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Couples counseling in the context of Botswana: Implications for social work counseling

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Abstract

Couples in Botswana, like their counterparts in various countries face numerous challenges that necessitate counseling. The challenges that call for couples counseling is multifaceted and they include relational matters, conflicting cultural beliefs, domestic violence, financial and health issues. However, formal couple counseling is a fairly recent phenomenon in the country. Therefore, there is scarcity of literature on couple counseling in Botswana. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the circumstances that necessitate couples' counseling and the implications for social work counseling in the context of Botswana. The paper also maps the way forward for research, practice and policy.

Keywords: Couples Counseling; Social Work; Botswana

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1. Introduction and background information

Couples counseling is not a new approach to Botswana, it has existed from time immemorial. Some scholars argue that while it may be true that no professional counseling existed traditionally, the concept of counseling has always existed. Traditionally the elders informally counselled younger individuals and couples in the community. Mupedziswa (1998), for example, argued that mothers and grand-mothers for instance, gave counsel to young women on a variety of topics, including how to live peacefully with their husbands; often they intervened in cases of marital fall out, and gave counsel in cases of infertility, etc.

Similarly, fathers and grandfathers counseled young men on responsible parenthood and indeed on a host of other topics. In the majority of instances, it was grandparents that were very much the mainstay of the counseling duties, and they dispensed with these duties admirably. Other than that, community elders too, including chiefs and headmen, were also often involved in counseling people in the villages under their jurisdiction. And yet no specific, written theory was utilized. If any theory trend was used at all in the course of counseling, it was by accident rather than design. While these arrangements worked, it would be foolhardy to pretend the methods were as effective as modern techniques that are based on scientific knowledge and skills. However, there is an increase of services that offer professional or formal couples' counseling in Botswana. The increase in formal and professional counseling is mainly due to the break-up of traditional systems, in particular the extended family network. The decrease in traditional systems of counseling is mainly triggered by such factors as urbanization and modernization as well as the rampant social problems that come with such developments. By and large, the couples counseling role has been taken over by institutions such as public and private social welfare agencies, the church included. Those responsible for counseling couples include professionally trained social workers, psychologists, religious ministers, police officers, health personnel, etc. But this is not to suggest that no informal counseling occurs today. In present day, most communities in Botswana still provide traditional pre-marital counseling to newlyweds and during those sessions, only people who have been married before are allowed to attend the counseling session and offer counseling to the new couples. The process is commonly known as "*Go laya*", and often bears less fruits because it is done under constrained times. couples are often encouraged to consult the elderly relatives such as aunts and uncles whenever they are having conflicts or needing some guidance. They usually approach informal social network members first, and only seek assistance from formal network members after they have exhausted informal network members. The limitation of informal or traditional couples counseling networks is that they are generally biased and gendered. For example, advice and guidance provided to couples is mostly in line with cultural beliefs that emphasizes that married women must always do their best to keep families together and that married women should always submit to their husbands regardless of abusive circumstances that they could be facing. These messages are even implicit in traditional songs that are sung during weddings. One of them is *Senkgapele Mosadi ke mo rekile ka dikgomo* (don't take my wife, I bought her with cattle-bride-price).

It is important to highlight that most clients that seek or initiate formal or professional couples counseling in Botswana are women. By and large a majority of men in the country tend to resist formal or professional couples counseling. Men's reluctance to participate in counseling has been associated with the way they have

been socialized. By and large, men in most parts of Africa are socialized to be strong and not to display emotions. Consequently, they grow up believing that they must be strong, they must not cry, they are capable of solving challenges by themselves, seeking help is a sign of weakness, etc. Some men reject counseling and view it as feminine and label it as a programme for the weaker sex (Baylies and Bujra, 2000; Mmonadibe, 2009).

Although couples are confronted with various challenges, couples counseling has been left largely unexplored in family research in Botswana. A focus on couples counseling is important in present day Botswana because there are many social problems and challenges affecting couples such as high rates of divorce, domestic violence, unemployment, marital conflicts, escalated cohabitation and HIV and AIDS. Existing literature has largely focused on violence against women and HIV/AIDS. As such there is scarcity of literature on couples counseling in Botswana. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the circumstances that necessitate couples' counseling and the implications for social work counseling in the context of Botswana. Issues discussed on this paper are based on the following sources: the scanty literature that exist in the country as well as in the region; reports from newspapers about the different social problems that confront the nation, discussions that the authors had with professionals such as customary court presidents, district commissioners and social workers; interviews that one of the authors held with divorced women and men in 2000. The authors also rely on their extensive experiences of providing services to various child and family welfare agencies in Botswana as well as that of teaching and supervising social work students in fieldwork. Lastly, they also rely on their experience of occasionally providing counseling to couples who seek their assistance.

2. Circumstances that necessitate couples counseling

As mentioned above there are numerous factors that lead couples to seek counseling in Botswana. However, for the purpose of this paper, we shall focus only on a few issues. These are: cohabitation, violence against women, issues related to HIV and AIDS, and cultural factors.

2.1. Cohabitation

A cohabitant is a person who had been living with a partner outside marriage for at least six months (Mokomane, 2004). The six months or more duration criterion was placed on cohabiting unions primarily to leave out episodic and short-term relationships. Some of the factors that lead people to cohabit as opposed to getting married are: economic reasons (i.e. unemployment and cost sharing, rent, men said they had no money to pay bride price, as well as to fund customary marriage negotiations and ceremonies and white weddings); parents' disapproval and lack of cooperation; lack of trust; socio-legal constraints to marriage (i.e. social circumstances that that inhibit a couples' marital prospects lead them to opt for cohabitation instead of marriage. For example, if one of the partners is widowed or has recently divorced, it is usually difficult for their children and / or former in-laws to accept the new partner) and lastly some people cohabit for convenience reasons (largely mentioned by men who did not know how to carry household duties for themselves) (Mokomane, 2004).

2.2. Violence against women

The definition of violence against women is fluid as it encompasses any acts or behaviours that are perpetuated against women and consequently violates their human rights (Ahmed, Rizwan-ur-Rashid, and Ahmed, 2019; Newman, 2019; National Research Council, 1996). Violence against women can occur in public or in private places such the homes or any other secluded areas that makes it hard for others to witness the violence. Violence committed against women includes different kinds of abuse such as denying women access to resources, genital mutilation, sexual, physical and emotional abuse as well as femicide (killing women). Men are the most common perpetrators of violence against women. Violence against women is a worldwide problem and transcends racial, social, economic, religious, and cultural barriers. Many cultures have beliefs, norms, and social institutions that legitimize and perpetuate violence against women. The same acts that would be punished if directed at an employer, a neighbor, or an acquaintance often go unchallenged when directed at women, especially within the family.

In the past several years, incidents of both divorce and violence have been increasing at an unprecedented and alarming rate (More, 2018; Diane, 2016; Maundeni et al., 2009). The worst and brutal kind of domestic violence that continues to take place is femicides /passion killings as some people call them. This refers to incidents where a woman's significant other; either boyfriend or husband decides to kill her. Passion killing is a specifically gendered form of violence because generally, the majority of victims are women.

Numerous researchers (cf. Maundeni, 2015; Moagi-Gulubane, 2003; Mookodi, 2004) have asserted that levels of violence against women are increasing in Botswana. For example, in a study investigating violence among University of Botswana students, Moagi-Gulubane (2003) found that about 59% of the participants reported one or more instances in which they had perpetrated some form of violence against their intimate partner in the preceding year. She noted that the most frequent form of violence among unmarried University of Botswana students who participated in the study was psychological aggression, with almost one-half (49.80%) of the participants reporting having been psychologically abusive to their girlfriends. This high prevalence of psychological aggression should be taken seriously, given that research elsewhere has established that psychological aggression is frequently a precursor and an accompaniment of physical assault in intimate relationships (Follingstad et al., 1990). If psychological aggression is indeed prognostic of physical assault, the high prevalence rate of psychological aggression may be indicative of hidden physical assaults in these intimate relationships. Attention must be focused on this early marker of violence in dealing with the issue of 'passion killings' in Botswana. And couples counseling is one of the major ways of addressing the problem.

Violence against women has been linked to factors such as men's control over women, societal beliefs and practices that condone gender-based violence, women's economic dependence on men as well as men's lack of skills to cope with challenges related to relationships. Different theories have been advanced to explain violence against women in general and intimate partner abuse, love killing or passion killing. The predominant view focuses on the notion that patriarchal societies have direct bearing on violence committed by men against women. However, it seems that there is no clear explanation for the occurrence of violence against women. It is clear that the problem of intimate suicide emanates from a complex manifestation of societal and

personal/individual dynamics – presenting a constant interplay of social-structural as well as individual human agency. As the key agent of socialization and promulgator of human interaction, the society plays a key role in determining cultural norms, values and modes of behavior, including those related to relations between the females and males, as well as condoning or discouraging violence. A study to explore the experiences of evangelical pastors in counseling victims of domestic violence in the United States of America indicates that although domestic violence is usually caused by socio structural factors, victims often blame themselves and have difficulties to get out of the abusive relationships (Zust et al., 2017). This is applicable to Botswana as many of the women often takes a long time to disclose abuse and to get out of abusive relationships, more especially marriage.

2.3. Issues related to HIV/AIDS

The cases that social workers deal with involve individuals, families and communities whose lives had been disrupted by HIV and AIDS, and other illnesses (Malinga and Mupedziswa, 2009). Botswana has the second highest prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS in the world at 37%. Young adults are the most affected by the pandemic and are the ones mostly involved in incidents of gender-based violence. In most cases, women seek HIV-related counseling due to one or more of the following reasons: interest in knowing their status; interest in convincing the counselor to encourage their partners to come for HIV testing; or suspecting that both are at risk of HIV infection. Fewer men than women in Botswana know their status, and usually after the woman tests, and is HIV negative, the husband automatically assumes that he shares the same status with the woman. By and large, men are resistant to test for HIV, yet some are reluctant to practice safe sex (Akinade, 2003).

There are many strategies that have been adopted by both public and private organizations in Botswana such as voluntary counseling and testing centers but HIV and AIDS continue to be a challenge *for many couples in Botswana as a result of migration and mobility* (Maundeni and Ntshwarang, 2016). Some couples can start their relationship or affair while they have already been infected. Others get infected while they are in existing relationships that were initially HIV uninfected. For example, as a result of mobility and migration (which most of the times is a result of employment and economic reasons) people in relationship often find opportunities for infidelity, multiple partners and consequently increases their exposure to HIV infection. Such experiences have generally resulted in more cases of discordant couples in the country. *Couples tend to face several challenges such as stigma and the fact that they need to cope with living together but with different HIV status. An individual with a positive HIV status among the discordant couples has to cope with social stigma. Social stigma implies that the individual with a positive HIV status is often blamed by the society for flawed provenances of blame and responsibility* (Ntshwarang and Malinga-Musamba, 2012) *for discordant HIV status.*

2.4. Cultural factors

Botswana is going through a process of social change. On one hand, some people still cling on to cultural beliefs and practices that prevailed in traditional Tswana society, while on the other hand, they have incorporated modern beliefs and practices. During interviews that one of the authors held with divorced women, it became apparent that beliefs in witchcraft are still prevalent in the country. Several women mentioned that the reason

why their ex-husbands left them was because they were accusing them of witchcraft. The issue of witchcraft is not only common to Botswana as Ashforth (2015) has indicated that accusations of witchcraft among African communities such as Malawi are often consequences of violence. As a result, couples are generally more likely to focus on blaming witchcraft for personal and structural challenges instead of seeking assistance from relevant individuals and trained counselors.

Traditionally, some of the professionals have not viewed counseling as their mainstay and hence view it as incidental to their work. For this reason, they do not give clients sufficient time for counseling, thus making it hard for couples to access counseling services. Some Botswana tend to shun formal counseling and there are several reasons for this. One key reason is that modern day (formal) counseling, as it is known today is alien to them (Ntshwarang and Malinga-Musamba, 2012). Many of the African people find it strange that people can confide in strangers in the hope of solving their personal social issues. In traditional African society people shared their concerns with members of their inner circle such as uncles and aunts and most of the time there are issues that are not supposed to be shared with others, regardless of how bad they are and that often perpetuate problems among couples. Another aspect they find disturbing is the age of the counselors. Age differentials between the counselor and the client pose a major challenge. Often the counselors are young people who have freshly graduated from university or other training institutions, and older folks in particular are not prepared to share their problems with young people as traditionally that is not common. They view the counselor as a child and in African culture, children should be seen but not heard. As a result, couples seeking help often do not openly disclose their genuine challenges to the counselors as a result of doubts of being successfully assisted, leading to a misdiagnosis of issues.

A nagging challenge in couples counseling relates to language barrier. Botswana is composed of various ethnicities that speak differing ethnic languages although Setswana and English are the official languages. There are still tribes in the country that do not understand these two languages. The point therefore is that counselors sometimes find themselves out of their depth - unable to converse with couples that do not speak the official two languages. This may suggest the need to use interpreters. Yet many clients are not comfortable to share their problems through a third party, and understandably so. The fact is use of an interpreter compromises a key element of any counseling relationship – that of confidentiality. Once the principle of confidentiality is compromised, the counseling relationship is almost certainly doomed. Biestek (1957) in his ageless publication “The casework relationship” notes that violation of the confidentiality principle will make it impossible for the worker and the client to establish rapport. Compton and Galaway (1979) corroborate this by adding that while a client’s right to confidentiality might not be absolute (since it might be shared with others at the professional level), the obligation to maintain confidential information still binds all the professionals so involved equally (Mupedziswa, 1998). It might be added that it is one thing to share confidential information at the professional level, and quite another to actually sit in (as an interpreter) while the counseling interview takes place. While many clients might tolerate the former, they will find it difficult to open up in the latter scenario.

3. Implications for social work counseling

This paper has shown that couples in Botswana face several challenges that necessitate counseling, yet professional counseling is not widely in the country. The challenges indicate that couples in Botswana grapple with many challenges that prompt both the private and public sector in the country to strengthen counseling services for couples. According to Meyerson (2008) most couples often seek help after they have struggled with issues and having had fights for a long time, hence they need a counsellor who is able to educate them about the aims of counseling, promote trustworthy environment, set parameters for expression of concerns or feelings as well as setting up the mood for couples be conscious of their roles in the issues troubling the couples. Given the nature of challenges there is a need for social work counsellors to extensively consider a combination of educational and psychological counseling strategies when providing couples counseling. Couples counseling services should focus on enhancing awareness on the influence of structural factors as well as personal characteristics as opportunities and limitations to couples' competency in having healthy and stable relationships that are free of violence.

In addition, social work counselors should be culturally sensitive to couples and make efforts to understand the cultural backgrounds of couples seeking help. "Acquired cultural knowledge and sensitivity makes it possible for the therapist to reframe behaviors and attitudes that are misinterpreted by the couples" (Sullivan and Cottone 2006). The fact that professional counseling is alien to many Africans, also poses another challenge – namely how to utilize the service. In other words, there is often no clarity in terms of expectations – what to expect out of the counseling process. The contention by Bettman et al. (2009) that in Africa, many clients expect counselors to give them answers, rather than create an environment for self-determination, is poignant. The issue is many clients end up treating the counseling relationship the same manner they treat other forms of welfare provision, in which hand-outs are dished out. The client expectation becomes that of a mere recipient of service. There is often failure to appreciate that the counseling process simply provides the client with options, and it is for them to pick what they consider the best way forward.

The above discussed issues also have implications for staffing of social work counselors in the country. There is shortage of social workers in the country because a single social worker is often assigned multiple roles that are covered within several areas. A majority of social work counselors work for the government in the social and community development department (SandCD), some work for the ministry of Local Government and Lands – in the Department of Social Services, some for the NGOs such as Child line Botswana, Save our Soul Children's Village, the shelter for Survivors of domestic violence, some work for faith based organizations, some work for international NGOs like UNICEF, others are self-employed running their own companies, while some work for the private sector such as Banks. Those working for the SandCD provide psychosocial (PSS) and material support to people such as orphans and destitutes. The HIV scourge has resulted in many orphans in the country, therefore many social workers who work for the SandCD spend a considerable amount of time assessing, registering and providing material support to orphans. As such they have little time to provide counseling to clients. Furthermore, social workers are not found in some areas of the country, therefore sometimes one social worker can cover several small villages. Destitutes are another group of people that social workers spend time helping. In 2003, the destitute policy was revised to make it

more generous, so currently many people qualify to be registered as destitutes. It is therefore not surprising that social workers spend a lot of time assessing, registering and providing material support to destitutes. In addition, the introduction of school fees in government secondary schools has increased social workers' load of assessing students who could be exempted from school fees. This further eats on the time that they could be spending on the provision of PSS.

The issues discussed above are diverse and considerable and therefore require the government to increase the number of social workers employed in the public sector to ensure that educational efforts to teach people about couples' counseling so as to encourage people to maximize counseling services available to them. Two observations can be made in regard to the current social work counseling services, first the heavy work-load of the very few professional counselors and secondly, related to this, the distances that potential clients would have to travel to get to the nearest counselor. There are just not enough professional counselors available; their offices are often situated too far away; so distance becomes a major deterrent. The workload also tends to affect the quality of services provided. Because of the large numbers of people needing attention, the professional counselors are often reduced to mere clerks. The challenge becomes that of how to dispense with the cases as quickly as possible, without giving each client proper attention. Often, resources do not permit the luxury of following up of cases. Professionals complain of lack of transport to do effective follow-ups. Poor telecommunications compound the challenges. Counselors tend to be hamstrung and are often not able to make home visits to do a thorough analysis of the circumstances of clients. Even in cases where transport may be available, but because some clients' homes are situated in areas with rugged terrain not passable by four-wheel vehicles, the professionals still find themselves powerless to do meaningful follow-ups. Hence misdiagnosis becomes the order of the day.

Social work counselors need to maximize the use of support groups to support couples with similar challenges, such as discordant couples and those experiencing violence to facilitate appreciation of the challenges and the need to embrace couples counseling. This approach is rarely used by social workers who work for the government because of rigid work schedules. However, it is in our view that once the staffing of social work counselors is increased the use of group work is likely to become feasible.

There is a need for social work counselors to establish research informed interventions and programs that can help strengthen knowledge and psychological wellbeing of couples as well as to boost couples' communication styles and relationships. According to Williamson (2014) interventions that focus on prevention and reduction of stress in relationships have the capacity to decrease demand for couples counseling in the later stages of the union. Thus, educational and preventative programs such as pre-marital counseling are needed as they are crucial to reduce risk behaviors that lead to distress and conflicts among couples and consequently will prevent some of the social problems that necessitated the need for couples counseling. Strengthened couples centered preventive program is also able to enhance prevention of risk behaviors, especially those related to the spread of HIV among couples (Desgrées-du-Loû and Orne-Gliemann, 2008)

Cultural factors such as issues of witchcraft indicate that social work need to re-think couples' counseling by considering that some couples may need a social worker competent in counseling couples in intercultural

relationships. Intercultural couples counseling is important as some of the conflicts among couples are caused by inability of individuals to understand the background of their partners. Therefore, intercultural counselors in social work practice should not only analyse couples' issues based on racial differences but should also consider other ethnic issues such as language and communication barriers as well as make efforts to learn from the couples seeking help (Sullivan and Cotton, 2006).

4. Conclusion

As discussed, it is incontrovertible that traditional or informal counseling still plays a critical role particularly in rural areas of Botswana. This is essentially for two reasons: firstly, that many inhabitants have still not appreciated the place and efficaciousness of formal (modern) counseling, and secondly, there will be very few, if any, professional counselors within reasonable distance (Mupedziswa, 1998). It is a truism that several issues such as increased cases of violence against women, cohabitation, HIV and AIDS as well as cultural factors such as witchcraft accusations are some of the common challenges affecting couples in the country. The situation is compounded by the shortage of social work counselors, as demand exceeds supply. Social workers are significant in providing couples counseling because they are the largest professional counselors employed in the public sector and they are deployed to almost all areas in the country including remotest areas. Therefore, such challenges have serious implications for couples counseling such as strengthening educational and preventive programs and interventions that target couples in the country. There is also a need for continuous on the job training for social workers to enhance their couples counseling skills and competency on both cultural and intercultural counseling. Lastly the gaps and challenges discussed in the paper call for empirical research that examines couples' relations, communication styles and the lifestyles of married and unmarried couples in general to establish their needs as well as to develop appropriate interventions to enhance the lives of couples.

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