

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Relationship between premarital counselling and marital success: Perceptions of married Christians in Ghana**

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The period before marriage is extremely critical in determining the success of the marriage. The period allows would-be couples the opportunity to learn more about each other and make informed decisions regarding the marriage. Churches in Ghana have for some years now organized premarital counselling programmes to prepare would-be couples for the realities of marriage and family life. They have obliged members to go through this premarital counselling before the marriage is celebrated in the church. Reports on increasing cases of divorce in Ghana calls for investigation into the role of premarital counselling programmes in marital success. A sample of 300 married men and women were purposively selected for this study. The results showed that there is a significant mean difference between male ( $M=1.24$ ,  $SD=0.16$ ) and female ( $M=1.19$ ,  $SD=0.15$ ) married Christians regarding their perception on the essence of pre-marital counselling. Also, the duration of pre-marital counselling did not significantly affect the effectiveness of premarital counselling given ( $r = 0.016$ ;  $n = 300$ ;  $p > 0.78$ ). Christian married couples held a negative perception of the effectiveness of pre-marital counselling. Based on the findings, it was recommended that churches and other religious bodies continue to stress the importance of pre-marital counselling to the members. Counsellors should be more proactive in giving marital counselling to married people to compliment the pre-marital counselling married people are given.

**Key words:** Premarital, counselling, married, Christians, marital success.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Choosing to marry is a complicated decision. The desire to satisfy one's physical, emotional and social needs is among the important factors that lead to marriage. Preparation for marriage has been a traditional component of family socialisation, supported by religious

and social guidance on mate selection and marital role performance (Silliman and Schumm, 2000). Marriage is an institution ordained by God. Heward-Mills (2005) opined that it is the only institution that was established before sin came into the world. Marriage is the foundation

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of all communities, societies and the nation at large. If marriages do not succeed, there is bound to be problems in society. Marriage, therefore, can be said to be a very important institution and as such should be properly planned and started on the right footing.

There is growing literature linking the quality of pre-marital relationship to marital satisfaction and stability. Some studies have shown that group differences in marital stability and satisfaction can be predicted by the quality of couples' pre-marital relationships (Fowers and Olson, 1986; Larsen and Olson, 1989; Markman et al., 1993). Norvell (2009) noted that getting married without pre-marital counselling is like starting a business or any important venture without preparing. Khulman (2007) opined that most couples just do not realise that good, skill-based pre-marital counselling or classes can reduce the risk of divorce by up to 30% and lead to a significantly happier marriage. A study by Carroll and Doherty (2003) showed that pre-marital counselling can help build a stronger, more successful marriage. The research reviewed 23 studies on the effectiveness of premarital counselling and found that the average couple who participated in a premarital counselling and education programme reported a 30% stronger marriage than other couples. The study also found that premarital counselling programmes were generally effective at producing immediate and short-term gains in interpersonal skills and overall relationship quality.

Premarital counselling helps couples prepare for marriage. It provides a good avenue for learning more about each other which includes developing better communication among couples. Premarital counselling helps to ensure that couples have a strong, healthy relationship, and are given a better chance for a stable and satisfying marriage. It can also help couples identify weaknesses that could become bigger problems during marriage (Ratson, 2015). Premarital counselling is meant to equip couples with problem-solving skills to manage problems that may occur in the future through becoming aware of each other's characteristics. Because of such reasons, premarital counselling programmes are extremely important.

Marriage preparation began with clergy and community counselling and a few college classes prior to World War II, growing into more systematic pastoral counselling and therapy in the two decades after the war (Stahmann and Hiebert, 1987). In recent times, most churches demand would-be couples to compulsorily undergo premarital counselling before their marriages are contracted in church. Christian counselling carries a spiritual dimension, to explore what God says about marriage and how to build a relationship and family on Christian principles (Fickle, 2020).

While many religious denominations have strongly encouraged church members to complete premarital counselling as a stipulation to being married in the faith, the tradition has gone secular (Teal, 2018). The pre-

marital period is one of the critical points for the prevention of serious relationship problems. In many developed countries like England and the United States, couples are encouraged to participate in pre-marital counselling programmes. The effectiveness of these programmes in increasing marital satisfaction has been proven (Stahmann, 2000). In a 2006 study at the University of Denver, Scott Stanley and his colleagues (as cited in Smith, 2013) found that couples who married in a religious setting were seven times more likely to seek out premarital counselling than those who were married in secular settings. This disparity could be partially explained by the counselling requirement put forth by many clergy before they perform marriage ceremonies. For the more than 2,500 respondents in Stanley et al. (2006) study, premarital counselling was also significantly associated with marital satisfaction, but there was no significant distinction between the effectiveness of counselling in religious settings and non-religious settings.

Premarital counselling may greatly improve a couple's chance of a successful marriage. According to researchers such as Stanley et al. (2006) and Teal (2018), participation in premarital education is associated with higher levels of satisfaction and commitment in marriage and lower levels of conflict-and also reduced odds of divorce. These estimated effects were robust across race, income, and education levels, which suggest that participation in premarital education is generally beneficial for a wide range of couples. Thus, it seems wise for would-be couples to consider seeking guidance to explore important and complex issues that are inherent in marriage before they take the vows. In pre-marital counselling, would-be couples are guided to answer important questions that improve their awareness of each other's strengths and weaknesses that may not have been already explored. Through this process, would-be couples explore what behaviours need to change or otherwise. Would-be couples can also decide firmly on whether to continue with the marriage or not based on information gathered. In support of this, research by Siddiqi (1996) in India showed that good, pre-marital counselling can reduce the risk of divorce by up to 30%.

Teal (2018) notes that premarital counselling allows couples an opportunity to improve their relationship and work toward a successful marriage. During premarital counselling, couples are advised to discuss numerous topics, including: Intimacy, affection and sex; Communication skills; Finances and money management; Children and parenting; and Roles in marriage. Often times, people get married believing that it will fulfill their emotional, financial, social, and sexual needs unfortunately these expectations are not always met. When differences and expectations are discussed before marriage, the couple can develop ways to understand as well as support each other after they are married. Early intervention is crucial to reduce the risk of divorce

(Ratson, 2015).

Recently in Ghana, there seems to be an increase in the number of couples who seek counselling prior to marriage. For most churches, it is mandatory to receive premarital counselling. The period usually lasts between three to six months. Although more couples preparing for marriage go for compulsory premarital counselling, there are also increasing reports on divorce cases in the country. For instance, the Ghana Statistical Service (cited in Adjassah, 2015) reported that as at 2014, nearly 600,000 of marriages contracted in the country had collapsed. Additional statistics showed that the divorce rate had increased from 5.4% in 2006 to 6.6% in 2013. This is a matter of concern to the health of the Ghanaian society as healthy marriages create healthy societies (Mrozek and Mitchell, 2017). In view of the rise in divorce cases in Ghana, it is important to investigate the role of premarital counselling in preserving the institution of marriage.

Bogler (2011) stated in a news article that the number of marriages per year was approximately constant whereas the amount of divorces kept increasing. Reasons for the cases of divorce include lack of maturity, inadequate preparedness, poor understanding of marriage itself, incompatibility and lack of compatibility and respect. Also, prospective couples storm into marriage, be it out of love or out of economic reasons, without thinking of the responsibility they are about to take on. Bogler (2011) further opined that the solution to reducing divorces was the offering of good premarital instruction programme. In the opinion of Bogler, lack of adequate knowledge about the partner that one has chosen to marry, and the absence or insufficiency of premarital counselling, contribute a lot towards failed marriages, broken down romantic relationships, and unhappy homes, creating most of the marital tragedies that are so rampant now.

Various researches have been done internationally on issues related to premarital counselling with other variables including marital satisfaction. Such studies include "*Premarital counselling and marital satisfaction among civilian wives of military service members*" by Schumm et al. (1998) and "*Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research*" by Carroll and Doherty (2003). Their findings suggested that premarital prevention programmes are generally effective in producing immediate and short-term gains in interpersonal skills and overall relationship quality. In Ghana, Ansah-Hughes et al. (2015) conducted a study on the perception of married people about premarital counselling in the Techiman Municipality of Ghana. The major finding from the study was that premarital counselling has positive impact on marriages and married people in the Techiman Municipality have positive perception about premarital counselling. Ntim (2014) also conducted a study on the impact of premarital counselling

on marital adjustment among Christian couples in the Cape Coast Metropolis and found that premarital counselling is vital to marital success as it helped participants to know themselves better.

Although some work has been done on premarital counselling with other variables such as marital adjustment, marital satisfaction, internationally and locally, the incidence of divorce is still high. The alarming rate of divorce cases in Ghana calls for investigation into some of the issues that lead to divorce. One of these factors is the provision of effective premarital counselling which will serve as a firm foundation for marriage. If premarital counselling is meant to provide a firm foundation for marriage, how come the divorce rate keeps rising? The study aimed at investigating the perceptions of married Christians on the essence of premarital counselling for marital success. The effect of the duration of premarital counselling on marital success was also investigated. Furthermore, the study sought to investigate the content and effectiveness of pre-marital counselling given to would-be Christian couples in the Accra Metropolis.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the *ex post facto* research design. The population comprised all Christian married men and women in the Accra Metropolis. The population was purposively chosen because the Greater-Accra region is said to be one of the regions with the highest number of divorce cases in the country (Ankrah, 2013). Also, married people in churches were used for the study because churches are much more particular about premarital counselling and therefore a lot of their members are compelled to go through it. A sample of 300 was used for the study. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents based on the fact that they were married and had gone through premarital counselling as well as their willingness to participate in the research.

From a review of related literature, a questionnaire titled, 'Premarital Assessment Inventory' was developed and used to collect data for this study. The inventory had five sections. Section I was on the personal data of respondents which included age, sex, duration of marriage and the personnel from whom they received premarital counselling. Sections II, III, IV and V were structured to seek information on the duration, content, essence and effectiveness of premarital counselling respectively. Two experts in the field of counselling from the University of Cape Coast validated the instrument and all corrections suggested were effected. Cronbach alpha was used to estimate a reliability coefficient of 0.71 from 30 married people in Cape Coast for pilot testing. The information gathered from the data collected was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

## RESULTS

**Research Question 1:** What is the perception of Christian married men and women on the essence of premarital counselling?

This research question aimed at finding out how males

**Table 1.** Perception of Christian married men and women on the essence of premarital counselling.

Gender	N	Mean	SD	T	Df	P
Male	182	1.24	0.16	2.378	298	0.018
Female	118	1.19	0.15			

$p > 0.05$  significant level.

**Table 2.** Correlation (Pearson) of duration of pre-marital counselling and the effectiveness of premarital counselling given to Christian couples in the Accra Metropolis.

Assessment		Knowledge	Time management skills
How long did you see your counsellor?	Pearson correlation	1	0.016
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.78
	N	300	300
Effectiveness of premarital counselling	Pearson Correlation	0.016	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.78	
	N	300	300

\*  $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed).  $R^2 = 0.0$  (0%).

and females perceived the essence of premarital counselling they received. Table 1 presents the results based on t-test analysis.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the gender differences of Christian married people on the essence of pre-marital counselling. There was a statistically significant difference ( $t(298) = 2.378$ ,  $p = 0.018$ ) between males and females on the essence of pre-marital counselling. The null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) was rejected. Therefore, the results show that there is a significant mean difference between the Christian married males ( $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD = 0.16$ ) and females ( $M = 1.19$ ,  $SD = 0.15$ ) regarding their perception on the essence of pre-marital counselling.

**Research Question 2:** How does the duration of pre-marital counselling relate to the effectiveness of premarital counselling given to Christian couples in the Accra Metropolis?

To answer the research question two formulated in this study, the Pearson's Product Moment correlation coefficient was used to test if there is a statistically significant relationship between the duration and effectiveness of premarital counselling given to Christian couples in the Accra Metropolis. In the analysis, the directions and degrees of the relationship between the variables were established. Both variables were continuous and therefore the assumptions of the statistical tool adopted were not violated.

Table 2 shows the results of the Pearson's Product Moment correlation on the relationship between the duration of premarital counselling and the effectiveness of premarital counselling given to Christian couples in the Accra Metropolis. The results on the Table shows a weak

positive relationship between the duration of premarital counselling and the effectiveness of premarital counselling given to Christian couples ( $r = 0.016$ ;  $n = 300$ ;  $p > 0.78$ ). This implies that the duration of premarital counselling did not significantly relate with the effectiveness of premarital counselling given to Christian couples. The positive relationship implies that the increase in duration of pre-marital counselling will lead to a high level of the effectiveness of premarital counselling given to Christian couples. The coefficient of determination ( $r^2$ ) is 0.00. This means that the duration of pre-marital counselling explains 0% of variation in the effectiveness of premarital counselling given to Christian couples.

**Research Question 3:** What is the content of premarital counselling received by Christian couples in the Accra Metropolis?

This research question focused on the kind of information counselees receive during the premarital counselling given by the churches.

Table 3 reveals that all the 8 eight areas given to the respondents to respond to as to whether those contents were covered in the premarital counselling that these Christian couples went through were answered in the affirmative. A greater number of the respondents indicated that "communication" ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = .43$ ) was an area most covered in their premarital counselling. This was followed by "Roles and responsibilities" ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) and "Sex" ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ).

**Research Question 4:** What is the perception of Christian couples on the effectiveness of pre-marital counselling they received?

**Table 3.** Means and standard deviations on the perception of effectiveness of premarital counselling by Christian married couples.

Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Finances	300	2.07	0.34	8th
Problem solving	300	2.09	0.43	6th
Health	300	2.09	0.29	6th
Communication	300	2.24	0.43	1st
In-law	300	2.12	0.33	5th
Conflict resolution	300	2.14	0.35	4th
Roles and responsibilities	300	2.17	0.65	2nd
Sex	300	2.17	0.44	2nd

**Table 4.** Means and standard deviations on the perception of effectiveness of the premarital counselling by Christian married couples.

Item	N	Mean	Standard deviation
It helped me understand my partner better	300	1.15	0.52
It helped me identify my weaknesses	300	1.22	0.61
It helped me know, myself better and appreciate my partner better	300	1.05	0.32
It helped me know most of the weaknesses of my partner	300	1.79	0.98
Important areas of marriage were thoroughly discussed	300	1.11	0.45
It addressed all my marital concerns before the marriage started	300	2.18	0.99
Effectiveness of Premarital counselling	300	1.41	0.30

The respondents were to choose from a set of alternatives on a 3-point Likert type scale weighted as Agreed = 3, Not Sure = 2, Disagree = 1. A midpoint of this was used to determine whether the respondents had positive perception or not. Thus,  $(3+2+1 = 6; 6 \div 3 = 2)$  if the mean of means falls above the cut-off mean of 2 then it is interpreted as positive effectiveness of the premarital counselling while if below it is a negative perception. Table 4 shows the means and standard deviations of the perception of the effectiveness of the premarital counselling.

The results in the Table 4 show the perception of Christian couples on the effectiveness of pre-marital counselling. From the Table, the majority of the respondents agreed ( $M=2.18, SD=0.99$ ) that all their marital concerns were addressed before the marriage started.

Nevertheless, the respondents had a negative perception as to whether "it helped them to understand their partners better", "helped them to identify their weaknesses", "helped them understand themselves better and therefore appreciate their partner better", "helped them to know most of the negative sides of their partners" and as to whether "Important areas of marriage were thoroughly discussed such as financial, emotional, sexual, responsibility and roles". These items had mean values less than 2.0.

The results thus implied that Christian married couples held a negative perception of the effectiveness of pre-

marital counselling. This is because their overall means score ( $M=1.41, SD=0.30$ ) was below the mean cut-off of 2.0.

## DISCUSSION

The results of research question 1 showed that there is a significant mean difference between the male and female married Christians regarding their perception on the essence of premarital counselling. The finding supports Pepple (2017) who assessed the perception of people on premarital counselling in Calabar, Nigeria. His study revealed that males differ significantly from females in terms of the perception on marital counselling. Ajak (2016) however disagrees with this position in a study he conducted in Wau, South Sudan to investigate the increases in divorce in Sudan. His study revealed that men did not differ significantly from women in the thoughts they held on the essence of premarital counselling. We believe there may or may not be a difference in the perceptions people hold about premarital counselling. It is instructive to note that premarital counselling has the ability to improve marital quality if the counsellor uses right procedures and the would-be couple pay heed to the issues discussed.

The duration of premarital counselling did not significantly affect the effectiveness of premarital counseling given to Christian couples. However, there

was a positive relationship between duration of premarital counselling and the effectiveness of premarital counselling given to Christian couples. Camba (2015) study carried out in Brikama, Gambia showed that there was a positive relationship between the length of premarital counselling and its effectiveness. The part of his finding that departs from the finding of the current study is the fact that, he found that the length of premarital counselling affects its effectiveness. He found that the length of premarital counselling accounts for 17% of the variance in the effectiveness in premarital counselling. We argue that a longer length of time of premarital counselling sessions does not necessarily inform an effective premarital counseling programme. However, the content of the discussion as well as the fidelity of the counsellor will inform the effectiveness of the process.

A greater number of the respondents indicated that "Communication" was an area most covered in their premarital counselling in this current study. This seems to agree with Smith (2017) who indicated that communication is the binding glue of any successful relationship. He indicates that effective communication reduces suspicions, acrimony and bad intentions in marriage. This position is supported by Macdonald (2018) in a study of 250 respondents on the predictors of effective premarital counselling in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. He found that sex was the least issue discussed in premarital counselling while communication was the most discussed. We agree with Macdonald that sexual relationship may be important but to have an effective sex may depend on a number of factors including effective communication, good health, and sound finances.

It was also found that Christian married couples held a negative perception of the effectiveness of premarital counselling. The finding is supported by Knowles (2016) who found that married people in George Town, Bahamas had a very negative perception about premarital counselling. He indicated that his 274 respondents representing 85.6% out of 320 were found to have stated that they will not encourage anybody to patronise premarital counselling. Johansson (2016) rather found that 89% of 350 married individuals he investigated revealed they held a positive perception towards premarital counselling. The finding of our study is very important for us as counsellors because perhaps it explains one of the many reasons why we have a lot of divorce cases in recent times.

## Conclusion

Premarital counselling is of essence to both the married and the unmarried. It has the penchant to strengthen the gains people make in marriage and perhaps put breaks on the rather unfortunate cases to have happened in marriage. It therefore has the ability to reduce divorce

and increase happiness in marriage. Although some married people have negative perceptions about premarital counselling, if the contents are revised, we believe it can improve people's perception about premarital counselling. The study investigated the perceptions of married Christians on the relationship between premarital counselling and marital success. The results showed that there is a significant mean difference between male and female married Christians regarding their perception on the essence of pre-marital counselling. Also, the duration of premarital counselling did not significantly affect the effectiveness of premarital counselling given. Finally married Christians held a negative perception of the effectiveness of pre-marital counselling.

## Recommendations

1. Churches and other religious bodies should continue to stress the importance of pre-marital counselling to the members.
2. The content of pre-marital counselling should be reviewed by counsellors and other stakeholders to make it more responsive to the demands of successful marriages.
3. Unmarried individuals should study more about premarital counselling and also avail themselves to go through same.

## Implications for counselling

1. Counselling educators should begin to find ways of incorporating pre-marital counselling into the training of counsellors.
2. Counsellors should be more proactive in giving post-marital counselling to married people to compliment and vitalize the pre-marital counselling married people are given.

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