents repeatedly described respect, communication, trust, cooperation and family support as characteristics of successful marriage, while poor communication, infidelity, jealousy, family pressure and economic hardship appeared as prominent sources of conflict.

A second concern is the changing effectiveness of traditional counselling itself. Cultural legitimacy and accessibility can make traditional mechanisms attractive, particularly where professional counselling services remain limited. Yet cultural familiarity is not equivalent to clinical adequacy. Traditional mediation may be useful for ordinary disagreements, relationship education and reconciliation, while cases involving severe violence, coercive control, trauma or serious mental-health concerns require safeguarding and specialised referral. In addition, family-based counselling may create confidentiality problems, and the authority structures surrounding elders or kin may reproduce gendered or generational power imbalances. The issue is therefore not whether traditional counselling is either wholly effective or wholly obsolete, but under what conditions it supports relational well-being and under what conditions its limits become consequential.

The article draws mainly from the third and fifth objectives of the doctoral study from which it is developed. Objective 3 examined the influence of traditional marriage counselling on marital satisfaction, communication, conflict resolution and marital stability; Objective 5 examined factors threatening the sustainability and effectiveness of traditional marriage counselling in contemporary South Sudan. Because the study was cross-

sectional and based substantially on perception measures, the analysis does not claim that counselling caused particular marital outcomes. Instead, it identifies empirically grounded pathways and constraints reported by participants, then interprets them through family, attachment, learning, cognitive-behavioural and ecological perspectives.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it reframes traditional counselling as a mechanism-rich psychosocial resource whose effects are likely to operate through communication, trust, accountability and social support rather than through cultural authority alone. Second, it places marital stability within a broader risk environment that includes poverty, unemployment, infidelity, family interference, harmful marriage practices, violence and weak access to formal services. Third, it develops a conditional view of effectiveness: traditional counselling may contribute to stability when it facilitates voluntary dialogue, mutual respect and constructive mediation, but it should not be used to pressure individuals to remain in unsafe relationships or to substitute for professional intervention in complex cases.

1.1 Research Focus and Questions

The analysis is guided by two linked questions: (1) through what relational pathways do respondents perceive traditional marriage counselling to support marital stability, communication, trust, conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction; and (2) which contemporary social, economic, cultural and practice-related factors reduce the effectiveness or continuity of traditional counselling? These questions connect the study's outcome-oriented and challenge-oriented objectives without treating marital stability as a single isolated variable.

In this article, marital stability is understood as a multidimensional relational condition involving continuity of the marital bond, constructive communication, mutual respect, trust, emotional and practical support, commitment and the capacity to manage conflict. Relationship satisfaction is treated cautiously as a perceived outcome domain rather than as a separately validated clinical scale, because the source study did not administer an independent standardised satisfaction instrument. This distinction is important for interpreting the evidence accurately.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1 Marriage, Community and Relational Regulation

African scholarship has long emphasised the collective dimensions of marriage. Mbiti (1969) describes social personhood as deeply embedded in community, while Gyekye (1996) highlights the moral and relational values that sustain communal life. In marital contexts, this orientation means that elders and extended families may act as educators, witnesses, mediators and guarantors of social obligations. Goody (1976) similarly demonstrates that marriage exchanges and family arrangements perform social and economic functions that extend beyond the couple. These perspectives help explain why traditional marriage counselling is often inseparable from broader systems of kinship and community regulation.

The value of such collective involvement lies partly in social support. Family networks can provide advice, childcare, financial assistance, moral encouragement and practical mediation. Family Systems Theory suggests that couple behaviour is influenced by wider relationship systems, including patterns of alliance, anxiety, differentiation and intergenerational transmission (Bowen, 1978; Nichols & Davis, 2020). In South Sudanese settings, elders and relatives may therefore operate as both resources and pressures. The same network that

helps resolve a misunderstanding can also intensify a dispute if relatives take sides, impose expectations or prioritise family reputation over the wishes and safety of spouses.

Traditional counselling thus needs to be interpreted as relational regulation rather than merely advice. It establishes expectations about how spouses should speak, apologise, fulfil responsibilities, involve families, manage disagreement and repair damaged relationships. Indigenous conflict-resolution scholarship similarly emphasises dialogue, reconciliation and restoration of social harmony (Murithi, 2008). These features make traditional counselling potentially relevant to marital conflict, but their effectiveness depends on consent, fairness and the capacity to distinguish reparable disagreement from situations where reconciliation pressure is unsafe or unjust.

2.2 Communication as a Pathway to Marital Stability

Communication is one of the clearest bridges between traditional counselling and contemporary couple-therapy literature. Gottman and Silver (1999) argue that relationship quality depends not on the absence of disagreement but on how partners respond to disagreement, express needs and repair conflict. Clinical couple-therapy literature likewise treats communication, emotional attunement and problem solving as central targets for intervention (Gurman et al., 2015; Snyder et al., 2006). Traditional counselling can intersect with these mechanisms when elders encourage spouses to listen, speak respectfully, clarify expectations, apologise, forgive and negotiate responsibilities.

Within the South Sudanese evidence, communication appears in both positive and negative form. Respect, communication and trust were the most frequently coded characteristics of successful marriage, while poor communication, misunderstanding and disrespect were the second most common reported source of conflict. This dual appearance suggests that communication is not merely one variable among many; it is a relational process through which other stressors are translated into conflict or cooperation. Economic scarcity, for example, may be difficult but manageable where spouses share information and plan jointly, whereas secrecy, blame or contempt may convert the same pressure into sustained conflict.

A cognitive-behavioural lens provides an additional explanation. Beck (1976) emphasises that interpretations influence emotional and behavioural responses. In marriage, assumptions such as ‘my spouse is deliberately disrespecting me’ or ‘asking for help shows weakness’ can escalate ordinary disagreements. Traditional counsellors may not use formal cognitive therapy, but advice, reframing, storytelling and moral instruction can encourage alternative interpretations and behavioural restraint. The analytical point is not that indigenous counselling secretly constitutes cognitive therapy, but that some practices may engage comparable psychological functions through culturally different forms.

2.3 Trust, Attachment and Relationship Satisfaction

Trust is a central relational resource because it affects disclosure, emotional security, cooperation and willingness to remain engaged during conflict. Attachment theory proposes that experiences of safety, responsiveness and reliability shape expectations within close relationships (Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Ainsworth, 1978; Thompson, 2008). In adult marriage, trust is not identical to attachment security, yet the concepts overlap in their attention to dependable support and the management of vulnerability. Traditional counselling may strengthen trust when mediators encourage honesty, responsibility, reconciliation and consistent fulfilment of obligations.

The same domain becomes destabilising when infidelity, jealousy or secrecy is present. In the study, infidelity, jealousy and lack of trust formed the third most common coded source of marital conflict. This pattern is important because breaches of trust may not be resolved through generic advice alone. Couples may need structured conversations about disclosure, boundaries, emotional injury and decisions about continuation of the relationship. Where coercion or violence accompanies jealousy, safety takes precedence over reconciliation.

Relationship satisfaction is similarly multidimensional. It may be influenced by communication quality, fairness, emotional support, sexual and relational expectations, family relations, financial management and perceived commitment. The source study did not administer a separate validated satisfaction scale; however, participants' descriptions of successful marriage consistently referenced respect, trust, cooperation, responsibility and support. These indicators provide a grounded basis for discussing perceived satisfaction pathways while avoiding stronger causal claims than the data can sustain.

2.4 Economic and Social Context

Ecological Systems Theory is especially useful for understanding why counselling cannot be evaluated apart from material conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Marriages exist within labour markets, displacement histories, housing conditions, kinship obligations, security environments and institutional systems. Economic hardship may increase arguments over household resources, intensify dependence on extended family, delay marriage arrangements or generate role strain when expected providers lack income. Counselling can improve communication around these pressures, but it cannot create employment or remove structural scarcity.

Social change also alters the authority and availability of traditional counselling. Urbanisation and migration can separate young couples from elders; formal education can reshape expectations about gender and autonomy; religious institutions can become alternative sources of marital advice; and mobile communication can transform patterns of intimacy, secrecy and family involvement. Giddens and Sutton (2017) describe broader processes of social transformation that change family relationships, while Cherlin (2004, 2010) documents the loosening of traditional institutional scripts in other contexts. The South Sudanese setting has its own history and cannot be reduced to Western family change, but the general point remains: marital institutions evolve when social conditions change.

These shifts can weaken intergenerational transmission of indigenous counselling while also creating pressure for adaptation. Traditional leaders may remain culturally legitimate yet require new skills in confidentiality, mental-health awareness, gender-sensitive practice and referral. Conversely, professional counsellors may possess technical expertise but lack cultural credibility or accessibility. A contextually responsive system must therefore address both the limits of traditional practice and the cultural limits of imported professional models.

2.5 Conceptual Model

The analytical model used in this paper proposes that traditional counselling can influence perceived marital stability through proximal relational mechanisms—communication, trust, conflict resolution, accountability, reconciliation and social support. These mechanisms operate within a contextual environment shaped by economic conditions, cultural expectations, family involvement, social change and access to services. Practice constraints such as confidentiality, unequal authority, violence, trauma and limited specialised expertise can weaken or reverse the potential benefits of counselling. Figure 1 summarises this logic as a conditional rather than deterministic pathway.

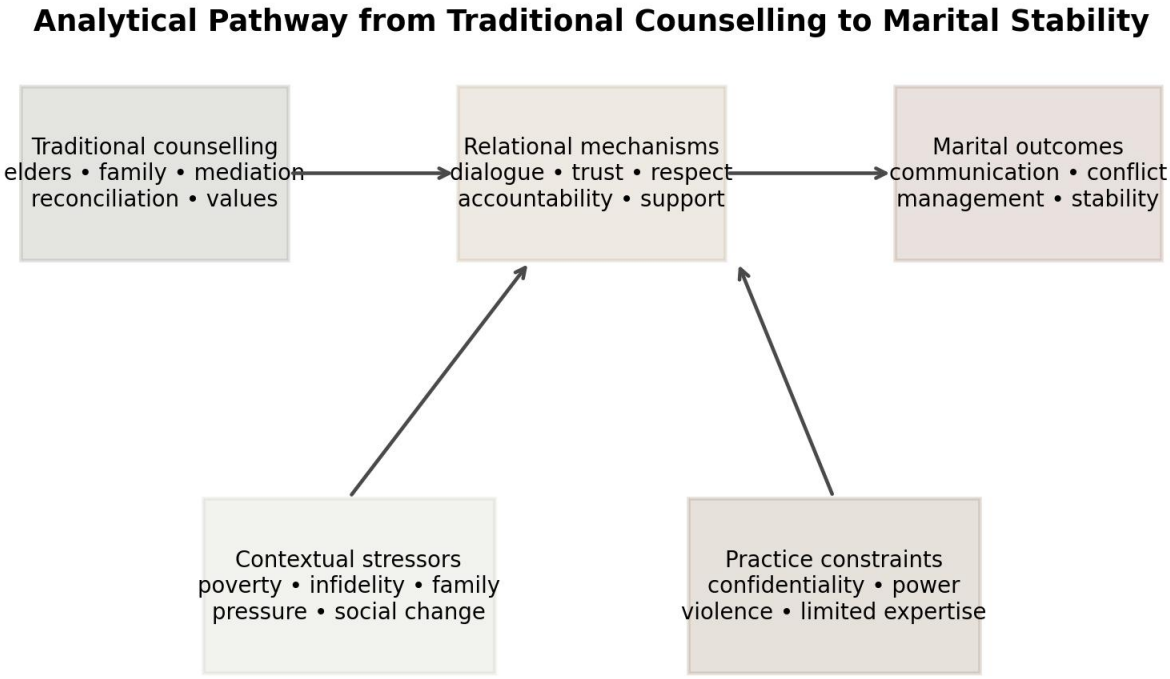


Figure 1. Conditional pathways linking traditional counselling, relational mechanisms, contextual stressors and marital outcomes.

Source: developed from the study findings.

3. Methodology

This article is a secondary journal-paper analysis of data collected for the doctoral study on traditional marriage counselling and marital stability in South Sudan. The parent study used a descriptive cross-sectional mixed-methods design. This design was appropriate for describing respondent perceptions and exploring relationships among counselling attitudes, marital factors and demographic characteristics at a defined period. Because exposure and outcome information were collected cross-sectionally, temporal ordering cannot be demonstrated and causal inference is not warranted (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Two hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed and 242 completed questionnaires were available for analysis, producing a response rate of 96.8%. The questionnaire included demographic variables, six items on traditional marriage counselling, five items on factors affecting marital stability, four items on psychological counselling and integration, and four open-ended questions. Likert items used a five-point response scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Open-ended questions asked respondents about practices supporting successful marriage, causes of marital conflict, ways of combining traditional and professional counselling, and recommendations for strengthening marriages.

The sample contained 169 men (69.8%) and 73 women (30.2%). Most respondents were recorded as married (205; 84.7%), with smaller numbers separated, divorced, widowed or recorded as single. The sample was predominantly urban (209; 86.4%), and almost half had a university degree (117; 48.3%), with a further 56 respondents (23.1%) holding postgraduate education. These distributions matter for interpretation because the

results should not be treated as nationally representative of every cultural, rural or educational group in South Sudan.

Quantitative analysis included frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations and internal-consistency assessment. Spearman rank correlation was used for ordinal associations in the parent study. The traditional counselling scale demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha=.849), while the psychological counselling/integration scale produced alpha=.765. The five contextual marital-factor items produced alpha=.730 but were retained as individual dimensions because they included both risk and support statements rather than a single unidirectional construct.

Qualitative content analysis was applied to the open-ended responses. Coding was non-exclusive: one response could contribute to more than one theme. Percentages therefore indicate the proportion of the 242 records in which a theme was identified and should not be summed to 100%. Interview, focus-group and observation materials in the dissertation were used to deepen interpretation, particularly regarding mediation practices, social change, confidentiality, gendered power, violence, referral needs and the role of elders and families. Patton (2015) supports the use of systematic qualitative analysis to identify recurring patterns while retaining attention to context.

Ethically, the parent study emphasised informed consent, voluntariness, confidentiality, anonymity, respect for cultural values and avoidance of harm. This article retains a strict safeguarding distinction: traditional mediation is not assumed to be appropriate for violence, coercion, severe psychological distress or serious rights violations. Such concerns require appropriate professional, medical, legal or protection referral.

Table 1. Selected characteristics of the 242 respondents

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	169	69.8
Gender	Female	73	30.2
Marital status	Married	205	84.7
Marital status	Separated	30	12.4
Education	University degree	117	48.3
Education	Postgraduate	56	23.1
Residence	Urban	209	86.4
Residence	Rural	33	13.6

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Factors Affecting Marital Stability

Table 2 and Figure 2 show the five contextual factors measured in Section C of the questionnaire. Poor communication received the highest mean (M=4.27, SD=1.14), with 83.9% agreeing or strongly agreeing that it contributes to marital conflict. Social support was also strongly endorsed (M=4.20, SD=0.96; 83.1% agreement) as a contributor to marital satisfaction. Economic difficulties recorded M=4.06 (SD=1.16; 77.3% agreement). Lack of counselling services produced M=3.90 (SD=1.22; 75.6%), while cultural expectations recorded M=3.86 (SD=1.14; 75.6%). The pattern demonstrates that respondents viewed marital stability as both relational and contextual: communication and support coexist with economic, cultural and service-access pressures.

Table 2. Factors affecting marital stability

Item	Factor	Mean	SD	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
C1	Poor communication contributes to marital conflict	4.27	1.14	83.9
C2	Economic difficulties affect marital stability	4.06	1.16	77.3
C3	Cultural expectations influence marital relationships	3.86	1.14	75.6
C4	Lack of counselling services contributes to marital problems	3.90	1.22	75.6
C5	Social support improves marital satisfaction	4.20	0.96	83.1

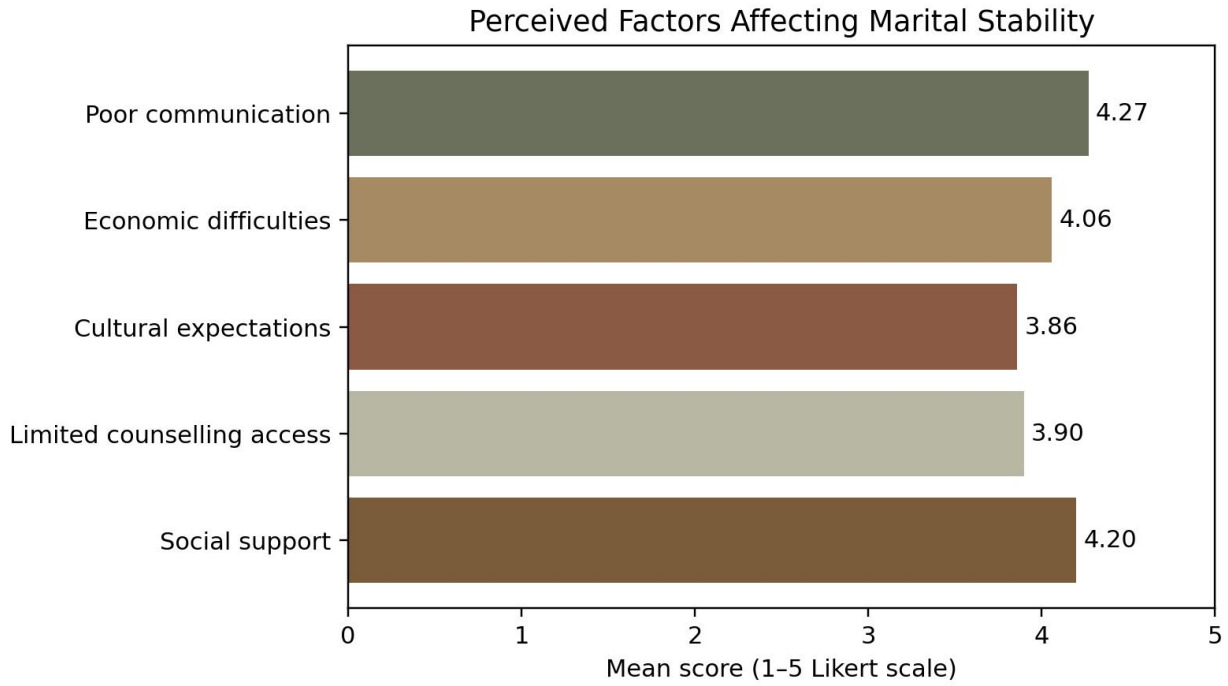


Figure 2. Mean scores for perceived factors affecting marital stability (1–5 scale).

4.2 Successful Marriage as a Relational Resource Pattern

The open-ended evidence offers a more textured account of what respondents considered to support successful marriage. Respect, communication and trust were coded in 118 responses (48.8%), making this the dominant theme. Elders, family and community support appeared in 67 responses (27.7%), traditional, cultural or religious values in 64 (26.4%), cooperation, commitment and mutual responsibility in 53 (21.9%), and professional counselling or support in 22 (9.1%). These themes do not constitute a validated satisfaction scale, but they show the practical indicators through which participants described relational quality.

Table 3. Open-ended themes associated with successful marriage

Theme	Respondents coded	% of 242
Respect, communication and trust	118	48.8
Elders, family and community support	67	27.7
Traditional/cultural or religious values	64	26.4
Cooperation, commitment and mutual responsibility	53	21.9
Professional counselling/support	22	9.1

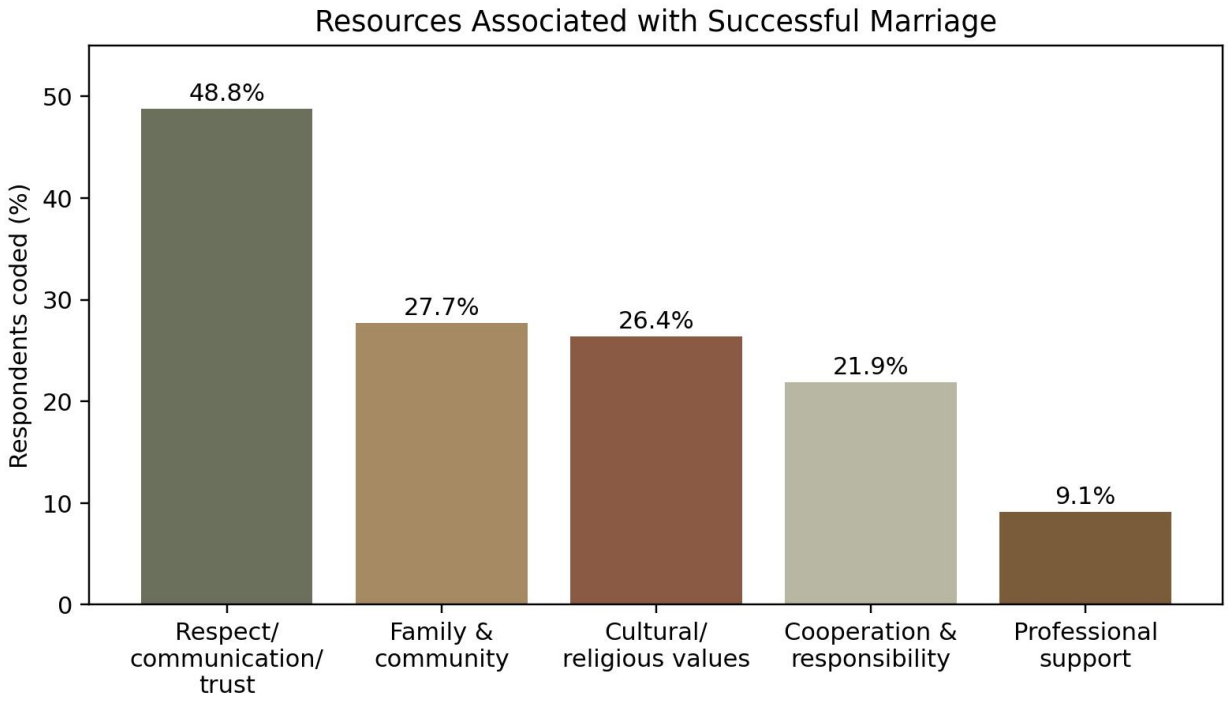


Figure 3. Reported resources associated with successful marriage. Theme coding was non-exclusive.

4.3 Sources of Marital Conflict

Conflict themes were dominated by economic and relational pressures. Economic hardship, poverty or unemployment were identified in 90 responses (37.2%). Poor communication, misunderstanding or disrespect appeared in 72 responses (29.8%), followed by infidelity, jealousy or lack of trust in 53 responses (21.9%). Family interference, social pressure or cultural conflict appeared in 28 responses (11.6%); lack of counselling or social support in 25 (10.3%); substance use, violence or trauma in 24 (9.9%); polygamy, dowry, forced or child marriage issues in 23 (9.5%); and land, property or resource disputes in 12 (5.0%).

Table 4. Open-ended causes of marital conflict

Conflict theme	Respondents coded	% of 242
Economic hardship/poverty/unemployment	90	37.2
Poor communication/misunderstanding/disrespect	72	29.8
Infidelity/jealousy/lack of trust	53	21.9
Family interference/social pressure/cultural conflict	28	11.6
Lack of counselling/social support	25	10.3
Substance use/violence/trauma	24	9.9
Polygamy/dowry/forced or child marriage	23	9.5
Land/property/resource disputes	12	5.0

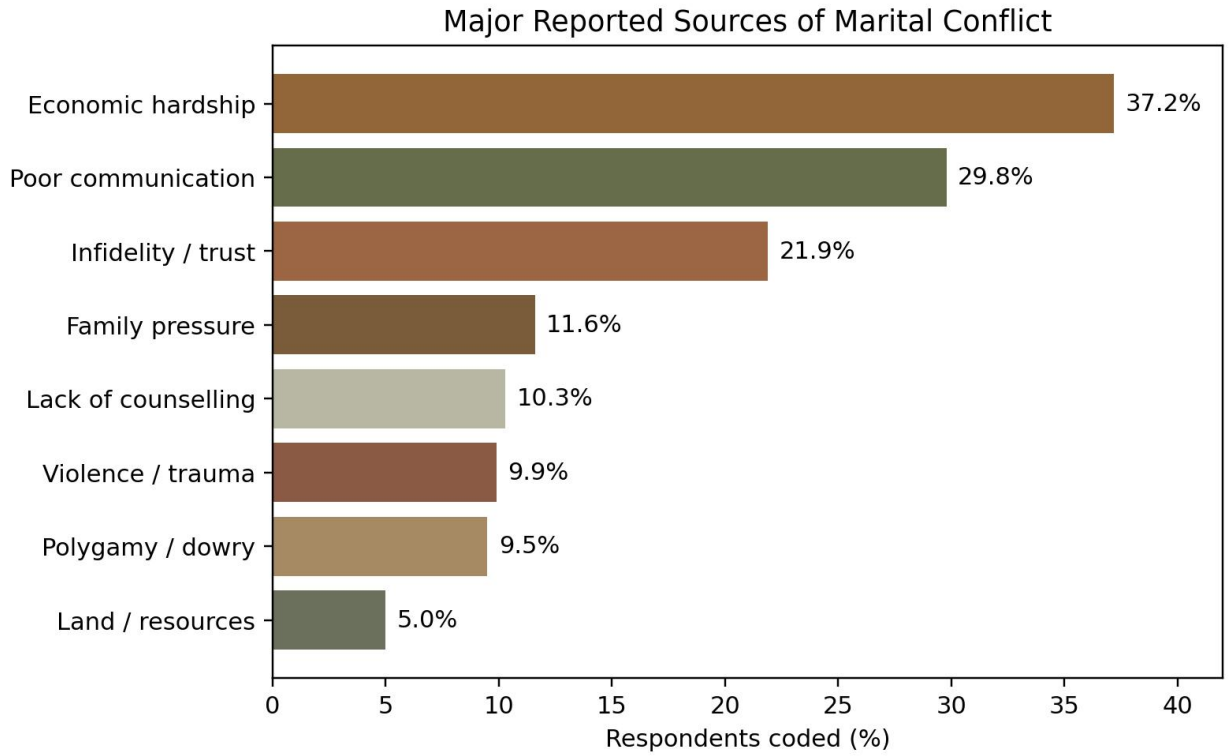


Figure 4. Major reported sources of marital conflict. Theme coding was non-exclusive.

4.4 Traditional Counselling as a Perceived Relational Intervention

Traditional counselling was strongly valued in the parent study. The six-item traditional counselling scale produced an overall mean of 4.30 (SD=0.79). The strongest item concerned the role of traditional leaders in resolving marital conflict (M=4.48; 95.0% agreement), followed by elders' guidance to couples experiencing marital problems (M=4.35; 89.7%), traditional reconciliation practices (M=4.31; 87.6%), family involvement (M=4.24; 88.4%), cultural values (M=4.24; 84.3%) and promotion of communication between spouses (M=4.18; 86.0%). These results establish that the sample broadly recognised traditional counselling as relevant to relationship management.

However, the data do not show that counselling automatically produced stable marriages. Rather, the pattern supports a pathway interpretation. Traditional leaders and elders are perceived as useful because they mediate conflict; family involvement is valued because it can provide social support; reconciliation practices are valued because they create opportunities for repair; and counselling is believed to promote communication. These are relational mechanisms that may contribute to stability when appropriately applied.

The parent study also found that traditional counselling perceptions were positively associated with support for psychological counselling and integration (Spearman's rho=.440, p<.001). This is significant for interpretation because strong attachment to traditional counselling did not imply rejection of professional counselling. Respondents who valued indigenous mechanisms also tended to support professional integration, suggesting that cultural legitimacy and psychological expertise can be perceived as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

4.5 Contemporary Constraints on Traditional Counselling

The qualitative materials identify several conditions that can reduce the effectiveness of traditional counselling. Informants described possible gender inequality and power imbalance, limited confidentiality, pressure to preserve marriage, stigma and limited specialised psychological knowledge. Focus-group participants similarly called for stronger confidentiality, private spaces, pre-marital counselling, mental-health awareness, gender equality, human-rights awareness and referral links with professional services.

Social change was another recurring concern. Urbanisation, changing family structures, new communication patterns and changing expectations have altered how couples access elders and how authority is interpreted. The weakening of intergenerational transmission does not mean that traditional counselling has disappeared; rather, its social infrastructure may be less predictable. A couple living away from extended family may have fewer trusted mediators, while younger spouses may expect greater privacy and individual choice than previous generations.

Serious risk conditions also define the boundary of community counselling. Informants indicated that severe violence, trauma, serious mental-health concerns and complex cases may require professional counselling, health, legal or other referral services. This boundary is central to Objective 5: effectiveness cannot be judged only by cultural acceptance. A counselling process that restores dialogue in an ordinary disagreement may be beneficial, whereas the same reconciliation-oriented approach may be dangerous if it pressures a victim of violence to return to an unsafe situation.

Table 5. Pathways, threats and practice implications

Domain	Potential stabilising pathway	Contemporary threat	Practice implication
Communication	Dialogue, listening, clarification, apology	Misunderstanding, disrespect, secrecy	Structured communication skills and private sessions
Trust	Accountability, honesty, reconciliation	Infidelity, jealousy, betrayal	Trust-repair work; safety assessment where jealousy is coercive
Conflict resolution	Elder mediation, negotiation, restorative dialogue	Family bias, pressure to reconcile	Voluntary mediation; neutral facilitation; referral boundaries
Social support	Family/community assistance and accountability	Interference, social pressure, unequal authority	Consent-based family involvement
Economic stress	Advice on responsibilities and cooperation	Poverty, unemployment, resource conflict	Financial communication plus linkage to social/economic support
Safety and wellbeing	Community detection and support	Violence, trauma, severe distress	Safeguarding; professional, medical or legal referral
Continuity of counselling	Cultural legitimacy and local accessibility	Urbanisation, migration, changing expectations	Train community counsellors and build referral networks

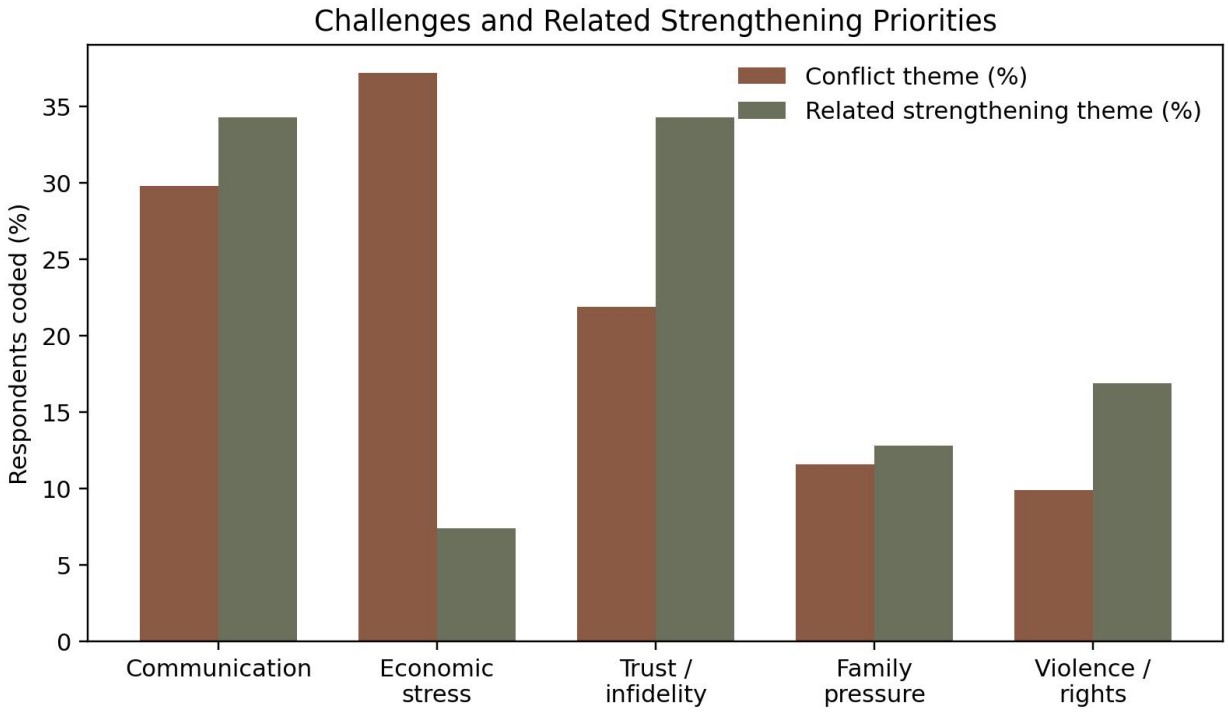


Figure 5. Challenges and related strengthening priorities. The paired bars are descriptive theme frequencies from different open-ended questions and should not be interpreted as directly matched respondent pairs.

5. Discussion

5.1 Communication as the Central Relational Pathway

The clearest finding is the centrality of communication. Poor communication had the highest quantitative mean among contextual marital factors, while respect, communication and trust formed the dominant qualitative resource associated with successful marriage. Communication therefore appears on both sides of the marital-stability equation: its absence is experienced as a source of conflict, and its presence is experienced as a characteristic of successful relationship functioning. This convergence strengthens the interpretation that communication is a key pathway through which traditional counselling may be perceived to exert value.

Traditional counselling creates culturally recognised occasions for spouses to speak in the presence of respected mediators. Such settings can slow conflict escalation, require each side to explain events, make expectations explicit and create social accountability for agreements. The process resembles some functions of modern couple interventions even where the language, authority structure and techniques differ. Gottman and Silver (1999) emphasise constructive interaction and repair, while Gurman et al. (2015) describe communication and conflict management as common therapeutic targets. The South Sudanese evidence suggests that indigenous mediation may pursue comparable relational goals through culturally familiar actors and procedures.

Nevertheless, communication cannot be reduced to ‘talking more’. Effective dialogue requires opportunity to speak without intimidation, reasonable privacy, respect for each spouse’s perspective and freedom from coercion. Where an elder is strongly aligned with one family or where gender hierarchies restrict a spouse’s voice, the counselling setting may reproduce rather than resolve the communication problem. This is why equal

participation and confidentiality emerge as contemporary practice concerns. The value of elder mediation depends not simply on elder status, but on how authority is exercised.

The findings also imply that communication skills can moderate other stressors. Economic hardship was the most frequent coded cause of conflict, yet poverty is not itself a communication problem. What counselling can potentially influence is how spouses discuss scarcity, disclose income and debts, prioritise expenses, negotiate obligations to relatives and respond emotionally to unmet expectations. This distinction is important: counselling may improve relational management of structural stress without claiming to remove the structural condition itself.

5.2 Conflict Resolution, Reconciliation and Marital Stability

Traditional leaders' role in resolving marital conflict received the strongest endorsement among the six traditional-counselling items. Reconciliation practices were also highly rated. These findings are consistent with indigenous approaches to conflict resolution that prioritise restoration of social relationships and community harmony (Murithi, 2008). In marital settings, mediation can provide a structured route away from escalating retaliation by introducing respected third parties, clarifying grievances, facilitating apology and encouraging negotiated solutions.

From a family-systems perspective, third-party involvement may alter interaction patterns that spouses are unable to change on their own (Bowen, 1978; Nichols & Davis, 2020). However, system involvement is not inherently beneficial. Extended-family participation can also contribute to triangles, alliances and pressure. The qualitative data explicitly identify family interference, social pressure and cultural conflict as sources of marital disagreement. The same social system can therefore be both protective and destabilising. This dual role is one of the most important findings for culturally responsive practice.

The implication is that conflict resolution should be selective and consent-based. Ordinary disagreements over expectations, communication, family obligations or misunderstandings may be suitable for culturally legitimate mediation where both spouses participate voluntarily. By contrast, violence, forced marriage, coercive control or severe trauma should not be framed as symmetrical conflict requiring mutual compromise. The dissertation's safeguarding position is therefore essential: reconciliation is not the appropriate primary goal when safety and rights are at risk.

This distinction also protects traditional institutions from being assigned responsibilities beyond their competence. Elders can remain important first points of contact, but they should have clear referral pathways to professional counsellors, health services, legal mechanisms and protection actors. A strong community system is not one that handles every case internally; it is one that recognises the limits of its mandate and connects people to appropriate support.

5.3 Trust, Infidelity and Emotional Security

Trust appears prominently in respondents' accounts of both marital success and conflict. Nearly half of the sample's open-ended responses linked successful marriage to respect, communication and trust, while more than one fifth identified infidelity, jealousy or lack of trust as sources of conflict. These results align with attachment perspectives in which dependable responsiveness and emotional security shape relationship functioning (Bowlby, 1988; Thompson, 2008). They also show why marital stability cannot be understood only

as the continuation of a legal or customary union: a relationship may endure while trust and emotional safety deteriorate.

Traditional counselling may help rebuild trust when breaches are acknowledged and both spouses wish to repair the relationship. Community mediators can encourage accountability, clarify expectations and support restitution or reconciliation. Yet trust repair requires more than social pressure to forgive. Betrayal often generates anger, humiliation, uncertainty and recurring suspicion. Professional counselling may add structured methods for disclosure, emotional processing, boundary negotiation and decision-making, particularly when repeated infidelity or trauma is involved.

Jealousy also requires careful interpretation. In some cases it reflects understandable fear after betrayal; in others it may form part of surveillance, intimidation or coercive control. A culturally responsive approach should not treat all jealousy as proof of love or all marital secrecy as a private family matter. Counselling systems need basic risk-screening competencies so that relational language does not obscure safety concerns.

5.4 Social Support: Protective Resource and Source of Pressure

Social support was strongly endorsed quantitatively, and family/community support was the second most frequent qualitative resource associated with successful marriage. These findings fit the collectivist orientation described in African family scholarship (Mbiti, 1969; Gyekye, 1996; Amoateng & Heaton, 2015). Support networks can reduce isolation, provide practical help, model relationship responsibilities and offer respected avenues for assistance before conflict becomes severe.

At the same time, family interference and social pressure were reported as conflict themes. This apparent contradiction is analytically useful. Social support is beneficial when it increases the couple's resources while respecting their agency; it becomes harmful when relatives control decisions, take sides, disclose private information or pressure spouses to accept unsafe or unwanted arrangements. The relevant distinction is therefore not family involvement versus individualism, but supportive involvement versus intrusive involvement.

This distinction has direct implications for counselling design. Couples should be able to choose which relatives or leaders participate, what information can be shared and when private professional counselling is preferable. The dissertation's proposed confidentiality architecture—where community participation is separated from unrestricted disclosure—addresses precisely this concern. Informed consent should govern family involvement even in settings where family participation is culturally normal.

5.5 Economic Hardship and the Limits of Counselling

Economic hardship was the most frequently coded source of marital conflict and received strong quantitative endorsement. This finding highlights the importance of ecological interpretation. Employment, income, housing, food security, bride-wealth obligations and expectations of support to extended family are not background variables; they shape daily emotional and relational life. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework helps locate marital processes within these wider environments.

Traditional counselling may help couples negotiate responsibilities, manage expectations and reduce blame, but it cannot substitute for economic opportunity. Overstating the power of counselling would individualise structural problems by implying that better communication alone can solve poverty. A more realistic model treats counselling as one component of a broader support system. Couples under severe economic strain may

benefit from financial communication and conflict-management guidance alongside livelihood, social-protection or community-support interventions.

Economic stress may also interact with cultural expectations. A spouse who is expected to provide particular forms of material support may experience shame or loss of status when unemployment makes that impossible. Families may intensify pressure through dowry expectations or demands for assistance. Counsellors therefore need to explore not only household income but also the meanings attached to provision, reciprocity and responsibility.

5.6 Cultural Expectations, Dowry, Polygamy and Changing Norms

Cultural expectations were endorsed as relevant to marital relationships, and the qualitative data included polygamy, dowry, forced or child marriage concerns. Cultural practices cannot be treated as a single homogeneous category. Some traditions provide meaningful social support, identity and structured responsibility; others may create economic burdens, unequal expectations or threats to individual choice. Nwoye's wider critique of indigenous African counselling, reflected in the dissertation literature, is relevant here: cultural responsiveness requires critical engagement rather than romanticisation.

Bride-wealth and marriage negotiations can create bonds between families and opportunities for guidance, as Goody (1976) and the dissertation literature note. Yet when payments become excessive or are interpreted as conferring ownership, they can intensify conflict and constrain women's autonomy. Similarly, polygamous arrangements may be culturally recognised in some communities but still generate disputes around fairness, resources, inheritance, emotional security and household responsibilities. Counselling must therefore work with the actual relational consequences of a practice rather than assuming that cultural recognition guarantees wellbeing.

The data also suggest generational change. Urbanisation, education and new communication patterns may produce disagreements over gender roles, privacy and family authority. Traditional counsellors who are trained to facilitate dialogue rather than simply enforce older norms may be better positioned to remain relevant. Cultural continuity is more likely to be sustainable when it includes adaptive capacity.

5.7 Confidentiality, Power and Professional Boundaries

One of the clearest challenges to traditional counselling is confidentiality. Family and community participation can make support accessible, but it also increases the number of people who know intimate details. Fear of gossip or reputational harm may prevent spouses from disclosing sexual concerns, infidelity, violence, psychological distress or other sensitive issues. Professional counselling places stronger formal emphasis on privacy, although access may be limited. The most useful integrated model therefore does not eliminate community participation; it defines information boundaries more carefully.

Power is equally important. Traditional counsellors derive authority from age, kinship, customary status or religious legitimacy. This authority can stabilise mediation when both spouses respect the mediator, but it can also silence disagreement. Gender inequality, generational hierarchy and family alliances may shape whose account is believed. Training in active listening, impartial facilitation, informed consent, gender sensitivity and rights awareness is therefore not an external attack on culture; it is a practical strategy for strengthening the credibility and fairness of counselling.

Professional boundaries also clarify what traditional counsellors should not be expected to do. They need not diagnose psychiatric disorders or independently manage severe trauma, suicidality, dangerous violence or complex legal disputes. Their role can be strengthened through basic recognition skills and referral networks. The ability to say 'this case requires specialist help' is itself a marker of competent community practice.

5.8 A Conditional Model of Effectiveness

Taken together, the findings support a conditional model of effectiveness. Traditional marriage counselling is most plausibly beneficial when the presenting problem is amenable to dialogue, both spouses can participate voluntarily, the mediator is respected and reasonably impartial, confidentiality expectations are clear, and the intervention strengthens communication, trust, accountability or social support. Effectiveness is weakened when structural hardship overwhelms relational coping, when families intensify rather than resolve conflict, or when social change reduces the authority or accessibility of traditional counsellors.

The model also contains a safety threshold. When violence, coercion, severe psychological distress, serious trauma or rights violations are present, ordinary reconciliation-focused mediation may be inappropriate. In such cases, cultural responsiveness should be expressed through respectful engagement and referral rather than through insistence that every problem be solved within the traditional system. This position is consistent with the dissertation's conclusion that indigenous knowledge should neither be discarded nor romanticised.

A further implication is that relationship satisfaction and marital stability should not be equated with remaining married at any cost. Stability is meaningful only when it is compatible with dignity, safety, mutual respect and voluntary commitment. A counselling system that reduces separation by silencing abuse would produce an administratively stable marriage but a psychosocially harmful outcome. Future evaluation should therefore use multidimensional outcomes, including communication quality, conflict-management capacity, safety, confidentiality, goal attainment and client-reported wellbeing.

5.9 Interactions among Economic Stress, Communication and Family Pressure

The results become more informative when the reported stressors are interpreted as interacting rather than independent. Economic hardship, for example, can intensify communication problems by increasing uncertainty, blame and disagreement about priorities. When resources are scarce, ordinary decisions about food, school costs, transport, remittances or support to relatives may become emotionally charged. The presence of extended-family obligations can further complicate negotiation because household decisions are embedded in wider expectations of reciprocity. In such cases, traditional counsellors may be asked to interpret not only what each spouse owes the other, but also what the couple owes their families. This is precisely where culturally informed mediation can be useful, provided that the process does not simply impose one family's expectations on the couple.

Infidelity and jealousy can also interact with financial strain. Suspicion may be intensified by unexplained spending, time away from home or perceived unequal investment in different households or relatives. Likewise, economic dependence can make it difficult for a spouse to challenge betrayal, violence or unfair treatment. The relational meaning of money is therefore inseparable from trust, power and security. Counselling that addresses only budgeting without addressing control, secrecy or fear may miss the most important dimension of the problem.

Family pressure can interact with communication in similar ways. Relatives may act as trusted advisers, but they may also carry messages between spouses, amplify grievances or create coalitions. Bowen's family-systems perspective is particularly relevant because conflict can be stabilised temporarily by involving a third party while the underlying couple tension remains unresolved. Traditional counselling may reduce such triangulation when elders encourage spouses to communicate directly, but it may increase it when family actors speak for the couple rather than helping them speak to one another. The practical criterion should therefore be whether family involvement increases constructive dialogue and agency.

These interactions help explain why no single counselling technique can guarantee marital stability. The same communication exercise may have different effects depending on whether the couple is facing ordinary misunderstanding, chronic poverty, repeated betrayal, coercive family interference or violence. A context-sensitive assessment is therefore needed before deciding whether traditional mediation, professional couple counselling, individual support, economic assistance or safeguarding referral is most appropriate. The study's data support this differentiated approach more strongly than any universal claim about one preferred counselling model.

5.10 Exploratory Demographic Variation and the Meaning of Counselling

The parent study conducted exploratory group comparisons of the traditional-counselling mean. Gender and residence did not show statistically significant differences, while education and duration of marriage did; age approached but did not reach the conventional 0.05 threshold. These findings should be interpreted cautiously because the subgroup analyses were exploratory and the sample was unevenly distributed. Nonetheless, they raise useful questions about how education and marital experience may shape perceptions of traditional counselling.

Education may influence exposure to professional psychological ideas, expectations of confidentiality, attitudes toward gender roles and willingness to combine traditional and formal services. It may also affect the ability to access urban counselling services. The study's exploratory regression found that university and postgraduate education categories were positively associated with support for psychological counselling and integration after adjustment for selected variables, while traditional-counselling perceptions remained a strong positive predictor. This pattern suggests that support for professional counselling need not represent rejection of culture. More highly educated respondents may simultaneously value indigenous mechanisms and expect them to operate alongside formal psychological expertise.

Duration of marriage may matter for a different reason. Couples with longer marital experience have had more opportunities to encounter conflict, seek family help, observe the strengths and limitations of customary mediation and revise their expectations about what counselling can achieve. Newly married couples may place greater emphasis on preparation and communication skills, while longer-married couples may have accumulated complex histories involving children, property, extended family and repeated conflict. The dissertation data do not establish these mechanisms, but they identify a useful direction for future stratified research.

The absence of a significant gender difference in the traditional-counselling mean should not be interpreted as evidence that men and women experience counselling identically. Aggregate scale means can mask differences in speaking power, privacy, perceived fairness or safety. The qualitative material explicitly raises gender inequality and power imbalance as concerns. Future research should therefore analyse women's and men's

experiences separately and include measures of voice, autonomy and satisfaction with the counselling process rather than relying only on overall endorsement.

5.11 Relationship Satisfaction as a Multidimensional Outcome

The title of this article includes relationship satisfaction because the source study explicitly examined marital satisfaction within Objective 3 and included social support as a factor improving satisfaction. Yet the empirical design did not use a dedicated validated satisfaction instrument. This creates an important analytical distinction between measured perceptions of relationship quality and a psychometrically validated satisfaction score. Rather than treating satisfaction as a single numerical outcome, the present article interprets it through the recurring indicators participants themselves supplied: respect, trust, communication, cooperation, commitment, mutual responsibility and support.

This approach is conceptually defensible because marital satisfaction is inherently multidimensional, but it also places limits on statistical inference. The study can show that respondents associate these features with successful marriage and that they perceive communication, economic pressure and counselling access as relevant to stability. It cannot estimate how many units of satisfaction would be gained from receiving traditional counselling, nor can it compare treatment effect sizes across counselling models. Such questions require longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs and validated outcome measures.

A future South Sudanese marital-stability instrument could combine universal relationship domains with culturally specific indicators. Universal domains might include communication, conflict management, trust, emotional support, fairness and safety. Culturally specific domains could examine family involvement, bride-wealth obligations, expectations of elders, clan relationships, religious support and culturally meaningful forms of reconciliation. Developing such a measure would help move the field from general endorsement of counselling toward more precise evaluation of who benefits, from which components, and under what circumstances.

The distinction also matters ethically. A high satisfaction score cannot be assumed from marital continuity alone, and low conflict reporting does not necessarily indicate wellbeing if one spouse is unable to speak freely. Evaluation should therefore include subjective satisfaction, safety, autonomy and confidentiality alongside stability. This broader definition is especially important in contexts where social pressure may discourage separation even when a relationship is harmful.

5.12 From Cultural Legitimacy to Service Quality

Traditional counsellors often possess an advantage that professional services struggle to reproduce: they are known, locally available and culturally intelligible. Clients may already understand the language, symbols and authority of the process. Cultural legitimacy can reduce the psychological distance between a distressed couple and the help-seeking system. It can also mobilise relatives or community members who are essential to resolving practical aspects of a dispute. However, legitimacy is a starting condition, not a sufficient indicator of service quality.

Service quality requires attention to process. Couples need clarity about who the counsellor represents, whether participation is voluntary, how information will be shared, how both spouses will be heard, and what happens if agreement cannot be reached. Traditional systems may vary greatly on these dimensions. Some mediators may already practise careful listening and confidentiality; others may rely more heavily on authority or public

deliberation. Training should therefore build on existing strengths while establishing minimum standards that protect clients.

A useful quality framework can be organised around five questions. First, accessibility: can couples obtain help early and without prohibitive cost? Second, cultural responsiveness: does the process understand local family structures and values without stereotyping them? Third, relational effectiveness: does the process improve communication, problem solving and respect? Fourth, ethics and safety: are confidentiality, consent, non-discrimination and safeguarding protected? Fifth, continuity: can cases be followed up and referred when needs exceed the counsellor's competence? These dimensions convert the broad concept of integration into criteria that can be monitored.

This quality perspective also makes professional counselling accountable. Formal training does not guarantee cultural competence, affordability or trust. A professional practitioner who ignores kinship realities or dismisses clients' cultural values may be technically qualified but ineffective in engagement. Integration should therefore be reciprocal: traditional actors develop stronger psychological and ethical competencies, while professionals develop stronger cultural humility and community linkage.

6. Implications for Counselling Practice and Policy

The findings support culturally responsive pre-marital and marital counselling programmes that explicitly teach communication, listening, trust-building, financial dialogue and constructive conflict resolution. Traditional and religious leaders can contribute cultural knowledge, social legitimacy and early access, while professional counsellors can provide assessment, confidentiality, evidence-informed techniques and specialist referral. The objective is not to merge roles indiscriminately but to coordinate them around clearly defined competencies.

Training for traditional counsellors should include active listening, confidentiality, informed consent, impartial mediation, gender-sensitive practice, domestic-violence awareness, psychological first-line support and referral. Such training would strengthen rather than replace indigenous mechanisms. Community programmes should also address the socioeconomic environment by linking counselling to livelihood, social-protection, health and protection services where possible.

For policy, the study suggests value in community referral networks connecting elders, chiefs, religious institutions, counsellors, health services and protection actors. National or local guidance could define minimum safeguarding standards while allowing community-specific adaptation. Monitoring should assess not only the number of reconciled couples but also whether participants felt heard, safe, respected and able to exercise choice.

6.1 A Practical Stepped-Care Pathway

A stepped-care model offers a practical way to operationalise the study findings. At the first level, community education and premarital preparation can address communication, expectations, financial dialogue, family boundaries, parenting plans and sources of help before severe conflict develops. At the second level, ordinary disputes can be managed through voluntary traditional or faith-based mediation where both spouses are safe, willing and able to participate. At the third level, cases involving persistent communication breakdown, complex trust injuries, trauma symptoms or repeated conflict can be referred to trained professional counsellors. At the fourth level, violence, coercion, serious mental-health risk or legal protection concerns require specialist safeguarding, health or legal intervention rather than routine reconciliation.

This stepped structure preserves the accessibility of community systems while preventing them from being treated as the sole response to every marital problem. It also creates a clear role for follow-up. A couple may begin with elder mediation, move to professional counselling if the problem persists, and return to community support for agreed practical arrangements. Conversely, professional counsellors may invite selected family or community figures into the process when clients consent and when such involvement would strengthen implementation. Movement between levels should therefore be based on need and risk rather than institutional competition.

Referral networks are especially important in settings where specialist services are scarce. Even when a professional counsellor is not available locally, traditional leaders can be trained to recognise red flags, provide psychological first-line support, protect confidentiality as far as possible and connect clients with health, protection or remote counselling resources. Documentation can remain minimal and culturally appropriate while still recording whether safety screening, consent and referral occurred. These simple process indicators would make community counselling more accountable without bureaucratising it unnecessarily.

6.2 Monitoring Outcomes Beyond Reconciliation

Programmes should avoid using reconciliation alone as the primary success indicator. A resolved case should not simply mean that spouses remained together or that elders declared a dispute closed. More meaningful indicators include whether communication improved, whether both partners felt heard, whether agreed responsibilities were followed, whether trust or cooperation improved, whether violence risk was reduced, and whether participants understood their options for further help. Client-reported satisfaction with confidentiality and fairness is also essential because these are precisely the areas in which traditional systems may face contemporary challenges.

Monitoring should also distinguish ordinary relationship support from high-risk safeguarding. For routine cases, follow-up can examine communication, problem solving and social support. For high-risk cases, the key outcomes are safety, successful referral and protection from retaliation. This distinction prevents programme targets from creating pressure to reconcile cases that should instead be separated from ordinary mediation. It also enables traditional leaders to contribute meaningfully to protection systems without being asked to act as therapists, police officers or judges.

At policy level, evidence from this study supports investment in culturally responsive counselling capacity rather than the wholesale importation of standardised models. Training materials should be available in locally appropriate languages and should use culturally recognisable examples. At the same time, universal ethical principles—voluntariness, dignity, privacy, non-discrimination and safety—should be explicit. The resulting model would preserve cultural legitimacy while making quality measurable, referral visible and client wellbeing the central criterion of success.

7. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations require caution. The cross-sectional design does not establish that traditional counselling caused greater marital stability. The quantitative measures are perception-based, and relationship satisfaction was not assessed using a separate validated clinical scale. The sample is heavily urban, male and university-educated relative to the broader South Sudanese population, limiting generalisability. Cultural practices also

vary substantially across ethnic and geographic communities, so the findings should not be interpreted as a single national tradition.

Future research should follow couples longitudinally before and after different forms of counselling, compare traditional-only, professional-only and integrated approaches, and develop culturally validated measures of marital stability and satisfaction. Community-specific studies should examine gender, generation, rural-urban differences and the effects of displacement. Evaluation of training programmes for traditional leaders would also help determine whether confidentiality, safeguarding and referral competencies can be improved without undermining cultural legitimacy.

8. Conclusion

Traditional marriage counselling remains a meaningful relational resource in South Sudan, but its contribution to marital stability is best understood through specific pathways rather than broad claims of cultural effectiveness. The data identify communication, trust, conflict resolution, reconciliation and social support as the mechanisms most closely connected to respondents' descriptions of successful marriage. At the same time, economic hardship, poor communication, infidelity, family pressure, harmful marriage practices, violence, trauma and limited access to counselling create conditions that can destabilise relationships and exceed the capacity of traditional mechanisms.

The strongest interpretation is therefore neither preservation without critique nor replacement by imported professional models. Traditional counselling can remain valuable where it creates voluntary, respectful and culturally legitimate opportunities for dialogue and repair. Its contemporary credibility will depend increasingly on confidentiality, fairness, gender sensitivity, safeguarding and referral. A marriage-support system that combines indigenous legitimacy with clear professional boundaries offers a practical route for strengthening relationships while protecting dignity and safety in a changing South Sudanese social environment.

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