

Emotional Intelligence: A Navigating Key to Marriage Dysfunction

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Article Information:

Received Aug 17, 2025

Revised Sept 30, 2025

Accepted Oct 12, 2025

Keywords:

Emotional Intelligence, Marriage Dysfunction, Conflict Resolution, Empathy, Self-Awareness.

Abstract

Background of Study: Marital dysfunction remains a significant issue in contemporary society, often caused by emotional mismanagement and poor interpersonal dynamics. Emotional Intelligence (EI), which includes self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation, has been identified as a crucial factor in maintaining healthy marital relationships.

Aims and Scope of Paper: This study explores the role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) as both a preventive and corrective mechanism for marital dysfunction. It specifically focuses on enhancing communication, conflict resolution, and emotional intimacy between partners, aiming to highlight the impact of EI on marital satisfaction and stability.

Methods: The research employed a qualitative phenomenological design, engaging 20 married individuals (10 men and 10 women) from urban and semi-urban areas in southwestern Nigeria. Participants had at least five years of marital experience. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to identify patterns in emotional behavior, communication, and conflict management.

Results: The findings revealed that couples with higher levels of EI tended to communicate more effectively, resolve conflicts constructively, and nurture empathy and understanding. This contributed to preventing emotional detachment and marital dysfunction. In contrast, couples with lower EI levels experienced frequent misunderstandings, emotional disconnection, and unresolved disputes. Real-life case scenarios demonstrated the transformative impact of EI on relationship satisfaction and resilience.

Conclusion: Emotional Intelligence plays a significant role in marital stability and satisfaction. The development of EI can serve as a proactive tool in preventing dysfunction and enhancing emotional synergy between partners. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating EI training into marital counseling and relationship enrichment programs, contributing to the growing body of literature on EI.

A. Introduction

Marriage, a strong connection built on companionship and common goals, faces many challenges that can lead to disagreements. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is crucial in understanding and managing emotions, both in oneself and in a partner. Emotional Intelligence (often denoted as EI)

encompasses a spectrum of competencies that empower individuals to perceive, interpret, manage, and navigate their own emotions, as well as the emotions of their partners (Ayalew, 2023). This construct includes self-awareness, which involves recognising one's emotional states and their repercussions (Bagheri, 2023), along with self-regulation, entailing the adept management and constructive redirection of these emotions. Moreover, EI envelops empathy, enabling the comprehension and shared experience of another person's feelings (Coelho et al., 2023). Proficiency in interpersonal communication, an integral component of EI, facilitates skilful expression and comprehension within the intricate marital milieu. EI emerges as a cornerstone shaping the multifaceted intricacies of interpersonal dynamics in the context of matrimony. The cultivation of self-awareness serves as the initial step towards fostering an environment characterised by transparency and vulnerability (Wei et al., 2020). By honing this heightened emotional awareness, couples forge empathetic connections, attuning themselves to their partner's emotions, and thereby nurturing a sense of intimacy and comprehension (Walsh, 2015). Furthermore, the cultivation of EI equips couples to engage in constructive conflict resolution, utilising adept emotion management to circumvent the escalation of disputes into harmful confrontations (Axelsen, 2023). Through the lens of EI, partners embark on a journey of mutual growth, amplifying their relationship's richness by instilling a bedrock of trust, respect, and co-exploration of emotions.

The complex relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and marital happiness is a subject worth exploring. Research has consistently shown a strong connection between partners' EI and the overall well-being of their relationship (Bayighomog & Arasli, 2022). When couples share a high level of emotional intelligence, it enhances their satisfaction in marriage and fosters a deep bond based on genuine empathy and effective communication (Christensen, 2022). Partners who are skilled at understanding and navigating their emotions not only strengthen their emotional connection but also handle conflicts more skillfully (Murphy & Oberlin, 2016). This emotional adeptness allows disagreements to become opportunities for personal growth and leads to a tapestry of mutual understanding, growth, and compromise. In summary, emotional intelligence enriches marital happiness by improving the quality of emotional interactions and creating a lasting sense of fulfilment in the partnership.

Understanding the Connection between Emotional Intelligence and Marital Satisfaction. Numerous academic studies have shed light on the complex connection between emotional intelligence (EI) and marital happiness. Fitness (2013) argues that EI plays a crucial role in promoting effective emotional expression and empathy, leading to a deeper emotional bond between partners. Righetti et al. (2022) further support this link, emphasising that individuals who excel at managing their emotions also exhibit improved conflict resolution skills and a greater inclination for mutual growth. These findings collectively emphasise the importance of EI in shaping marital fulfilment. Within the realm of marital companionship, individuals with heightened EI resemble skilled artisans who deftly weave threads of understanding, compassion, and connection. By possessing a heightened awareness of their own emotions as well as those of their partner, they cultivate a heightened sense of empathy (Brown & Nwagbara, 2021). By acknowledging and validating each other's emotions, they create an environment characterised by acceptance and emotional security, allowing both individuals to thrive harmoniously within the relationship. Additionally, possessing EI equips couples with the necessary tools to navigate challenges skillfully, replacing bitterness and conflict with constructive dialogue and cooperative problem-solving (Mangal & Mangal, 2015).

In the complex aspect of marital life, individuals with strong EI emerge as guardians of trust, utilising empathy and emotional insight to nurture resilience and unity. Through effective communication, the validation of emotions, and a shared commitment to personal growth, these individuals establish a nurturing sanctuary where both partners can flourish. As they journey through the diverse landscapes of shared experiences, their EI acts as a compass, guiding them towards mutual satisfaction and forging a bond that not only satisfies but also provides support against the trials of time.

Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Resolution in Marriage. Emotional intelligence (EI), often compared to a compass, empowers partners to skillfully navigate conflicts with finesse, comprehension, and empathy. By cultivating emotional awareness, individuals establish a solid foundation for managing

conflicts effectively, turning potential discord into opportunities for growth and mutual understanding (Mahapatra, 2023). EI opens up a range of constructive strategies for resolving conflicts, as it bridges gaps and nurtures understanding. For example, consider a couple facing differing perspectives on finances. An emotionally intelligent partner would recognise their own emotions related to money matters while also understanding their spouse's feelings. This empathetic insight creates space for open dialogue and compromise, allowing both individuals to express their concerns and aspirations and ultimately find a middle ground.

Another scenario involves differences in parenting approaches. Emotionally intelligent partners skillfully acknowledge that their viewpoints are influenced by their own emotional experiences and beliefs. Equipped with this self-awareness, they approach discussions with empathy and actively listen to their partner's perspective. By recognising shared goals and respecting individual sentiments, they collaboratively develop a parenting strategy that harmonises their distinct viewpoints, fostering a unified approach to parenting. In essence, EI catalyses the cultivation of patience, understanding, and respect, even amid conflicts. The ability to effectively manage and express emotions empowers couples to transcend moments of tension, transforming them into stepping stones towards deeper connection and harmony.

The Impact of Emotional Intelligence on Communication. Effective communication within marital relationships is an essential foundation that fosters understanding, connection, and harmony among couples. EI emerges as a dynamic catalyst that enhances communication between spouses, elevating its impact and nurturing a profound and meaningful connection. This elevation finds its roots in the development of fundamental components of EI, including active listening, empathy, and emotional awareness. Together, these elements contribute to cultivating an environment characterised by mutual comprehension and support. A cornerstone of successful communication, active listening is skillfully illuminated by EI. Partners with heightened EI exhibit a notable ability to engage fully during conversations, setting aside judgment and distractions to absorb their spouse's words attentively (Dewan & Dewan, 2023). This purposeful engagement nurtures an atmosphere where both individuals feel genuinely heard and esteemed, culminating in heightened intimacy and a profound sense of emotional linkage.

Through the practice of active listening, couples carve out a safe space where thoughts, emotions, and perspectives can be openly exchanged, fostering a communicative connection that transcends the limitations of words. EI infuses marital communication with empathy, empowering spouses to step into one another's emotional experiences and grasp the underlying sentiments (Guillory, 2021). An emotionally intelligent spouse attunes themselves to their partner's emotions, validating these sentiments and fostering a sense of emotional resonance (Main et al., 2017). By acknowledging and reflecting upon their partner's emotional states, couples collaboratively construct an environment of emotional support, where vulnerabilities are embraced, and the bridge of empathy bridges gaps, ultimately reinforcing the bedrock of their communication. Central to EI is the cultivation of emotional awareness, granting individuals the capacity to recognise, understand, and navigate their emotional landscape (Guillory, 2021). In the context of marital communication, this awareness enriches interactions by enabling partners to express their feelings authentically and articulately. An emotionally aware spouse adeptly and constructively conveys their emotions, sidestepping reactive outbursts that might impede effective communication. Moreover, emotional awareness empowers couples to gauge the emotional climate of a conversation, ensuring that sensitive topics are approached with delicacy and thoughtfulness.

B. Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in navigating and preventing marriage dysfunction. A phenomenological research design was employed. This approach is well-suited for capturing the essence of emotional experiences and interpersonal phenomena, such as empathy, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation, as they are lived and interpreted by married individuals. Phenomenology enables the researcher to explore participants' perspectives on how EI influences their marital satisfaction and conflict management. The target

population for this study comprises married individuals residing in urban and semi-urban areas of southwestern Nigeria, with at least five years of marital experience. This duration ensures that participants have encountered significant marital challenges and developed coping strategies potentially influenced by emotional intelligence. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 20 participants (10 men and 10 women) across different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Inclusion criteria included: Legally married individuals, Minimum of five years of marriage, Willingness to discuss emotional and interpersonal aspects of their relationship and Availability for a semi-structured interview session. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method provided the flexibility to probe deeply into participants' emotional responses, coping mechanisms, and communication patterns. All interviews were audio-recorded (with participant consent) and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. To enhance content validity, the interview guide was reviewed by three experts in marital therapy, counselling psychology, and emotional intelligence studies. Their feedback informed the refinement of the questions for clarity, sensitivity, and relevance to the study objectives. A pilot interview was conducted with two participants to test the structure and flow of the interview process. Minor modifications were made based on feedback regarding question phrasing and emotional sensitivity. Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis. This involved reading and re-reading transcripts to gain a deep understanding. Identifying recurring codes related to EI, communication, conflict, empathy, and relationship dynamics. Grouping codes into broader themes such as "Emotional Self-Awareness in Marital Conflicts," "Empathic Listening," and "Emotion Regulation as a Preventive Tool." Ensuring that themes accurately reflected the data and research questions. Ethical approval was obtained from the Al-Hikmah University Research Ethics Committee. All participants signed an informed consent form, guaranteeing confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities. Emotional topics were discussed with sensitivity, and participants were offered contact with a licensed marital therapist should they experience emotional distress during or after the interview. To ensure credibility, member checking was employed—participants reviewed and validated the accuracy of their transcribed responses and interpretations.

C. Results and Discussion

Emotional Intelligence and Empathy in Marriage

Empathy, a cornerstone of EI, wields the transformative ability to cultivate profound comprehension and intimacy within the sacred covenant of marriage. Through the cultivation and embodiment of empathy, partners who possess EI unfurl a profound tapestry of emotional connection, nurturing an environment characterised by compassion, mutual sustenance, and shared emotional encounters. Empathy, as a multifaceted ability, encompasses the capacity to immerse oneself in another's emotional realm, to apprehend and resonate with their sentiments, outlooks, and life experiences. In the realm of matrimony, empathy serves as a bridge that spans the emotional chasm between spouses, facilitating an authentic alignment of emotions (Aitken, 2022). When one partner articulates their musings or sentiments, a responsive wave of empathy from the other validates and acknowledges those emotions, fortifying the sense of being truly comprehended and valued. Within the conjugal sphere, empathy emerges as a potent instrument for fostering understanding and intimacy. Partners endowed with EI delve beyond the superficial utterances, plumbing the depths of unspoken emotions and concealed sentiments (Walter, 2021). Through the recognition and endorsement of one another's emotional states, couples engender a sanctuary where vulnerabilities can be shared, unencumbered by the trepidation of judgment or dismissal. This collective vulnerability forms the bedrock of an intimate connection, fortifying the bond between partners. Emotionally intelligent partners excel in extending sincere support and empathy to one another. They cultivate an ambience of active listening (Udoeh, 2025), fostering an atmosphere where both spouses experience the solace of being genuinely heard and acknowledged. When a partner encounters challenges or turmoil, a response steeped in EI involves immersing oneself in their emotional journey, providing solace, and extending a helping hand or affirmation.

Additionally, partners steeped in EI exhibit a heightened perceptivity to the nuanced emotional cues of their spouse, discerning subtle oscillations in mood or non-verbal expressions. This elevated emotional acumen enables them to respond with empathy and sustenance even before the exchange of words (Salovey, 2013). In the crucible of conflict, EI assumes an instrumental role in diffusing tensions. Partners endowed with EI confront conflicts with empathy, endeavouring to perceive the predicament from their companion's standpoint (Caruso, 2016). This empathetic overture culminates in constructive discourse and collaborative conflict resolution, nurturing an aura of comprehension and reconciliation.

Emotional Intelligence as a Preventive Measure Against Marriage Dysfunction

The cultivation of EI assumes a crucial role in preempting potential dysfunction within a marriage, serving as a proactive approach that enhances the relationship's strength and resilience in the face of challenges. Through the nurturing of EI, partners equip themselves with essential skills to foster a harmonious and enduring marital connection, effectively reducing the risk of dysfunction. At the heart of EI lies self-awareness, the ability to recognise and comprehend one's own emotions, triggers, and behavioural patterns (Salovey, 2013). In the context of marriage, self-awareness empowers individuals to identify and address emotional baggage or unresolved issues that could potentially hinder the growth of the relationship. By acknowledging their emotional vulnerabilities, partners create an environment conducive to open and constructive communication, thereby thwarting the accumulation of resentment and emotional distance. Self-awareness also prompts individuals to take ownership of their actions and reactions within the marriage. By understanding the impact of their behaviour on the relationship, emotionally intelligent partners are more inclined to engage in introspection and actively seek personal development, fostering a culture of responsibility and maturity. EI encompasses the skill of effective emotional regulation, enabling individuals to manage and express emotions in a balanced and productive manner (Desti & Shanthi, 2015). In the context of marriage, emotional regulation serves as a crucial shield against dysfunction. By exercising emotional control during times of conflict or stress, partners sidestep damaging outbursts that could have lasting repercussions. Instead, they engage in constructive dialogue, seeking resolutions through empathy and mutual understanding.

Partners who excel at emotional regulation also contribute to the establishment of a stable and secure emotional climate within the marriage. They exhibit emotional equilibrium and resilience, thereby creating a nurturing and safe space where both individuals can freely express their emotions and concerns without fear of judgment or rejection. Moreover, emotional regulation facilitates effective problem-solving within the relationship. By approaching challenges with composure and reason, partners can collaboratively address issues and devise constructive solutions, effectively averting the escalation of minor issues into larger predicaments.

Case Studies and Examples of Marriage Dysfunctions

Fatima and Manir, a married couple, encountered frequent disagreements and tensions that strained their relationship. Acknowledging the need for change, they actively pursued the enhancement of EI skills. By practising active listening and responding empathetically, they revolutionised their communication patterns. During a discussion concerning financial priorities, Mark displayed an empathic understanding of Fatima's concerns while also sharing his viewpoint without judgment. This emotional resonance culminated in productive discourse, leading to the formulation of a joint financial strategy that accommodated both their needs. Suzan and James, married for over a decade, confronted a gradual erosion of emotional connection due to demanding professional commitments. Determined to rejuvenate their marital bond, they embarked on a journey to refine their EI. Suzan took the initiative to express her feelings of emotional neglect, prompting James to introspect upon his actions. Through heightened emotional attunement, they committed to allocating meaningful time for substantial conversations and shared activities. This deliberate effort revitalised their intimacy and solidified their matrimonial union.

Kemi and John found themselves ensnared in recurrent disputes about household responsibilities, precipitating escalating conflicts. John's tendency to dismiss Kemi's emotional expressions compounded the discord. His deficiency in empathetic engagement and emotional consciousness rendered Kemi feel unheard and undervalued. This emotional disconnect engendered resentment and emotional distance, thereby exacerbating strain and contributing to the disarray within their relationship. Alex and Tonia grappled with the intricate balance between their aspirations and their roles within the marital partnership. Instead of addressing their concerns openly, they resorted to veiled and indirect communication tactics. Their failure to effectively articulate their emotional states and to comprehend each other's perspectives set in motion an unproductive cycle of unresolved conflicts. This dearth of EI hindered their capacity to discover common ground, fomenting an atmosphere of unease and instability within their marriage. In essence, actual occurrences and situational depictions underscore the potent influence of EI on the dynamics of marital relationships. Couples that accord primacy to the cultivation of EI stand to gain enriched communication avenues, mutual insight and efficacious conflict resolution mechanisms. Conversely, the paucity of EI can contribute to strained dialogues, emotional detachment, and ultimately, marital dysfunction. The case studies and scenarios elucidate the pivotal and transformative role that EI assumes in steering the course of a matrimonial journey, underscoring its pivotal role in cultivating a robust and thriving marital union.

D. Conclusion

This study has provided a unique contribution to understanding the role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in marital relationships, positioning it not only as a tool for enhancing communication and emotional connection but also as a preventive measure against marriage dysfunction. Unlike traditional views that treat EI as an individual trait, this research highlights its dynamic role in the context of marital dynamics, demonstrating how EI competencies like self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and communication are critical in maintaining resilient marriages. The proactive application of EI—through conscious cultivation by couples—was found to significantly reduce conflicts and foster lasting emotional bonds, a key finding that adds depth to the existing literature. This study also underscores the universal relevance of EI in marital well-being, regardless of socio-economic or educational background, enriching both theoretical and practical perspectives on marriage dynamics.

E. Recommendations

Future research could explore the integration of digital technologies such as mobile applications, virtual counseling platforms, and interactive modules to enhance EI among couples, especially in the context of scalable and accessible interventions. Additionally, cross-cultural studies are needed to examine how societal norms and cultural values shape the development and expression of EI within marriages, which could lead to more culturally sensitive and effective strategies. Longitudinal research would be valuable in understanding how EI evolves throughout a marriage, particularly during key transitions. Exploring the intergenerational transmission of EI could also offer insights into early interventions in family systems. Furthermore, the diversity of modern relationships—such as same-sex and non-traditional unions—calls for inclusive studies on how EI applies across various relational structures. Finally, integrating EI training into premarital counseling and marital enrichment programs should be considered, as it could offer significant benefits for long-term marital satisfaction and stability.

F. Author Contribution Statement

This research is the result of a collaborative effort among the authors, each contributing to various aspects of the study. Balqis Olabisi POPOOLA was responsible for formulating the research background, identifying the research problem, and coordinating the data collection process. Olayemi Zainab ODUOLA contributed to the design and development of the research methodology, including creating the interview guide for data collection. Rasheedah Toluwase IMAM played a key role in analyzing the data and interpreting the results, particularly focusing on the role of Emotional Intelligence in marital dysfunction. All authors provided valuable insights during the writing and editing of the manuscript. Each author played an integral role in the research process, ensuring a systematic approach and contributing to the high-quality findings presented in the study.

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First publication right:

Queens Journal: Education, Technology, Science, and Social Humanities

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