

# Family System Theory as a Counselling Strategy for Improving Marital Satisfaction Among Ghanaian Couples: Implications for Counselling

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## Abstract

Marriage is contracted between two individuals. Their efforts to make the marriage work is supported by members of their families be it nuclear or extended. In assisting the spouses to achieve marital satisfaction, counsellors fall on theories. One of such theories is the family system theory. The theory sees the spouses as a unit and to achieve marital satisfaction counsellors should treat the unit not the individuals per se. The theory has been used many regards to assist married people to improve their marriages. It was concluded that the theory can effectively be used in the Ghanaian context.

## Introduction

Marriage can be described as a union between two biologically unrelated female and male who live together and seek to derive benefits from such union such as sexual gratification, love, companionship among others and also use such a union as a legitimate means to procreate (Abra, 2001). Acknowledging that marriage is a basic institution in every society Nukunya (1992) on his part disclosed that despite the universality of marriage there is no accepted definition for it. He however cited one of the often quoted definitions as contained in the official handbook of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain as “a union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are recognized as a legitimate off-spring of both parents.” (p. 23).

Marriage is a social union or legal contract that establishes rights and obligations between the spouses, between spouses and their children, and between the spouses and their in-laws (Haviland, 2011). The institution of marriage was traditionally a union between a man and a woman but currently, some countries have accepted same sex marriages and even legalized them (Akuamoah, 2013).

## Marital Satisfaction as a Concept

A uniform definition for marital satisfaction is a herculean one owing to the fact that what one perceives as satisfying in marriage is somewhat different from one person to another. From a relativistic point of view as posited by Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1988), a satisfying marriage is the one in which rewards to both partners are greater than the cost and it is preferable to any other alternative. Marital satisfaction is the level of commitment a person has towards his or her marriage and spouse. When looking at marital satisfaction it is important to examine those factors that help or hinder satisfaction. Integral factors involved in marital satisfaction include communication and spousal support.

John Gottman, a leading researcher in the field of marriage, describes key criteria that can lead to dissatisfaction in a marriage as “the four horsemen,”; criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Gottman & Silver, 1994). Criticism includes an opinion, judgment, or disapproval of what is wrong or bad about a spouse. Contempt is distinguished from criticism by the intention to insult and psychologically abuse a spouse. This includes the use of words and body language and throwing insults at a spouse’s sense of self. Defensive phrases, along with the stance they express, lead to conflict rather than resolution. Thus, defensiveness adds to marital troubles (Gottman & Silver, 1994). Finally, stonewalling frequently occurs when a couple is talking things out. A stonewaller removes him or herself from the discussion by becoming a “stone wall.” It is a powerful act, and “conveys disapproval, icy disdain and smugness” (Gottman & Silver, 1994, p. 5).

Problems become apparent in a marriage when complaints are unacknowledged and a spouse continually repeats the same act that precipitated the complaint (Gottman & Silver, 1994). Perren, Von Wyl, Burgin, Simoni and Von Klitzing (2005) supported this assertion by finding that decreases in communication and sensitivity were a major source of declining satisfaction in a marriage. The quality of communication associated with marital outcomes is continuing to gain evidence over time. When spouses experience strain, it can be assumed that their marital interaction and communication might be primed for more critical comments and blaming (Rogers & White, 1998).

When looking at marital satisfaction, spousal support must be considered. Research has shown that supportive spouses react more positively to one another. “The more satisfied spouses are with their marriage, the more likely they will approach one another in attempts to elicit support, and the more positively each will respond to these requests” (Heffner, Kiecolt-Glaser, Loving, Glaser & Malarkey, 2004, p. 250). Feeling heard

and validated by a spouse helps to increase the support felt by each spouse. Also, as spouses work on trying to improve the marriage, the support they feel may also be increased. Purdom, Lucas and Miller, (2006) individuals who reported higher rates of spousal support were more likely to report higher levels of Marital Satisfaction, fewer symptoms of depression, and more manageable stress levels. As spousal support increases, Marital Satisfaction also increases (Purdom, Lucas & Miller, 2006).

However, what happens to marital satisfaction when one or both spouses are stressed by specific day-to-day responsibilities, child characteristics, or parent-child relationships coupled with age and number of children? When demands external to the marriage are high, even those couples with good coping strategies and skills may find it difficult to exercise those skills effectively (Karney & Bradbury, 2005). "Marriages taking place in more stressful contexts may be more challenging simply due to the increased severity of the obstacles that couples face inside and outside of their marriages" (Karney & Bradbury, p. 173).

The fact remains that for most parents, the role of parents continues despite living separations from the children, yet the empty nest stage has proved to positively affect marital satisfaction (Katz, 2001). These factors found to contribute to a "happy" marriage are by no means the only influences on marital satisfaction. Autonomy and relatedness, otherwise known as an encouraging sense of spousal independence and perceptions of closeness, were found to positively correlate to each other, and more significantly, to overall marital satisfaction. According to Pacey (2004), the important parental stage of childlessness, or the Empty Nest period, proved to positively influence marital satisfaction for both spouses.

In another set of studies, Amstutz-Haws and Mallinckrodt (1996) surveyed 25 heterosexual couples who were 18-30 years old and had been married between 6-13 months on how much they felt they were psychologically detached from their parents and have established themselves as distinct individuals. Each spouse was also asked whether they felt they got along as a couple, whether they were satisfied with the marriage, whether they received enough affection and whether they agreed enough on various issues. A husbands' lack of independence from both his parents was the biggest predictor for both spouses not adjusting very well to the new marriage. Both spouses reported higher levels of adjustment and satisfaction in their marriage when the husbands were free from excessive guilt, anxiety, mistrust, responsibility, inhibition, resentment and anger in relation to their mothers. The couples were also better adjusted in their new marriage when the husband possessed a greater ability to manage and direct practical affairs without the help of his father. Wives' adjustment to marriage seemed to depend on how well the husbands separated from their parents. However, husbands' adjustment to marriage depended on how well both spouses separated from their parents' influence. Amstutz-Haws and Mallinckrodt (1996) also found that a person who marries someone similar to his/her psychological type and interests is much more likely to stay married and be happier with his or her selection.

Marioles (1997) asked 426 married and pre married couples to take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator which measures people's preferences on how they relate to the world. The study then compared each type with each spouses' marital satisfaction. A person can have four different types that determine how to deal with the world. One can be either extraverted or introverted. Extraverted people prefer relating to people in the outer world to relating to the inner world of ideas which introverted people prefer. A sensing person likes to have known facts to make decisions whereas an intuitive person prefers to look for possibilities and relationships that are not apparent to make decisions.

### **Characteristics of Married Couples in Ghana**

In Ghana, marriage is constructed according to the custom of ethnic group from which the couples belong. Generally, marriage in Ghana is recognized as a union between a man and a woman with the knowledge of both families of the bride and the groom. Marriage is usually a group affair which involves not only the immediate relatives of the couple but more distant kin folk. Inquiries are made by both families to ensure the family of the prospective son-in-law or daughter-in-law is respected. Usually violent behaviour, immorality, witchcraft, incurable or contagious diseases, and insanity in a family are not approved. Generally, many Ghanaians prefer a spouse who is hardworking and respectful, peaceful (not violent or do not advocate violence), and of the same or compatible religious background.

The customary rites or marriage ceremony, as practiced by the woman's ethnic group, are performed by the man's head of family, by the father or uncle or any member of the family who is recognized by the community as honourable. Presentation and acceptance of drinks and gifts known as dowry bride wealth signifies the consent of family members to the marriage. It is also a sign or a token of support for the marriage and is used to compensate the parent for the loss of the services of their daughter. The dowry or the bride wealth does not mean that the woman has been sold to the man. This type of marriage is as "engagement" among a number of Ghanaians.

There is also holy matrimonial marriage where couples get married in churches registered under the laws of Ghana as well as ministers or priest who have been gazetted under the laws of Ghana. This is normally referred to as wedding in Ghanaian circles.

According the Ghana Statistical service (2015), most people especially females get married after senior high school. Sixty-three percent (63%) of females marry at the age between 18 and 26. Only a few marry at below 18 years (11%). Again, 68% of Ghanaian men marry between 30 and 40 years. Nineteen percent (19%) of married people are in polygamous marriages. Seventeen (17%) of married people live in the same house with extended families.

In terms of responsibilities, the man is usually seen as the breadwinner of the family. Among many of the communities a responsible married man is the one who works and takes charge of his family. Women on the other hand are expected to be submissive and mostly keep the home and raise the children.

### **Counselling Strategies**

Counselling is the skilled and principled use of relationship to facilitate self- knowledge, emotional acceptance and growth and the optimal development of personal resources (The British Association for Counselling professionals, 2006). The overall aim is to provide an opportunity to work towards living more satisfyingly and resourcefully. Counselling relationships will vary according to need but may be concerned with developmental issues, addressing and resolving specific problems, making decisions, coping with crisis, developing personal insights and knowledge, working through feelings of inner conflict or improving relationships with others. The counsellor's role is to facilitate the clients work in ways that respect the client's values, personal resources and capacity for self-determination.

According to Omotosho, Nyarko-Sampson, Owolabi and Adeoye (2013) counselling strategies are counselling interventions that consist of more respectful and collaborative therapeutic activities tailored to the uniqueness of clients that is consistent with effective counselling. These interventions are the theories that have been propounded and used in marriage counselling by professional and para-professional marriage counsellors. The family system theory is seen as one intervention-driven theory that serves as a counselling strategy for improving marital satisfaction of married people. It serves as an impetus to understanding marriage as a unit with different elements from diverse developmental and psychological levels. The theory has been used to study various marital areas including Olson (1993) on circumplex model of marital and family systems. It also include Akuamoah (2013) on a study entitled "Back to the past: Marriage as friendship". The theory has also been used to assessed family diversity (Olson & DeFrain, 2000).

### **Family Systems Theory**

One of the more recent attempts to utilize theory in the study of leisure and relationship satisfaction utilizes the family systems perspective. Specifically, Zabriskie and McCormick (2001) find the three dimensions of Olson's Circumplex Model (1993) to be particularly appropriate for this area of study. Within Olson's model, family cohesion can be described as the emotional connection between family members, and family adaptability is associated with flexible leadership roles and relational rules. Family cohesion and adaptability are often facilitated through the communication dimension of the model. Leisure activities quite possibly provide the very best opportunity for this necessary communication. It seems that there is much promise in the application of family systems theory to the study of leisure and marital satisfaction. Still, it is clear that some effort needs to be made to find one major theory in the field of family sciences that can deal with the complexities of the relationship between shared leisure and marital satisfaction demonstrated in the literature.

In light of the current knowledge available, the present study examined the levels of several leisure variables in the relationships of couples as related to marital satisfaction. The issue at hand is not one of causality, but rather correlation. Little research has been conducted on the relationship between the two main variables (shared leisure and marital satisfaction) over the course of the family's life. The theory highlighted couples with adolescent children to reveal information on one specific part of the marital journey. As young married couples begin to have children, the time they are able to spend in shared leisure usually diminishes. However, as adolescents are gaining more independence, perhaps their parents are able to once again find more time to dedicate to shared leisure. Further research should expand the knowledge regarding changes in the relationship between leisure and marital satisfaction over time.

### **Basic Assumptions of Family Systems Theory**

The family systems approach is based on the following basic assumptions:

1. Each family is unique, due to the infinite variations in personal characteristics and cultural and ideological styles;
2. The family is an interactional system whose component parts have constantly been shifting boundaries and varying their degrees of resistance to change;
3. Families must fulfill a variety of functions for each member, both collectively and individually, if each member is to grow and develop; and
4. Families pass through developmental and non-developmental changes that produce varying amounts of

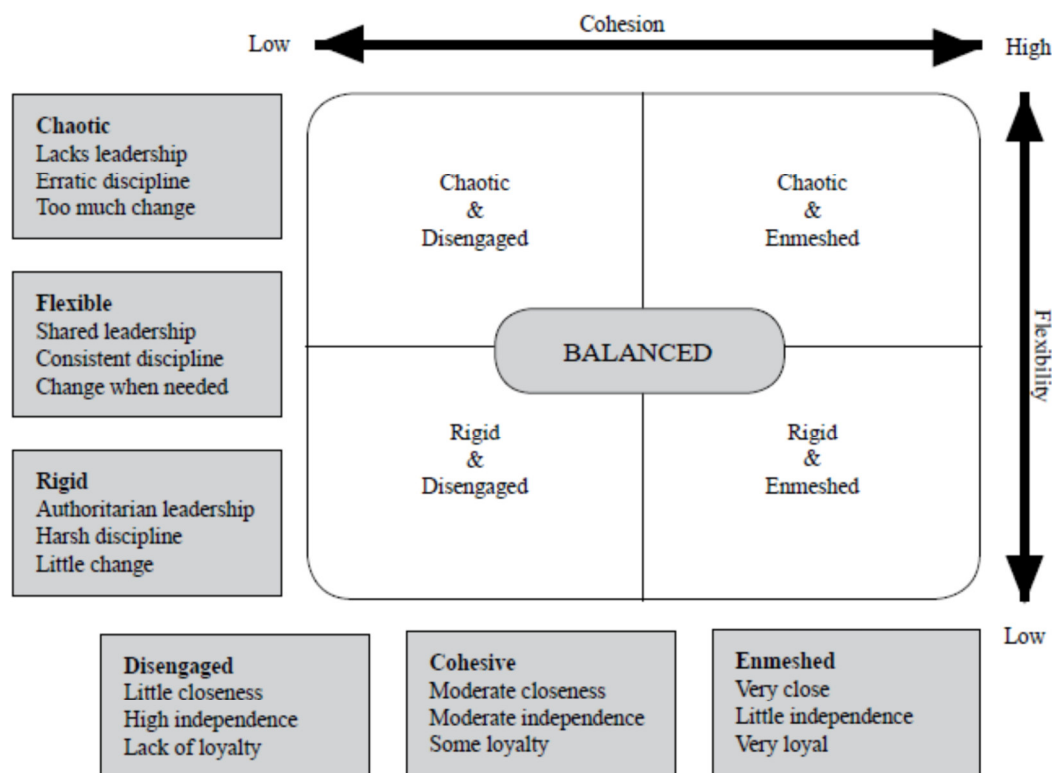
stress affecting all members.

### **Family Systems Model**

Olson's circumplex model, illustrated in Figure 1, assumes that the dimensions of cohesion and flexibility are conceptually and empirically distinct, yielding a two-dimensional assessment of family functioning (Olson & Defrain, 2002). This model also posits that balanced levels of cohesion and flexibility are most adaptive, while very high or very low levels are associated with problematic functioning (Olson, 2011). Cohesion is defined as emotional closeness and affection between family members. It ranges from low (disengagement), in which family members do not get along, seldom perform activities together, and tend to solve problems on their own, to high (enmeshment), where family members are overly dependent on each other and feel pressured to spend excessive time together. Flexibility refers to the consistency of roles, rules, and expectations within the family. It ranges from high (chaos), where the family is disorganized, lacks leadership, and fails to accomplish everyday tasks, to low (rigidity), where the family has inflexible rules and excessive consequences for deviation from them (Olson, 2011). The circumplex model of family functioning model has been extensively evaluated in over 1,200 studies and is widely supported empirically (Kouneski, 2002).

Specifically, research has shown that families with identifiable problems—such as families of sex offenders (Carnes, 1989), families with mentally ill or substance abusing members, and the families of juvenile delinquents (Finzi-Dottan, Cohen, Iwaniec, Sapir, & Weizman, 2003; Roderick, Henggler, & Hanson, 1986)—report more extreme unbalanced levels of cohesion (either enmeshment or disengagement) and flexibility (rigidity or chaos), as compared to families that do not have these problems. Unbalanced family functioning has also been correlated with lower family satisfaction and poorer communication within the family (Olson & Defrain, 2002). Moreover, unbalanced family functioning has been related to insecure attachment styles (Finzi-Dottan et al., 2003), which may give rise to interpersonal styles characterized by ineffective interpersonal skills and emotional dysregulation.

Insecure attachment styles have been shown to relate to the quality of family relationships (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 2002; Davila & Bradbury, 2001) and to negative, relationship-damaging behaviors during dyadic interaction tasks (Collins & Feeney, 2000). The vast majority of research on the circumplex model has utilized majority-culture American and European samples, and the relevance of the model and its theoretical assumptions to other cultures remain unclear (Kouneski, 2002). A review of the limited cross-cultural research available suggests that the circumplex model implicitly assumes that the Western values of autonomy and freedom are universally beneficial for families; however, other cultures may accept, or even promote, extreme family togetherness (enmeshment) or role rigidity (Kouneski, 2002; Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1982). For example, research has indicated that families in Asian cultures tend to emphasize interdependence, harmony, and mutual obligations, and that this more enmeshed and rigid style is normative within this context (Lee & Mock, 2006). Pirutinsky & Kor (2013) extended this work and explored the relevance of the circumplex model to family functioning among Orthodox Jewish families in Israel. Establishing the organization of problem and non-problem families within this unique religious culture has implications for assessment, treatment, and research within this population. The study may also inform the broader literature regarding cultural variability of adaptive family structures.



**Figure 1: Olson's Circumplex Model of Family Functioning**  
 Source: Pirutinsky & Kor, (2013).

### Key Concepts of Family Systems Theory

Bowen proposes eight interlocking concepts as cited by Nicholas and Schwartz, (2001). These concepts are:

#### 1) Differentiation of Self

Depicted with a theoretical scale, differentiation of self describes how people cope with life's demands and pursue their goals on a continuum from most adaptive to least. Variations in this adaptiveness depend on several connected factors, including the amount of solid self, the part of self that is not negotiable in relationships. For example, a person with well thought out principles enhances solid self, and will not be swayed by fads or opinions. A person with less solid self will feel more pressure to think, feel, and act like the other. This fusion between two people generates more chronic anxiety as one becomes more sensitive to what the other thinks, feels, and does. Acute anxiety also plays a role. A fairly well differentiated person can develop symptoms under acute anxiety, but will probably return to adaptive functioning soon after. A less differentiated person may live in a stress free environment and therefore function quite well for long periods of time.

#### 2) Triangles

Triangles are the basic molecule of human relationship systems. A two-person dyad becomes unstable once anxiety increases. Then, one or both members of the dyad usually pulls in a third person to relieve some of the pressure. In a three-person system, anxiety has more places to go, and the relationship where it originated experiences some relief. When the three-person system can no longer contain the anxiety, it involves more people and forms a series of interlocking triangles. Bowen researchers consider triangles a natural function of living systems. Triangles can have either negative or positive outcomes depending on how their members manage anxiety and reactivity. Bowen postulated that if one member of the triangle remains calm and in emotional contact with the other two, the system automatically calms down. On the other hand, with enough stress and reactivity, members lock into a triangular position, and develop symptoms.

#### 3) Nuclear Family Emotional Process

The nuclear family manages differentiation and anxiety with conflict, distance, over and underfunctioning reciprocity, which at extremes can lead to dysfunction in a spouse, and child focus. People engaged in conflict fight, argue, blame and criticize each other. Partners who distance tend to be emotionally unavailable and to avoid potentially uncomfortable, though important, topics. Reciprocity in relationships occurs when one person takes on responsibilities for the twosome. The two people slide into overadequate and underadequate roles. This can become so extreme that one partner becomes incapacitated either with an illness or a general lack of direction. Child focus is discussed more under the next concept.

#### **4) Family Projection Process**

The fixed triangle is evident in the family projection process, where parents in a nuclear family focus anxiety on a child and the child develops problems. Parents then usually attempt to get the child to change or they ask an expert to "fix" the child. Experienced Bowen family systems consultants report that when parents can instead manage their own anxiety and resolve their own relationship issues, the functioning of the child automatically improves.

#### **5) Emotional Cut-off**

An extreme distancing posture constitutes the concept of emotional cutoff, where family members discontinue emotional contact with each other. This has significant implications for the functioning of future generations, as the emotional family unit is severed in such a way that anxiety has fewer places to be absorbed in the extended family system. Consequently, chronic anxiety increases. People look for other relationships to substitute for the cut off relationship. These new relationships intensify and people become vulnerable to symptoms.

#### **6) Multigenerational Transmission Process**

Differentiation of Self is transmitted through the multigenerational transmission process. This concept describes patterns of emotional process through multiple generations. It offers a way of thinking about family patterns that goes beyond a dichotomy of genes versus environment. One of the ways family patterns are transmitted across generations is through relationship triangles.

#### **7) Sibling Position**

Sibling position, a concept which Bowen adopted from the research of Walter Toman, affects variation in basic and functional levels of differentiation as well. Oldest, youngest, and middle children tend toward certain functional roles in families, influenced also by the particular mix of sibling positions in it and the sibling positions of parents and other relatives.

#### **8) Societal Emotional Process**

The last concept Bowen developed is societal emotional process. It refers to the tendency of people within a society to be more anxious and unstable at certain times than others. Environmental stressors like overpopulation, scarcity of natural resources, epidemics, economic forces, and lack of skills for living in a diverse world are all potential stressors that contribute to a regression in society.

#### **Application of Family System Theory in the Ghanaian Context**

The family is seen as a tree with branches where each branch contributes to the overall growth of the tree. The family is seen as a unit or a system. The nuclear family is seen as a small system with the spouses and children if any. The extended family is a much bigger family including the families of both spouses. In a nuclear family system a counsellor is expected to facilitate the marital relationship using either an individual counselling approach or couple counselling approach. Individual counselling approach in family system is counselling each spouse separately or independently. Couple counselling is counselling both spouses together. The husband and wife are treated together while the counselor pays attention to the customs and norms of the community of the spouses.

In the extended family system, individual and couple approaches maybe still effective. However, since that system of family goes beyond the spouses some other family members may be involved the counselling process. When other people are involved in the counselling process, then group-oriented counselling is ideal.

#### **Advantages of Using Family System Theory**

The family system theory has been found to possess the following advantages over other marriage theories:

1. Theory has brought about insight into how the family contributes to the problem of individuals especially in marriage (Essuman, nd).
2. It is economical in the sense that the counsellor dealing with two or more individuals saves time.
3. Due to its social nature, it makes possible for interpersonal issues to be dealt with. (eg. Conflicts resolution).
4. The inherent characteristic of the family being together in one location allows the uses of assignments. In other words, what couples learn or parents and children learn, can be practices at home and reported at the next session.
5. Some scholars recommend family system theory combines aspects of developmental stage and psychological development. For example Gold (2014) in assessing the importance of family systems theory in masters-level school counseling curriculum opined that the way a person may live in a family system depends on the kind of his or her structure of the mind (id, ego and superego) that comes to play with an issue and these are mostly affected by the training the person went through at the five psychosexual stages of Sigmund Freud.

One criticism of the family system theory is that it concentrates on the group. It does not border about specific individuals whose problems may need individual counselling or examine problems due to

developmental stages (Pirutinsky & Kor, 2013).

### **Conclusion: Counselling Implications of Family System Theory**

The family system theory can effectively be used to improve the marital satisfaction of married people. There are some implications and best practices arising from suggestions that family system theory be used as a counselling strategy for improving marital satisfaction. The major among such implications are highlighted as follows:

1. Counsellors should know that to bring about a change requires disturbing the equilibrium in the family. This should happen before a new equilibrium with positive changes is restored.
2. A change brings about disturbances in the family system, thus families which are to undergo changes in counseling (changes in attitudes, values, behavior) may resist and so remain in the status quo. Counsellors should therefore clients to accept this change.
3. Being at equilibrium does not mean the family is healthy. Counsellors should be aware of this fact; that malfunctioning families can also be in homeostasis. This may be used to a pattern of behaving, attitudes, values (of speaking-blaming, accusing) which stays with them. Changing brings resistance. It is the same with healthy families.

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