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# INDIGENOUS MARRIAGE COUNSELLING AS A PSYCHOSOCIAL SYSTEM: CULTURAL PRACTICES, PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS AND MARITAL REGULATION IN SOUTH SUDAN

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## Abstract

Marriage in South Sudan operates simultaneously as an intimate partnership, a kinship arrangement and a community institution. This article examines indigenous marriage counselling as a psychosocial system rather than as a collection of isolated customs. Drawing primarily on the first two objectives of a doctoral study—identifying traditional marriage counselling practices and the psychological principles embedded within them—the paper analyses how elders' guidance, family participation, cultural instruction, mediation and reconciliation function as mechanisms of behavioural learning, emotional regulation, social accountability and relational repair. The underlying study employed a mixed-methods descriptive cross-sectional design. Of 250 questionnaires distributed, 242 were returned (96.8%). The six-item traditional counselling scale produced a mean of 4.30 (SD=0.79; Cronbach's α=.849). Traditional leaders' role in resolving marital conflicts received the strongest endorsement (M=4.48), while all six items recorded at least 84% agreement or strong agreement. Open-ended responses identified respect, communication, trust, cooperation, elders, family support and cultural or religious values as recurrent resources for successful marriage. The analysis interprets these practices through Family Systems Theory, Social Learning Theory, Attachment Theory, Cognitive Behavioural Theory and Ecological Systems Theory. The findings suggest that indigenous counselling can be understood as a layered psychosocial regulatory system: it teaches marital norms, creates culturally legitimate spaces for dialogue, mobilises support networks, reinforces accountability, and facilitates reconciliation. However, these strengths do not justify uncritical preservation. Risks involving confidentiality, unequal authority, coercion, violence and complex psychological problems require safeguarding and professional referral. The article concludes that culturally responsive marriage counselling in South Sudan should preserve beneficial indigenous mechanisms while distinguishing community guidance from professional psychological treatment and high-risk safeguarding functions.

***Keywords:*** *indigenous marriage counselling; psychosocial system; marital regulation; South Sudan; elders; family systems; social learning; culturally responsive counselling.*

## 1. Introduction

Marriage counselling in many African settings predates professional psychology. Long before formal therapeutic services became available, families and communities developed socially recognised methods for preparing people for marriage, correcting conduct, settling disputes and restoring relationships. In South Sudan, these processes remain visible in the involvement of elders, parents, clan authorities, religious leaders and other respected community actors. Their work is commonly described as 'traditional counselling', but that label can obscure the complexity of what is occurring. Advice is not only transmitted; expectations are socialised, emotions are contained, disputes are reframed, obligations are negotiated, kin networks are mobilised and marital behaviour is subjected to collective moral evaluation. For this reason, indigenous marriage counselling is analytically more useful when approached as a psychosocial system.

A psychosocial perspective directs attention to the interaction between internal psychological processes and the social environments within which they occur. Marriage is sustained not only by individual affection or personality but also by learned expectations, family histories, material pressures, cultural scripts, social approval, religious commitments and available mechanisms for managing conflict. In a society where marriage may create relationships between extended families as well as between spouses, counselling similarly extends beyond a private dyadic encounter. The counsellor may be an elder or family member; the counselling setting may be a home, a family meeting or a community mediation; and the desired outcome may involve not only emotional relief but restoration of social relationships and workable obligations.

This article therefore reframes indigenous marriage counselling as a system of marital regulation with psychological content. 'Regulation' is used here in a non-punitive sense to describe the processes through which communities transmit norms, establish expectations, encourage self-control, mediate disputes and reinforce behaviours considered supportive of marital continuity. Such regulation can be constructive when it promotes respect, communication, responsibility and non-violent reconciliation. It can also become problematic when collective pressure overrides consent, confidentiality or safety. A psychosocial interpretation must therefore identify both mechanisms and boundaries.

The empirical foundation comes from a doctoral study of traditional marriage counselling and marital stability in South Sudan. The present paper narrows that larger study to its first two specific objectives: to examine the traditional marriage counselling practices used in selected South Sudanese communities and to identify the psychological principles embedded within those practices. The emphasis is deliberately on mechanisms—what indigenous practices appear to do psychologically and socially—rather than on claiming that traditional counsellors are practising formal psychotherapy.

In African societies, marriage extends beyond a private relationship between two individuals. Rather, it represents a social contract that unites families, clans, and communities. Marriage is viewed as a collective responsibility in which parents, elders, relatives, and community leaders actively participate in preparing young couples for married life, supporting them during marriage, and intervening when conflicts arise. As a result, traditional marriage counselling has historically played a central role in maintaining marital harmony and preserving family stability throughout many African communities.

Traditional marriage counselling encompasses a range of culturally established practices through which experienced elders, clan leaders, respected family members, and other custodians of cultural knowledge provide guidance to couples before marriage, during marital life, and when conflicts emerge. These counselling processes are typically based on accumulated indigenous knowledge, cultural norms, moral values, customary law, and lived experience rather than on formal psychological training. Advice is often delivered through storytelling, proverbs, cultural rituals, mediation, and collective family dialogue, enabling couples to understand their marital responsibilities while reinforcing social cohesion and mutual respect.

In South Sudan, traditional marriage counselling continues to occupy an important place despite rapid social transformation. The country's diverse ethnic communities, including the Dinka, Nuer, Bari, Shilluk, Zande, Murle, and many others possess rich cultural traditions concerning courtship, marriage preparation, conflict resolution, and family life. While customs differ among communities, the underlying objective remains largely consistent: to prepare couples for successful, stable, and socially responsible marriages.

Historically, marriage counselling in South Sudan did not begin on the wedding day. Instead, it formed part of a continuous educational process beginning in childhood through family upbringing and extending into adulthood through pre-marital instruction, negotiation of marriage arrangements, community ceremonies, and post-marital guidance. Elders served not only as custodians of culture but also as counsellors, mediators, and conflict managers whose wisdom helped preserve relationships during periods of misunderstanding and disagreement.

However, contemporary South Sudan is experiencing profound social, economic, and political changes. Decades of civil conflict, displacement, urbanization, globalization, migration, changing gender roles, increased educational opportunities, technological advancement, and exposure to international cultures have transformed family structures and marital expectations. Many young people now grow up in urban environments or refugee settings where opportunities to receive traditional counselling are limited. As a result, intergenerational transmission of indigenous counselling knowledge has weakened in some communities.

However, professional psychological counselling has gradually emerged within educational institutions, healthcare systems, religious organizations, humanitarian agencies, and private counselling services. Modern counselling approaches emphasize evidence-based therapeutic techniques, communication skills, emotional regulation, cognitive restructuring, conflict management, and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, access to qualified professional counsellors remains limited throughout much of South Sudan, particularly in rural communities where traditional systems continue to provide the primary source of marital guidance.

Marriage has historically served as the cornerstone of family life and social stability in South Sudan. Across the country's diverse ethnic communities, traditional marriage counselling has long played an important role in preparing couples for marriage, strengthening family relationships, resolving marital conflicts, and preserving cultural values. Through the guidance of parents, elders, clan leaders, and respected community members, couples have traditionally acquired knowledge, attitudes, and interpersonal skills necessary for sustaining harmonious marriages.

However, South Sudan has undergone profound social transformation over the past several decades. Prolonged armed conflict, forced displacement, urbanization, globalization, increased access to formal education, changing gender roles, religious diversity, and technological advancement have altered traditional family structures and social interactions. These changes have weakened some customary institutions responsible for transmitting indigenous marriage counselling practices from one generation to another.

However, marital conflicts, family instability, domestic disputes, and separation appear to be increasing in many communities. Although reliable national statistics remain limited, reports from religious institutions, community leaders, humanitarian organizations, and counselling practitioners suggest that many couples experience difficulties related to communication, financial management, expectations, gender roles, trauma, and conflict resolution. Many younger couples receive limited traditional counselling before marriage, while professional psychological counselling services remain scarce, particularly in rural areas.

Despite the continued cultural significance of traditional marriage counselling, relatively little empirical research has examined its effectiveness from a psychological perspective. Existing studies largely describe cultural practices without investigating the psychological processes through which these practices influence communication, emotional regulation, trust, resilience, marital satisfaction, and long-term marital stability. The evidence also few studies have explored how indigenous counselling knowledge may be integrated with contemporary psychological counselling theories to create culturally appropriate interventions for South Sudan.

## 2. Indigenous Marriage Counselling as a Psychosocial System

Traditional marriage in African societies is deeply connected to cultural values, kinship systems, and community relationships. Unlike approaches that view marriage primarily as a private agreement between two individuals, many African communities understand marriage as a relationship involving families, clans, and wider society (Mbiti, 1969).

African traditional marriage systems emphasize collective responsibility. The success or failure of a marriage is often considered a concern of both families, and elders frequently participate in preparing couples, providing advice, and resolving disputes. This reflects the African philosophical understanding that individuals exist within a social community rather than separately from it (Gyekye, 1996).

One of the important features of traditional African marriage is the role of elders. Elders are regarded as custodians of cultural knowledge and moral values. They provide guidance on marital responsibilities, respect, communication, family obligations, and conflict management. Their authority is derived from age, experience, and social recognition within the community (Nukunya, 2016).

Bride wealth is another significant feature of many African marriage systems. Although interpretations differ among communities, bride wealth generally represents a symbolic relationship between families and serves as recognition of the responsibilities involved in marriage. Goody (1976) explains that marriage exchanges historically functioned as mechanisms for establishing social relationships and family alliances.

Traditional marriage counselling is embedded within these practices. Young couples traditionally receive guidance from parents, elders, and community members regarding expected behaviors, responsibilities, and methods of resolving disagreements. These practices represent indigenous systems of relationship education and social support (Mbiti, 1969).

However, traditional marriage systems have also received criticism. Some scholars argue that certain cultural practices may reinforce unequal gender relations, limit individual decision-making, or create pressure to maintain marriages regardless of harmful circumstances (Nwoye, 2015). For this reason, traditional practices require critical examination to preserve their strengths while addressing practices that may negatively affect individual well-being.

Traditional marriage counselling refers to indigenous systems of guidance, mediation, and relationship support provided by community members, elders, families, and cultural authorities. Unlike professional counselling, which is often based on psychological theories and formal training, traditional counselling is based largely on cultural knowledge, social experience, and community values.

In many African societies, traditional marriage counselling begins before marriage and continues throughout the marital relationship. Couples are prepared for marriage responsibilities, taught expected behaviors, and supported during conflicts through community-based mechanisms (Mbiti, 1969).

Traditional counselling views marriage as a social relationship involving families and communities. For this reason, marital problems are often addressed through collective discussion, mediation, and reconciliation rather than only through individual intervention.

### 2.5.1 Role of Elders

Elders play a central role in traditional marriage counselling because they are considered custodians of cultural knowledge and social wisdom. They provide guidance to couples regarding responsibilities, respect, communication, and family obligations.

The authority of elders comes from accumulated life experience and their recognized position within the community. Their involvement helps maintain cultural continuity and provides couples with social support during marital difficulties (Gyekye, 1996).

The system perspective adds an important analytical layer. Elders do not operate merely as information providers. Their social legitimacy may increase the perceived authority of advice, while family participation creates both support and accountability. Storytelling and proverbs can function as mnemonic devices through which complex expectations are condensed into culturally familiar language. Mediation slows conflict escalation by inserting a third party into emotionally charged interaction. Reconciliation rituals or negotiated apologies can mark a transition from grievance to renewed obligation. None of these mechanisms is uniquely South Sudanese, but their combination reflects a social ecology in which marriage is embedded in kinship and community.

Three characteristics are especially important. First, indigenous counselling is relational: the unit of concern is frequently the couple-in-family rather than the isolated individual. Second, it is normative: counselling transmits ideas about what spouses, families and elders ought to do. Third, it is restorative: conflict resolution often seeks to repair relationships and restore workable social harmony. These characteristics explain both its resilience and its tensions with professional counselling, which places stronger emphasis on individual autonomy, confidentiality, formal competence and evidence-based intervention.

## 3. Psychological Mechanisms Embedded in Indigenous Practice

The second objective of the study asked what psychological principles are reflected in traditional marriage counselling. Five theoretical perspectives provide complementary answers. They should not be read as proof that traditional practice was consciously derived from these theories. Rather, they provide conceptual languages for describing functions already present in indigenous counselling.

Psychological theories offer important explanations for understanding marital relationships, communication patterns, emotional connections, and conflict behaviors. This study is guided by several theories that help explain how traditional counselling practices may influence marital outcomes.

### 2.6.1 Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory was developed by Murray Bowen and explains that individuals exist within interconnected family systems. According to Bowen (1978), emotional patterns, behaviors, and relationship difficulties are influenced by interactions among family members.

The theory is highly relevant to traditional marriage counselling because African marriage systems often involve extended families, elders, and community networks. The involvement of families in marriage guidance reflects the idea that marital relationships are connected to wider social systems.

According to Family Systems Theory, problems within a marriage cannot always be understood by examining only the couple. Instead, researchers must consider family histories, expectations, communication patterns, and social relationships (Bowen, 1978).

In this study, the theory helps explain why elders, family members, and clan leaders may influence marital outcomes through advice, mediation, and social support.

### 2.6.2 Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory was introduced by John Bowlby to explain the importance of emotional bonds in human relationships. Bowlby (1969) argued that early experiences with caregivers influence emotional development and later interpersonal relationships.

In marriage, attachment patterns influence trust, emotional security, intimacy, and responses to conflict. Individuals with secure attachment patterns are generally more capable of developing supportive relationships, while insecure attachment may contribute to emotional difficulties (Bowlby, 1988).

Traditional marriage counselling may contribute to emotional security by teaching responsibility, commitment, patience, and mutual support. Elders and families often emphasize values that strengthen long-term relationship bonds.

### 2.6.3 Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura (1977), explains that individuals learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and reinforcement.

Marriage-related behaviors are often learned from parents, families, and communities. Young couples may observe relationship patterns from older generations and adopt culturally accepted behaviors related to communication, responsibility, and conflict management.

Traditional marriage counselling reflects social learning because elders transmit knowledge and expectations about marriage to younger generations. Through guidance and example, communities teach individuals how to perform marital roles (Bandura, 1977).

### 2.6.4 Cognitive behavioral Theory

Cognitive behavioral Theory emphasizes the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Beck (1976) proposed that individuals' interpretations of situations influence their emotional reactions and actions.

Within marriage, negative assumptions, poor communication, and unrealistic expectations may contribute to conflict. Counselling can help couples identify harmful thought patterns and develop healthier ways of responding to each other.

Although traditional counselling is not usually based on formal cognitive therapy, some traditional practices encourage positive attitudes such as patience, forgiveness, respect, and responsibility, which may influence marital behavior.

### 2.6.5 Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. The theory explains human behavior as influenced by multiple environmental systems, including family, community, culture, institutions, and wider social conditions.

According to this theory, marriage outcomes are influenced by factors beyond the couple themselves. Economic conditions, cultural beliefs, religious values, family relationships, and community expectations all affect marital experiences.

This theory is especially applicable to African traditional marriage systems because marriage is strongly connected to social networks and cultural institutions. Traditional counselling practices reflect the influence of the wider social environment on marital relationships.

For example, elders, clan leaders, and family members represent parts of the social environment that influence how couples understand and manage marriage.

The strength of Ecological Systems Theory is that it provides a broad understanding of marriage by recognizing the interaction between individuals and their social environment. Its limitation is that it may not provide detailed explanations of specific psychological processes within couples.

### 2.6.6 Relevance of Psychological Theories to the Study

The theories reviewed above provide complementary explanations for understanding traditional marriage counselling and marital outcomes.

Family Systems Theory explains the role of families, elders, and communities in marriage counselling.

Attachment Theory explains emotional bonding and relationship security between spouses.

Social Learning Theory explains how cultural values and marital behaviors are transmitted across generations.

Cognitive behavioral Theory explains how thoughts and communication patterns influence marital relationships.

Ecological Systems Theory explains the influence of cultural and social environments on marriage.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for examining how traditional counselling practices influence marital stability, satisfaction, conflict resolution, and relationship quality.

Analytical mapping of indigenous practices to psychological mechanisms

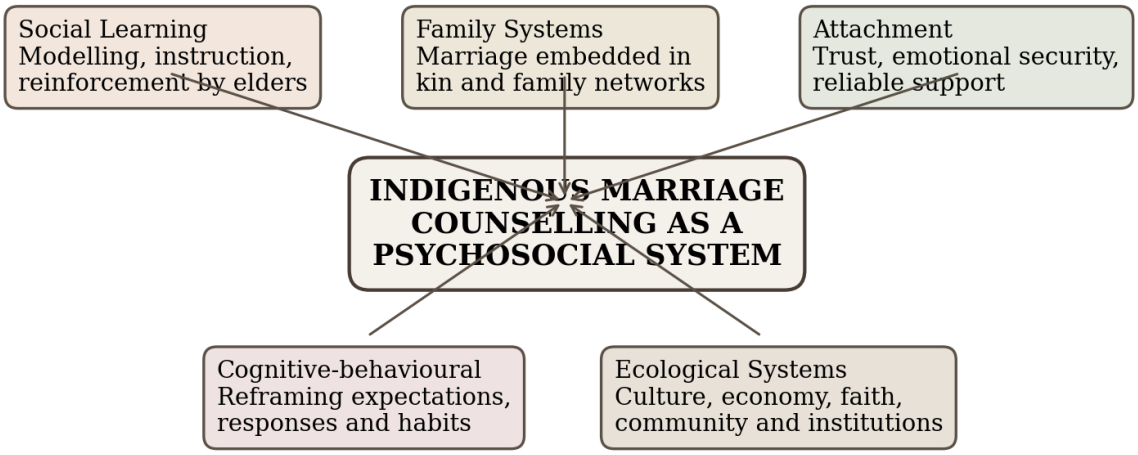



**Figure 1. Analytical mapping of indigenous marriage counselling practices to psychological mechanisms.**

### 3.1 Social learning: modelling, instruction and reinforcement

Social Learning Theory is particularly useful for explaining intergenerational transmission. Marriage conduct is learned partly through observing parents, relatives and respected elders, and partly through explicit instruction about responsibility, communication, sexuality, fidelity, resource sharing, family obligations and conflict. When elders praise patience, condemn humiliating communication, require apology or publicly affirm reconciliation, they are also shaping behavioural contingencies. The process resembles social learning because norms are communicated through models, reinforcement, correction and repeated observation (Bandura, 1977, 1986).

This mechanism is visible in the study's qualitative material. Respondents repeatedly associated successful marriage with respect, communication, trust, cooperation, commitment and mutual responsibility. These are not abstract traits alone; they are behaviours that can be modelled, practised and reinforced. The elder therefore functions as a culturally authorised model and feedback provider. The strength of this arrangement is contextual credibility. Its limitation is that harmful or unequal norms can also be transmitted through the same social-learning process, which makes critical selection essential.

### 3.2 Family systems: the marriage within a network

Family Systems Theory provides a second interpretive lens. Bowen (1978) argues that individual behaviour and emotional functioning are inseparable from patterns within family systems. South Sudanese marriage counselling frequently reflects this systemic logic in practice: marital difficulties may trigger involvement by parents, relatives, elders or clan authorities because the marriage is understood as connected to wider family relationships.

The study's quantitative findings support the continued perceived relevance of this network. Family involvement as a contributor to marital stability recorded a mean of 4.24, and 88.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

Family participation can contribute informational, emotional and material resources. It may help spouses understand family histories, clarify expectations and gain practical support during stress. It can also create accountability when destructive interaction patterns have become normalised within the couple. Yet systemic involvement is not automatically therapeutic. Family interference was itself identified as a source of marital conflict in the qualitative responses. The psychosocial task is therefore not to maximise family involvement but to distinguish supportive participation from intrusive or coercive involvement.

### 3.3 Attachment and emotional security

Attachment theory focuses on the human need for dependable emotional bonds and the ways experiences of security or insecurity shape responses to closeness, separation and conflict (Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Ainsworth, 1978). Traditional counselling does not normally use attachment terminology, but its emphasis on loyalty, trust, mutual support, patience and dependable responsibility has clear relevance to emotional security. The open-ended data strongly support this interpretation: respect, communication and trust formed the largest successful-marriage theme, coded in 118 responses (48.8%).

The attachment interpretation is especially useful because it moves analysis beyond social compliance. Advice to communicate, remain emotionally available, seek reconciliation and avoid betrayal can be understood as support for conditions under which partners experience one another as reliable. At the same time, attachment language must not be used to justify preserving unsafe relationships. Security requires safety; coercive control and violence contradict rather than strengthen an attachment-supportive counselling environment.

### 3.4 Cognitive-behavioural processes: expectations, appraisal and response

A cognitive-behavioural perspective draws attention to the interaction among beliefs, interpretations, emotions and actions. Marital conflict often escalates not only because of an event but because of the meaning assigned to it. Traditional advisers who ask spouses to reconsider assumptions, listen before reacting, accept responsibility, apologise or choose a less provocative response may be influencing cognitive appraisal and behavioural patterns even without employing formal cognitive therapy (Beck, 1976).

The study found that poor communication was the most strongly endorsed contextual factor affecting marital stability (M=4.27). This makes the cognitive-behavioural dimension practically significant. Communication is a behavioural channel through which assumptions and emotions become relational events. Indigenous counselling may interrupt cycles of accusation, retaliation and withdrawal by slowing the interaction and requiring explanation. Professional counselling can strengthen this function through more structured communication training, emotional-regulation skills and evidence-informed couple interventions (Gurman et al., 2015; Nichols & Davis, 2020).

### 3.5 Ecological systems: marriage under social and material pressure

Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective situates the couple within multiple interacting environments. Marriage is influenced by household conditions, extended family, community norms, religious institutions, economic opportunities and wider political or social change (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is highly relevant in South Sudan,

where conflict, displacement, urbanisation, migration, changing gender expectations and economic hardship can reshape both marriage and the institutions that support it.

The open-ended responses show why a purely intrapsychic account would be inadequate. Economic hardship, poverty and unemployment were the most frequently coded causes of conflict (90 responses; 37.2%). Family pressure, cultural conflict, bride-wealth issues, substance use, violence and limited counselling access also appeared. Counselling can alter communication and coping, but it cannot by itself eliminate structural poverty or social insecurity. The ecological interpretation therefore prevents the psychological analysis from blaming couples for stressors produced outside the relationship.

### 3.6 Indigenous and professional counselling: convergence and distinction

Traditional and professional marriage counselling share several practical aims even though their sources of authority differ. Both seek to reduce destructive conflict, improve understanding, support behavioural change and preserve relationships where this can be done safely. Traditional counselling derives authority from cultural knowledge, age, kinship position, religious legitimacy and accumulated experience, whereas professional counselling derives authority from formal training, ethical standards, psychological theory and supervised competence. The overlap in goals helps explain why the study found no simple opposition between the two systems. Respondents who valued traditional counselling also tended to support psychological counselling and integration; in the wider dataset, the traditional-counselling mean was positively associated with the psychological/integration mean (Spearman's rho=.440, $p<.001$).

The distinction remains important because similarity of goals does not imply equivalence of methods. Professional couple counselling usually includes explicit assessment, confidentiality, informed consent, case formulation, treatment planning and evidence-informed intervention. Indigenous counselling may achieve some analogous functions through conversation, mediation, moral instruction and community support, but it does not necessarily include formal assessment or a protected confidential setting. Gurman et al. (2015) and Nichols and Davis (2020) show that contemporary couple and family therapies draw on structured psychological models, while African indigenous systems are commonly rooted in community values, social experience and customary authority (Gyekye, 1996; Mbiti, 1969).

This difference is especially significant when marital difficulties involve trauma, severe mental-health symptoms, substance dependence, suicidality, serious violence or coercive control. A culturally respected elder may be the person most likely to notice that a household is in crisis, yet that does not mean the elder should manage a case beyond his or her competence. A robust psychosocial system therefore needs differentiated roles. Community counsellors can offer culturally legitimate first-line support, assist with ordinary disagreements and encourage help-seeking. Professional practitioners can provide psychological assessment, confidential therapy, documentation, supervision and referral. Legal and medical services may be necessary where safety or rights violations are present.

The key concept is complementarity without collapse. If professional counselling simply absorbs indigenous actors into a clinical hierarchy, cultural legitimacy may be lost. If traditional counselling is romanticised as sufficient for all problems, serious risks may be missed. Integration should instead preserve the distinctive contribution of each system while creating safe interfaces between them. Traditional actors bring context, language, local trust, family knowledge and community continuity. Professionals bring specialised psychological knowledge, ethical accountability, privacy protections, structured techniques and referral capacity. The study's

results support this middle position because respondents valued both traditional mechanisms and culturally responsive professional support.

### 3.7 Social change and the transformation of indigenous counselling

The psychosocial system is not static. Urbanisation, displacement, formal education, digital communication, migration, changing gender roles and exposure to global relationship ideals alter the social conditions under which traditional counselling operates. Young adults may live far from elders, marry across ethnic or religious boundaries, or construct expectations of intimacy that differ from those of their parents. Extended families may have less daily influence in urban settings, while mobile phones and social media introduce new possibilities for connection, secrecy, jealousy and conflict. Giddens and Sutton (2017) describe how modernisation changes family and intimate life, while Cherlin (2004) documents the broader tendency for marriage to become more individually negotiated in contemporary societies.

For South Sudan, social change is intensified by histories of armed conflict and displacement. These conditions can disrupt intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge at the same time as they increase psychosocial stress. The result is not necessarily the disappearance of tradition but its reconfiguration. Elders may remain symbolically authoritative while having less practical access to couples; churches and community organisations may take on counselling functions previously centred within kin networks; professional counselling may become more visible in urban institutions while remaining scarce elsewhere. A useful article-level interpretation is therefore that indigenous marriage counselling is a living social system adapting to changing ecological conditions rather than a fixed collection of pre-modern customs.

This transformation also creates an opportunity for deliberate capacity building. If the system is already changing, training in confidentiality, non-violent conflict resolution, informed consent and referral need not be seen as replacing culture. It can be framed as strengthening the ability of existing community institutions to respond to contemporary forms of marital stress. Likewise, professional counsellors can adapt their own practice by learning how kinship, bride wealth, clan relations, faith and community obligations shape the meaning of marital problems. Culturally responsive practice is therefore reciprocal: community systems acquire selected psychological and safeguarding competencies, while professional systems acquire deeper cultural competence.

**Table 4. Convergences and distinctions between indigenous and professional marriage counselling**

| Dimension | Indigenous counselling | Professional counselling | Integration principle |
|---|---|---|---|
| Authority | Eldership, kinship, cultural or religious legitimacy | Training, licensure/credentialing, ethical competence | Mutual respect without role confusion |
| Setting | Home, family meeting, community or religious space | Clinic, office, health, education or NGO service | Multiple access points with clear referral |
| Primary method | Advice, mediation, storytelling, proverbs, moral instruction, reconciliation | Assessment, formulation, structured therapeutic techniques | Use culturally meaningful dialogue with evidence-informed skills |
| Unit of concern | Couple embedded in family and community | Couple and individuals, often with systemic assessment | Include supportive networks with consent |
| Confidentiality | May be variable because of collective participation | Formal professional expectation | Define privacy boundaries before joint work |
| High-risk cases | May recognise crisis but have limited specialist capacity | Safeguarding, clinical assessment and referral | Traditional actors identify and refer rather than manage beyond competence |

### 3.8 From cultural practice to psychosocial effect

Understanding mechanism is important because the same outward practice can produce different outcomes depending on how it is conducted. Elder involvement, for example, may be supportive when the elder listens fairly, protects dignity and helps spouses clarify misunderstandings. The same involvement may become harmful when authority is used to silence one spouse, disclose private information or insist on reconciliation despite danger. Family participation may provide emotional and material support, but it may also intensify conflict when relatives take sides or impose competing obligations. Cultural instruction may strengthen commitment and responsibility, yet it may also preserve expectations that are no longer accepted by younger couples. The psychosocial effect therefore lies not in the cultural label itself but in the interaction between method, authority, consent, context and the problem being addressed.

This mechanism-sensitive perspective prevents two common analytical errors. The first is romanticisation: assuming that a practice is beneficial because it is indigenous. The second is displacement: assuming that a practice lacks psychological value because it is not delivered by a formally trained professional. The findings support a more discriminating approach. Strong endorsement of elders and reconciliation indicates social legitimacy, while the recurrent themes of trust, communication and cooperation indicate psychologically meaningful content. At the same time, reported concerns about violence, family pressure, harmful marriage

practices and limited confidentiality demonstrate that cultural legitimacy cannot substitute for safety and ethical boundaries.

The concept of marital regulation is useful precisely because it captures this conditionality. Regulation involves the shaping of behaviour through norms, expectations, feedback and social consequences. In healthy form, it can encourage accountability, empathy, patience and constructive conflict management. In unhealthy form, it can enforce conformity at the expense of autonomy or safety. The practical challenge for culturally responsive counselling is therefore to retain the regulating functions that support mutual respect while rejecting those that depend on coercion, unequal power or harmful social expectations.

## 4. Methods

The article draws on the completed empirical component of a broader doctoral study conducted in selected South Sudanese communities. A descriptive cross-sectional mixed-methods design was used. The design was appropriate for describing contemporary perceptions of traditional marriage counselling and examining relationships among measured variables at a defined period; it was not designed to establish causal effects.

Two hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed and 242 completed questionnaires were available for analysis, yielding a response rate of 96.8%. The questionnaire contained demographic items, six items on traditional marriage counselling (B1–B6), five items on factors affecting marital stability (C1–C5), four items on psychological counselling and integration (D1–D4), and four open-ended questions. Likert responses were coded from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. Missing responses were retained as missing rather than imputed.

Quantitative analysis used frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Cronbach's alpha assessed internal consistency. Spearman rank correlation was used for ordinal associations. For the present article, emphasis is placed on the B items and the qualitative material that directly illuminate the first two objectives. The six-item traditional counselling scale demonstrated strong internal consistency (α=.849). The larger study also reported the D scale reliability (α=.765; n=240), which is relevant when interpreting attitudes towards culturally responsive integration.

Open-ended responses were analysed through qualitative content analysis. Responses were cleaned only for obvious typographical variation, then coded into recurring themes. Coding was non-exclusive: a single response could contain several themes. Theme percentages therefore indicate the proportion of the 242 records in which a theme appeared and do not sum to 100%. The wider dissertation also used interview, focus-group and observation materials to deepen interpretation. The present article treats the questionnaire and open-ended dataset as the principal empirical base and uses the additional qualitative material cautiously as contextual support.

Ethical principles included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, respect for cultural values and avoidance of harm. A central ethical boundary is that traditional mediation is not appropriate for every problem. Violence, coercion, severe psychological distress and serious rights violations require safeguarding and appropriate professional, medical or legal referral.

*Cronbach's alpha:* $\alpha = [k/(k-1)]\,[1 - (\Sigma\sigma^2_i / \sigma^2_t)]$

*Spearman rank correlation:* $\rho = 1 - [6\Sigma d_i^2 / n(n^2 - 1)]$

In these expressions, k is the number of scale items, $\sigma^2_i$ is an item variance, $\sigma^2_t$ is the variance of the total score, $d_i$ is the difference between paired ranks and n is the number of paired observations. The equations are shown to

clarify the statistical logic used in the source study; all reported statistics are taken from the completed dissertation analysis.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Profile of the study sample

The dataset contained 242 respondents. Men constituted 169 (69.8%) and women 73 (30.2%). The largest age group was 25–34 years (31.0%), followed by those below 25 years (27.3%) and those aged 35–44 years (23.6%). Most respondents were recorded as married (205; 84.7%). The sample was predominantly urban (209; 86.4%) and relatively highly educated, with 117 respondents (48.3%) holding a university degree and 56 (23.1%) reporting postgraduate education. These characteristics should be considered when interpreting generalisability, particularly because rural communities and women were less represented.

**Table 1. Selected characteristics of the 242 respondents**

| Characteristic | Category | n | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 169 | 69.8 |
| | Female | 73 | 30.2 |
| Marital status | Married | 205 | 84.7 |
| | Separated | 30 | 12.4 |
| Age | 25–34 | 75 | 31.0 |
| | Below 25 | 66 | 27.3 |
| Education | University degree | 117 | 48.3 |
| | Postgraduate | 56 | 23.1 |
| Residence | Urban | 209 | 86.4 |
| | Rural | 33 | 13.6 |

### 5.2 Traditional counselling practices

Respondents strongly endorsed the continuing role of traditional marriage counselling. The composite six-item scale had a mean of 4.30 (SD=0.79) and Cronbach's α=.849. Traditional leaders' role in resolving marital conflicts received the highest mean (M=4.48, SD=0.89), with 95.0% selecting Agree or Strongly Agree. Elders' guidance to couples experiencing marital problems followed (M=4.35), while traditional reconciliation practices also received strong support (M=4.31). Family involvement and cultural values each recorded a mean of 4.24. The lowest mean in the set concerned traditional counselling promoting communication between spouses (M=4.18), yet 86.0% still agreed or strongly agreed. Thus, the 'lowest' item remained substantively positive rather than indicating rejection.

**Table 2. Traditional marriage counselling items**

| Item | Practice statement | Mean | SD | Agree/Strongly agree (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| B1 | Traditional leaders have an important role in resolving marital conflicts. | 4.48 | 0.89 | 95.0 |
| B2 | Elders provide useful guidance to couples experiencing marital problems. | 4.35 | 1.12 | 89.7 |
| B3 | Family involvement can contribute to marital stability. | 4.24 | 0.97 | 88.4 |
| B4 | Traditional counselling promotes communication between spouses. | 4.18 | 0.99 | 86.0 |
| B5 | Cultural values can strengthen marital relationships. | 4.24 | 1.05 | 84.3 |
| B6 | Traditional reconciliation practices can help restore relationships. | 4.31 | 0.99 | 87.6 |




**Figure 2. Mean scores for traditional marriage counselling practices.**

### 5.3 Indigenous resources associated with successful marriage

The open-ended responses provide substantive content behind the Likert endorsements. Respect, communication and trust were coded in 118 records (48.8%), making them the dominant successful-marriage theme. Elders, family and community support appeared in 67 records (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%). The pattern is important because it shows that respondents did not define indigenous counselling solely by the identity of the counsellor. They associated successful marriage with a relational repertoire—trust, communication, cooperation and social support—that has clear psychological relevance.

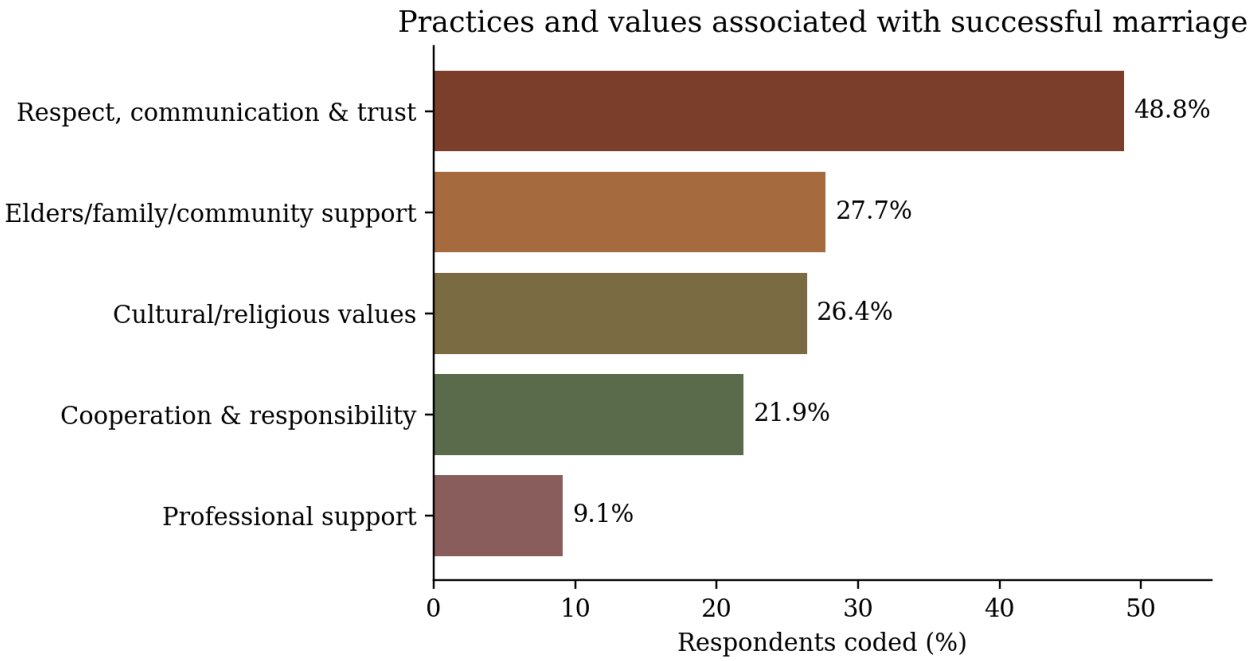



**Figure 3. Qualitative themes associated with successful marriage.**

### 5.4 Marital stressors and the limits of counselling

The same qualitative dataset identified stressors that place traditional counselling under pressure. Economic hardship, poverty and unemployment were coded in 90 responses (37.2%), followed by poor communication, misunderstanding or disrespect in 72 (29.8%), and infidelity, jealousy or lack of trust in 53 (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%); and polygamy, dowry, forced or child marriage in 23 (9.5%). These findings reinforce the ecological interpretation: some marital difficulties are relational, others are structural, and some require safeguarding rather than reconciliation alone.

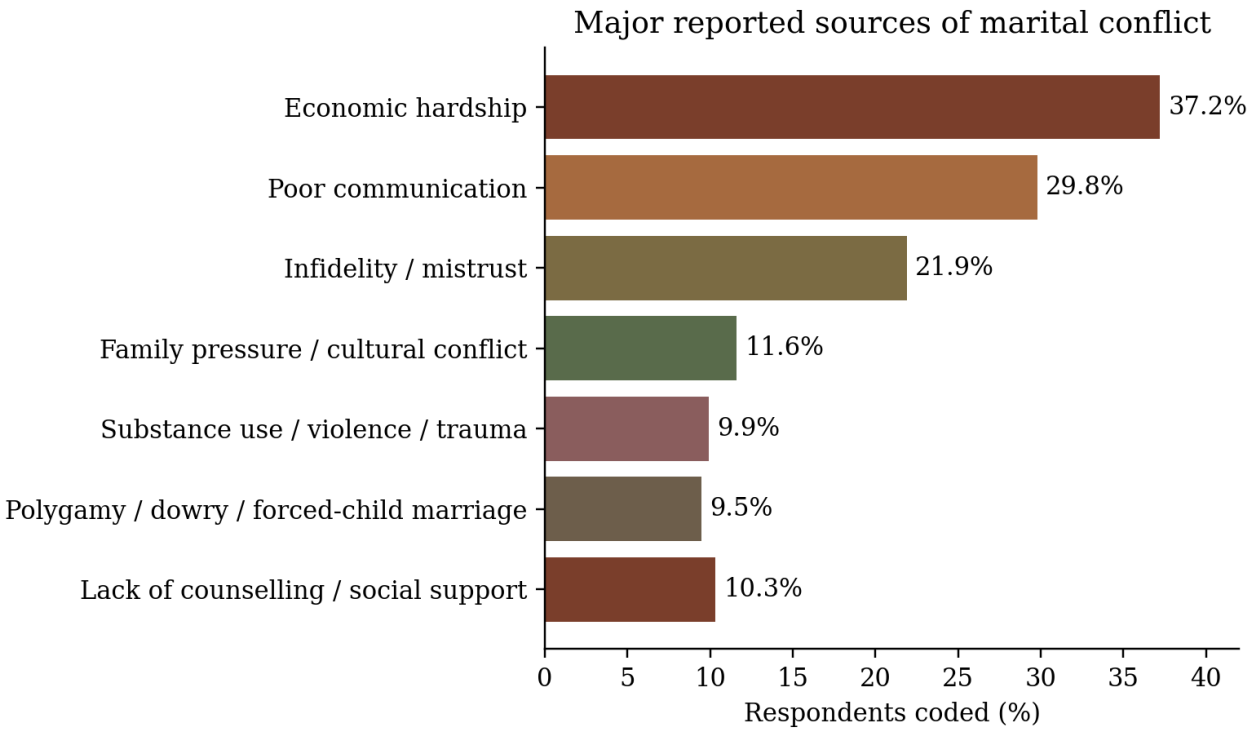



**Figure 4. Major causes of marital conflict identified in open-ended responses.**

### 5.5 Practice-to-mechanism mapping

The empirical findings allow a structured mapping from observable indigenous practices to plausible psychosocial functions. The mapping is interpretive rather than diagnostic: it identifies parallels between what participants describe and established psychological concepts. It does not claim that elders are practising clinical psychology or that every traditional practice produces a beneficial outcome.

**Table 3. Indigenous counselling practices and embedded psychosocial mechanisms**

| Indigenous practice | Primary psychosocial mechanism | Relevant theory | Potential marital function |
|---|---|---|---|
| Elders' advice and example | Observation, modelling, reinforcement of expectations | Social Learning Theory | Transmits norms of responsibility, respect and conflict conduct |
| Extended-family participation | Relational interdependence and systemic feedback | Family Systems Theory | Mobilises support, contextualises disputes and strengthens accountability |
| Trust, loyalty and mutual support instruction | Promotion of emotional security and dependable attachment | Attachment Theory | Supports reassurance, commitment and relational safety |
| Dialogue, apology and reframing | Changing interpretations and response patterns | Cognitive Behavioural Theory | Interrupts escalation and promotes constructive responses |
| Clan/community/religious involvement | Linking relationship to social and cultural environment | Ecological Systems Theory | Connects marriage to norms, resources and community supports |
| Mediation and reconciliation | Third-party containment, restorative problem solving | Integrative psychosocial function | Creates a culturally legitimate pathway from grievance to negotiated repair |

## 6. Discussion

The central finding is that indigenous marriage counselling in South Sudan is perceived not as a marginal remnant of custom but as a continuing social resource. The high composite score (M=4.30) and the consistently positive item-level responses indicate that respondents recognise multiple components of the traditional system: leader involvement, elder guidance, family participation, cultural values, communication and reconciliation. The qualitative findings give these endorsements psychological depth. Respondents repeatedly named respect, trust, communication, cooperation and support—constructs that are central to both indigenous moral language and contemporary relationship science.

This evidence supports the article's argument that indigenous marriage counselling should be analysed as a psychosocial system. Its operation cannot be reduced to 'advice from elders'. At least five interacting functions are visible: socialisation of marital norms; mobilisation of kin and community support; regulation of emotional and behavioural responses during conflict; restoration of damaged relationships; and reinforcement of accountability. These functions occur within a culturally recognised authority structure, which is a major source of both effectiveness and risk.

### 6.1 Cultural legitimacy as a mechanism of engagement

Cultural legitimacy matters because counselling is effective only if people are willing to enter the process, disclose concerns and consider guidance. Traditional advisers may be trusted because they share language, kinship knowledge, moral frameworks and local understandings of marriage. Gyekye (1996) and Mbiti (1969) emphasise the communal orientation of many African social systems, while Murithi (2008) shows how indigenous conflict-resolution traditions often privilege restoration of relationships. In this context, a counsellor's authority may derive less from certification than from recognised experience and social standing.

The finding that 95.0% of respondents endorsed the role of traditional leaders in marital conflict resolution therefore has more than descriptive importance. It suggests that traditional leaders remain potential access points to psychosocial support. Where professional counselling is scarce, geographically distant or culturally unfamiliar, these actors may be the first people to whom couples turn. This accessibility is an important strength, but it also means that the quality of their responses has serious consequences. Training in listening, confidentiality, safeguarding and referral could therefore produce benefits without requiring traditional leaders to become professional therapists.

### 6.2 Marital regulation through social learning

The social-learning dimension helps explain how marital expectations are transmitted before and during marriage. Bandura (1977, 1986) argues that behaviour is learned through observation, modelling and reinforcement. Indigenous counselling often uses exactly these social processes: elders recount examples, invoke collective standards, praise particular forms of conduct, condemn others, and remind couples that their behaviour affects wider family relations. Storytelling and proverbs condense social knowledge into memorable forms; ceremonies and family meetings place that knowledge within emotionally meaningful settings.

The regulatory effect can be constructive where the transmitted norms include mutual respect, honest communication, responsibility and non-violent conflict resolution. The study's qualitative results suggest that respondents value precisely these qualities. Yet social learning is content-neutral: harmful norms can also be reproduced through modelling and reinforcement. If an elder normalises coercion, gender inequality or endurance of violence, cultural authority can strengthen rather than correct harm. The practical implication is selective preservation. Cultural legitimacy should be retained as a delivery strength while the content and boundaries of counselling are subjected to ethical scrutiny.

### 6.3 Family systems and the double-edged role of kin

The endorsement of family involvement is consistent with Family Systems Theory, which treats relationship problems as embedded within wider patterns of interaction (Bowen, 1978; Nichols & Davis, 2020). In South Sudanese contexts, families may contribute advice, mediation, childcare, material assistance and continuity during crises. A dispute that appears interpersonal may also involve bride-wealth obligations, in-law expectations, property arrangements or long-standing clan relationships. A purely individualised counselling model may miss these dynamics.

At the same time, the qualitative results show that family pressure and interference can themselves contribute to conflict. The psychosocial system is therefore not inherently protective. Family inclusion should be purposeful, proportionate and—where possible—consented to by the couple. Professional ethics add an important corrective by distinguishing supportive systemic engagement from uncontrolled disclosure. Culturally responsive practice

does not require reproducing every traditional pattern of involvement; it requires understanding the system well enough to identify which relationships are resources and which are stressors.

### 6.4 Communication as the bridge between culture and psychology

Communication is the clearest bridge between indigenous practice and contemporary couple counselling. In the quantitative analysis, poor communication was the strongest contextual factor associated with marital conflict (M=4.27). In the qualitative analysis, respect, communication and trust formed the dominant successful-marriage theme, while poor communication and misunderstanding were the second most frequent causes of conflict. This convergence makes communication more than a generic recommendation: it is a central mechanism through which other processes operate.

Traditional mediation creates a culturally recognised conversation structure. A third party may insist that each spouse speaks, listen to competing accounts, clarify points of misunderstanding and guide the parties towards apology or agreement. Modern couple therapy similarly treats communication patterns as important targets, although it often uses more formal techniques, structured exercises and explicit emotional work (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Gurman et al., 2015; Snyder et al., 2006). The practical opportunity is therefore not to replace one with the other but to combine cultural access with structured relational skills.

### 6.5 Attachment, trust and restorative counselling

The attachment lens deepens the interpretation of reconciliation. Trust, loyalty and emotional support were prominent in the source study, and infidelity or mistrust was a major reported cause of conflict. Attachment theory proposes that dependable relationships support emotional security, while perceived abandonment or unreliability can intensify distress and defensive behaviour (Bowlby, 1988; Thompson, 2008). Traditional counselling that encourages dependable responsibility, honest disclosure and repair after injury may therefore support attachment-related needs even when it does not use clinical language.

Restorative practices can also have symbolic value. An apology witnessed by respected family members, a negotiated settlement, or a ritual marking renewed cooperation may signal that a conflict has moved into a different phase. Such symbolic transitions can be psychologically meaningful because they create shared expectations about future conduct. However, restoration must not be confused with mandatory reunion. Reconciliation is ethically defensible only where participation is voluntary and safety is protected.

### 6.6 Cognitive-behavioural parallels without conceptual overreach

It is tempting to label every form of advice ‘cognitive behavioural’, but that would overstate the evidence. The more defensible claim is that some indigenous counselling practices perform functions that are compatible with cognitive-behavioural principles. Advisers may challenge impulsive interpretations, encourage alternative explanations, ask a spouse to examine the consequences of a response, or establish new behavioural expectations. These processes can alter the thought–emotion–behaviour cycle described in cognitive approaches (Beck, 1976).

The distinction matters for professional integrity. Traditional counsellors are not automatically trained to assess depression, trauma, personality difficulties, suicidality or other clinical concerns. Nor does a culturally familiar intervention become evidence-based psychotherapy merely because it resembles a psychological principle. The value of theoretical mapping is explanatory: it identifies potential mechanisms and areas of complementarity, while preserving the boundary between indigenous guidance and professional treatment.

### 6.7 Ecological stress and the limits of a counselling-only solution

Economic hardship was the most frequently coded source of marital conflict. This is a critical finding because it shows that relationship distress is often produced within material conditions. Unemployment, poverty, resource scarcity and extended-family obligations can intensify disagreement even where couples possess good intentions and communication skills. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model helps locate these pressures at levels beyond the couple. Counselling may improve financial communication, joint planning and emotional coping, but it cannot create jobs, reverse displacement or eliminate structural insecurity.

A psychosocial system therefore needs referral and linkage functions. Marriage counselling should connect, where appropriate, with livelihood support, social services, health care, trauma services, legal protection and community-based assistance. This broader ecology is especially important in contexts affected by conflict and displacement. Treating every marital problem as a communication deficit would individualise problems that are partly economic, political or social.

### 6.8 Safeguarding: where marital regulation must stop

The most important boundary concerns safety. Traditional systems often value continuity of marriage and restoration of harmony. These goals can be constructive in ordinary disagreement, but they become dangerous if they pressure people to remain in violent or coercive situations. The study identified violence, substance use, trauma, forced or child marriage and harmful marriage practices among reported concerns. The source dissertation therefore explicitly states that violence, coercion, severe psychological distress and serious rights violations require safeguarding and professional, medical or legal referral.

This principle should be treated as non-negotiable in any integrated model. Elders and family members can remain valuable community actors while being trained to recognise situations beyond their remit. Confidentiality is similarly important. Community participation can increase support but also increase exposure of sensitive information. Couples should understand who is involved, what will be shared and why. Cultural responsiveness and individual dignity are compatible only when participation is voluntary and safety is prioritised.

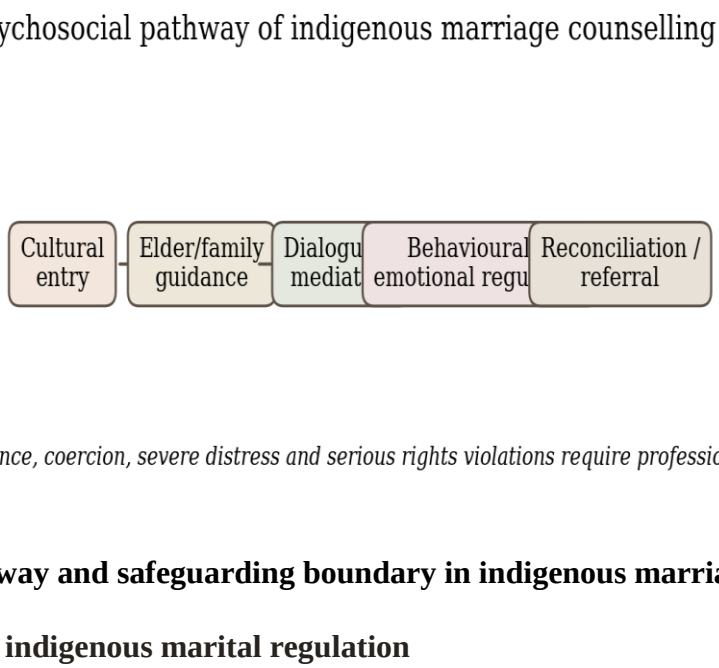



**Figure 5. Psychosocial pathway and safeguarding boundary in indigenous marriage counselling.**

### 6.9 A psychosocial model of indigenous marital regulation

Taken together, the findings support a five-part model. The first component is cultural entry: couples approach a familiar and legitimate source of guidance. The second is norm transmission: elders and families communicate expectations concerning respect, commitment, responsibility and acceptable conduct. The third is relational processing: dialogue and mediation provide a structured setting in which grievances are expressed and interpreted. The fourth is behavioural-emotional regulation: advice, apology, modelling and social accountability encourage changes in response. The fifth is restoration or referral: ordinary disputes may end in negotiated reconciliation, whereas unsafe or complex cases should move towards specialised services.

The model clarifies why traditional counselling persists even in contexts where professional psychology is expanding. Its strength is not simply that it is ‘old’ or culturally authentic. It is embedded in relationships, authority structures and social meanings that make counselling actionable. The same embeddedness creates risk when authority is unequal or when privacy and autonomy are weak. Effective integration therefore requires both respect and limits.

## 7. Implications for Culturally Responsive Counselling Practice

The findings suggest several practical implications for counselling programmes in South Sudan. First, professional services should not assume that culturally appropriate care begins only when a client enters a clinic. Couples may already be embedded in informal support pathways involving elders, religious leaders and family members. Mapping these pathways can help professionals understand prior advice, available support and potential sources of pressure.

Second, selected traditional and religious leaders could receive focused training in active listening, confidentiality, informed consent, basic mental-health awareness, gender-sensitive practice, domestic-violence recognition, child protection and referral. The goal should not be to convert them into psychologists but to improve first-line psychosocial support and strengthen safe referral. Third, professional counsellors need reciprocal cultural competence. Evidence-based techniques are less useful if delivered in ways that disregard kinship expectations, language, faith or community meaning.

Fourth, premarital counselling provides a particularly suitable area for collaboration. Traditional elders can transmit culturally meaningful expectations and family history, while professionals can add structured work on communication, emotional regulation, financial decision-making, consent, parenting expectations and conflict-management skills. Finally, monitoring should include not only whether marriages remain intact but whether counselling protects safety, privacy, dignity, communication and mutual respect.

**Table 5. Practical implications for an integrated psychosocial counselling system**

| Domain | Indigenous contribution | Professional contribution | Safeguard |
|---|---|---|---|
| Access | Trusted elders, family and community entry points | Referral pathways and accessible services | Voluntary participation |
| Premarital preparation | Cultural expectations, family history, communal obligations | Structured communication, consent and relationship skills | Gender equality and individual choice |
| Conflict mediation | Culturally legitimate dialogue and reconciliation | Assessment, emotional regulation and evidence-informed techniques | Screen for violence/coercion before mediation |
| Family involvement | Social support and accountability | Systemic assessment and boundary-setting | Confidentiality and consent |
| Complex cases | Recognition and community support | Clinical, medical, legal or trauma-informed intervention | Immediate referral when risk exceeds community competence |

For policy and programme design, this means evaluation should measure more than marital continuity. A marriage that remains intact under coercive pressure is not necessarily evidence of successful counselling. More appropriate indicators include communication quality, perceived fairness, emotional safety, voluntary engagement, confidentiality, access to appropriate referral and the couple's own assessment of progress. These indicators are consistent with the dissertation's wider integrated framework, which treats cultural responsiveness and professional ethics as complementary rather than competing requirements.

## 8. Study Limitations

Several limitations qualify the interpretation. The design was cross-sectional, so the findings describe perceptions and associations rather than causal effects of traditional counselling on marital outcomes. Questionnaire measures were perception-based rather than independent clinical assessments of relationship functioning. The sample was predominantly male, urban and relatively well educated, and therefore may not represent every ethnic, geographic or socioeconomic community in South Sudan. Traditional practices are diverse across Dinka, Nuer, Bari, Shilluk, Zande, Murle and other communities; the article intentionally avoids presenting one uniform 'South Sudanese tradition'. Open-ended responses varied in detail, and thematic percentages reflect coded mentions rather than

mutually exclusive categories. Finally, the psychological mapping is interpretive: theoretical parallels do not establish that indigenous counsellors consciously apply formal psychological theories.

## 9. Conclusion

Indigenous marriage counselling in South Sudan is best understood as a psychosocial system operating at the intersection of culture, family, behaviour, emotion and social regulation. The empirical evidence shows strong recognition of traditional leaders, elders, family participation, cultural values and reconciliation. It also shows that respondents associate successful marriage with psychological and relational resources—respect, communication, trust, cooperation, commitment and social support.

The article's main contribution is to make the mechanisms of this system explicit. Social Learning Theory illuminates modelling and intergenerational transmission; Family Systems Theory explains the wider network in which marriage is embedded; Attachment Theory highlights trust and emotional security; Cognitive Behavioural Theory clarifies the role of appraisal and response patterns; and Ecological Systems Theory situates marital life within economic, cultural and institutional environments. Together, these perspectives show that indigenous counselling does more than preserve custom: it can socialise, contain, mediate, regulate and restore.

Yet cultural legitimacy is not sufficient evidence of safety or effectiveness in every case. Confidentiality, consent, gender equality and safeguarding must define the limits of community-based marital regulation. Violence, coercion, severe psychological distress and serious rights violations require professional and, where appropriate, medical or legal intervention. The most defensible direction is therefore selective integration: preserve indigenous mechanisms that promote dignity, communication, support and non-violent reconciliation, while adding professional competence, confidentiality, structured psychological skills and clear referral boundaries.

## Declarations

Ethical considerations: The source study reports voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, respect for cultural values and avoidance of harm. No ethical approval/reference number is reproduced in the dissertation because an officially issued number was not supplied in the manuscript.

Conflict of interest: No conflict-of-interest statement was supplied in the source dissertation; this should be confirmed by the author at submission.

Data availability: The article is based on the completed dissertation dataset and qualitative responses. Any public sharing of participant-level data should follow the consent and confidentiality conditions of the original study.

Funding: No external funding statement was supplied in the source dissertation; this should be confirmed by the author at submission.

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