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Assertiveness, Perceived Social Support and Spousal Age Difference as Factors in Marital Stress among Clergy in Owerri, Nigeria

Helen I. Nnamdi-Annorzie*

Department of Psychology, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria

*Corresponding author: annorzie.ihuoma@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Clergy marriages are often assumed to be protected by faith, yet the demands of ministry expose pastors and their families to strains that may spill over into the marriage. This study examined whether assertiveness, perceived social support and spousal age difference were associated with differences in marital stress among clergy in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 250 married clergy (200 men and 50 women) aged 20 to 68 years (M = 45.26, SD = 9.17), drawn by convenience sampling from ten Christian churches and ministries in Owerri. Participants completed the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and the Marital Stress Inventory. Data were analysed with a 2 × 2 × 2 between-subjects analysis of variance. Assertiveness, $F(1, 242) = 0.06$, $p = .806$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$, and perceived social support, $F(1, 242) = 0.02$, $p = .882$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$, were not associated with significant differences in marital stress. Spousal age difference showed a small difference that did not reach significance, $F(1, 242) = 3.66$, $p = .057$, partial $\eta^2 = .015$, with clergy in marriages with a longer age gap reporting slightly lower marital stress. The three-way interaction was also not significant, $F(1, 242) = 3.72$, $p = .055$, partial $\eta^2 = .015$. The findings suggest that, within this sample, marital stress among clergy was not explained by these personal and relational factors, and that ministry-specific demands deserve closer study. Churches and counsellors may wish to provide marital support that addresses the structure of pastoral work rather than relying on general assumptions about personality or age.

Keywords: Assertiveness; Clergy; Marital Stress; Perceived Social Support; Spousal Age Difference; Nigeria

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Introduction

Marriage remains one of the most valued institutions in Nigerian society, and its stability is widely treated as a mark of personal and religious success. For clergy, the expectation is even stronger. Pastors, priests and ministers are expected to model a peaceful home, to counsel troubled couples and to present their own marriages as examples to the congregation. These expectations can be a source of meaning, but they can also become a source of strain when the demands of ministry compete with the needs of the marriage (Darling et al., 2004; Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003).

Marital stress refers to the tension, worry and emotional strain that spouses experience when the demands of married life exceed the resources they believe they have to meet them (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). It may arise from conflict over money, roles, sexual relations, in-laws, children, communication or the use of time, and it is linked with lower marital satisfaction, poorer health and a higher risk of separation (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Randall & Bodenmann, 2017). Stress that originates outside the marriage, such as work pressure, can also spill into the relationship, reducing the time and emotional energy that partners give each other (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

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The work of clergy carries several features that make such spillover likely. Pastors are on call at almost every hour; they deal with the grief and crises of members, and their homes are often physically and socially close to the church. Studies of Protestant clergy in the United States found that ministry demands, intrusions on family time and criticism from congregants were associated with greater stress for both clergy and their spouses (Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003; Morris & Blanton, 1994). Clergy spouses describe a "two-person career" in which they share the public burden of ministry without the formal role or income attached to it (Frame & Shehan, 1994). Comparative work shows that clergy experience levels of emotional exhaustion similar to, and in some respects higher than, those of other helping professionals (Adams et al., 2017), and work-family conflict has been identified as a predictor of burnout among pastors (Frederick et al., 2023). African studies point in the same direction. In Kenya, Makena et al. (2023) linked occupational stress to the quality of family relationships among clergy, while Emusugut et al. (2023) reported that fewer than half of Protestant clergy and their spouses in Nairobi were at a high level of marital satisfaction.

In Nigeria, the number of churches and ministries has grown rapidly, especially in the South-East. Owerri, the capital of Imo State, hosts orthodox, Pentecostal and independent churches whose clergy often combine pastoral duties with other work in order to support their families. Economic hardship, irregular stipends and congregational expectations may add to the pressures they face. Yet clergy are rarely studied as a distinct occupational group in Nigerian marital research, and the few available studies tend to focus on the general married population (Israel & Kpaduwa, 2026; Nwatu, 2020; Olatubi et al., 2022).

The present study considered three factors that may shape how clergy experience stress in marriage: assertiveness, perceived social support and spousal age difference. Assertiveness is the ability to express one's needs, opinions and feelings directly and honestly while respecting the rights of others (Rathus, 1973). In marriage, assertive communication may help couples to raise problems early and to negotiate solutions before resentment builds up (Zalki & Tondok, 2024). For clergy, however, assertiveness may be shaped by role expectations that favour patience, submission and the avoidance of open conflict. Florian and Zernitsky-Shurka (1987) showed that self-reported assertive behaviour differs by culture and gender, which suggests that its links with marital outcomes may not be the same across settings.

Perceived social support refers to a person's belief that family, friends and significant others are available to provide help, comfort and advice when needed (Zimet et al., 1988). Social support is widely thought to protect people from the harmful effects of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Among married people, higher perceived support has been associated with greater marital satisfaction and with better mental health in the face of marital stress (Abdolalipour et al., 2024; Akanbi, 2014; Israel & Kpaduwa, 2026). For clergy, sources of support may be limited, because the people closest to them are often members of the congregation whom they are expected to serve rather than lean on (Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003).

Spousal age difference refers to the gap in years between husband and wife. In many Nigerian communities, it is common and culturally accepted for a husband to be several years older than his wife, and the age gap is sometimes linked to authority and decision-making within the home. Large longitudinal data from Australia showed that marital satisfaction declined faster over time among couples with a larger age gap (Lee & McKinnish, 2018). Nigerian evidence is mixed. Olatubi et al. (2022) found that age difference with a spouse predicted marital satisfaction among healthcare workers, whereas Daniel (2026) found no significant link between spousal age gap and marital satisfaction among couples in Lagos.

Statement of the Problem

Reports from church leaders, counsellors and clergy families suggest that marital strain among clergy is real but seldom openly discussed. Because clergy are expected to be examples of stable marriage, they may hide difficulties for fear of losing respect or position, and they may be reluctant to seek help (Darling et al., 2004). When marital stress is left unaddressed, it can affect the health of the clergy, the welfare of their children and the quality of their ministry.

Most studies of marital stress in Nigeria have sampled married workers, women or couples from the general population (Israel & Kpaduwa, 2026; Nwatu, 2020; Olatubi et al., 2022). Studies of clergy have largely been conducted in North America and East Africa, and they tend to focus on burnout and work-family conflict rather than on personal and relational factors within the marriage (Adams et al., 2017;

Frederick et al., 2023; Makena et al., 2023). It is therefore not clear whether factors such as assertiveness, social support and spousal age difference, which are often discussed in Nigerian marriage counselling, are associated with differences in the marital stress of clergy. This study sought to address that gap among clergy in Owerri.

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of the study was to examine the roles of assertiveness, perceived social support and spousal age difference in marital stress among clergy in Owerri. The specific objectives were to:

1. examine whether assertive and non-assertive clergy differ in marital stress;
2. examine whether clergy with high and low perceived social support differ in marital stress; and
3. examine whether clergy in marriages with shorter and longer spousal age differences differ in marital stress.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at the .05 level of significance:

1. Assertive and non-assertive clergy will differ significantly in marital stress.
2. Clergy with high and low perceived social support will differ significantly in marital stress.
3. Clergy in marriages with shorter and longer spousal age differences will differ significantly in marital stress.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Three related perspectives guided this study. The first is Selye's (1956) general adaptation syndrome, which describes how the body responds to sustained demands in three stages: alarm, resistance and exhaustion. When stressors persist without relief, as may happen when ministry pressures are constant, the person may move from resistance towards exhaustion, with consequences for mood, health and relationships. The model helps to explain why chronic, low-level strain can be as damaging as single crises. However, it says little about why people exposed to the same demands differ in how much stress they feel.

The second perspective, the transactional model of stress and coping, addresses that gap. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argued that stress arises from the person's appraisal of a situation as threatening and of their resources as insufficient to meet it. Personal qualities such as assertiveness and external resources such as social support can change both appraisals. An assertive pastor may see a marital disagreement as a problem that can be discussed and solved, while a pastor with strong support from family and friends may feel less alone in dealing with it. Cohen and Wills (1985) formalised the second idea in the stress-buffering hypothesis, which holds that social support reduces the harmful impact of stress, particularly when stress is high.

The third perspective is the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The model proposes that marital outcomes depend on three elements: the enduring vulnerabilities that each spouse brings into the marriage, the stressful events the couple faces and the adaptive processes the couple uses to deal with them. Spousal age difference may be thought of as a structural feature that couples bring into the marriage, ministry demands as a source of external stress, and assertive communication and dyadic coping as adaptive processes (Bodenmann, 2005). The model predicts that couples who face high external stress with limited adaptive resources will experience greater marital strain. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that assertiveness, perceived social support and spousal age difference might each be associated with differences in the marital stress of clergy.

Empirical Review

Assertiveness and Marital Stress

Studies of assertiveness and marital outcomes have produced varied results. Among housewives in Indonesia, Zalki and Tondok (2024) found that assertiveness, together with mindfulness, was positively associated with marital satisfaction. In Iran, Abdolalipour et al. (2024) reported that sexual assertiveness was strongly related to social support and marital satisfaction among married women. These studies suggest that the ability to state one's needs openly can support a healthier marriage.

Other evidence suggests that the link depends on culture and context. Florian and Zernitsky-Shurka (1987) found that Arab and Jewish students in Israel differed in their self-reported assertiveness and that gender differences were present in some social situations, which implies that the meaning of assertive behaviour is shaped by cultural norms. In Nigeria, where marriage roles are often influenced by religious teaching and patriarchal expectations, direct expression of disagreement may sometimes be seen by a spouse as disrespect rather than honesty. Lavner et al. (2016) further cautioned that communication behaviour and marital satisfaction influence each other over time, and that communication skills alone may not explain much of the change in marital quality. These findings suggest that assertiveness may not have a simple or uniform link with marital stress, particularly among clergy whose roles call for restraint.

Perceived Social Support and Marital Stress

The protective role of social support is one of the better documented findings in stress research (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Akanbi (2014) studied dual-career married individuals in Oyo, Nigeria, and found that perceived social support was positively related to marital satisfaction, while work-family conflict was negatively related to it. Israel and Kpaduwa (2026) surveyed 385 married women in Lagos and found that perceived social support was positively related to mental health and moderated the relationship between marital stress and mental health. Okedare and Fawole (2024) reported that social support predicted lower psychological intimate partner violence among young married and cohabiting women in Ibadan.

Studies of clergy present a more complex picture. Lee and Iverson-Gilbert (2003) found that the perception of ministry demands and the availability of support together predicted family-related stress among Protestant clergy, with support playing a weaker role than the perception of demands. Emusugut et al. (2023) used the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support with clergy and their spouses in Nairobi and found that most reported moderate marital satisfaction, with support showing only modest links to marital outcomes. These findings suggest that support from the congregation may not always reduce marital strain for clergy, and may sometimes add expectations that increase it.

Spousal Age Difference and Marital Stress

Spousal age difference has received less attention in psychological research than in demography. Bumpass and Sweet (1972) reported that larger age differences between spouses were associated with higher rates of marital disruption in the United States. Using panel data from Australia, Lee and McKinnish (2018) found that both men and women in age-gap marriages reported higher marital satisfaction at the start of marriage but experienced a sharper decline over time than couples of similar age. Zhang and Liang (2023) identified spousal age gap as one of the pathways through which education related to marital satisfaction in China.

Nigerian findings are not consistent. Olatubi et al. (2022) found that age difference with the spouse was a significant positive predictor of marital satisfaction among married healthcare workers in South-West Nigeria. In contrast, Daniel (2026) reported no statistically significant relationship between spousal age gap and marital satisfaction among 192 married respondents in Lagos, although qualitative interviews suggested that age differences shaped communication and mutual understanding. The direction and strength of any link may therefore depend on the size of the gap, the stage of the marriage and the cultural meaning attached to age within the couple.

Clergy Families and Marital Stress

Research on clergy families has consistently identified ministry demands as a key source of strain. Morris and Blanton (1994) found that mobility, financial compensation, time demands, expectations of the family

and intrusions on boundaries were associated with lower marital and family satisfaction among clergy husbands and their wives. Frame and Shehan (1994) showed that relocation stress affected the well-being of both clergy and their spouses. Darling et al. (2004) reported that clergy and their spouses who felt more stress also reported lower quality of life, and that spiritual well-being and social support were associated with better outcomes. More recent work by Frederick et al. (2023) found that differentiation of self protected pastors from burnout linked to work-family conflict. In Kenya, Makena et al. (2023) reported that clear boundaries between work and family improved family relationships among clergy. In Nigeria, Nwatu (2020) found that coping strategies and education were associated with differences in the marital stress of married working women, which suggests that the personal resources that spouses bring to stressful roles matter for marital outcomes.

Summary of the Literature

The literature shows that clergy face unique demands that can spill into their marriages and that personal and social resources may shape how they cope. Social support has the strongest evidence as a protective factor in the general population, but its role among clergy is less clear. Evidence on assertiveness is limited and appears to depend on culture, and findings on spousal age difference are mixed. Few studies have examined these variables together among Nigerian clergy, which justified the present study.

Method

Participants

Participants were 250 married clergy drawn from ten churches and ministries in Owerri, Imo State: Salvation Ministries, Assemblies of God Church, Holiness Evangelistic Church, Ropheka Holy Ghost Church, Life Gate Church, the Anglican Church, Testimony House International, Glorious Grace Bible Church, Christian Pentecostal Mission and Overcomers Christian Mission. There were 200 men (80.0%) and 50 women (20.0%). Their ages ranged from 20 to 68 years (M = 45.26, SD = 9.17). Only clergy who had been married for at least one year were included. Participants were selected by convenience sampling, because clergy were available at different times and places and no single register of clergy in Owerri was available.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect data, in addition to a short demographic section that recorded gender, age, denomination and the ages of the participant and spouse, from which spousal age difference was calculated.

Rathus Assertiveness Schedule

The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS; Rathus, 1973) is a 30-item measure of assertive behaviour. Items are rated on a six-point scale ranging from "very characteristic of me" to "very uncharacteristic of me". Thirteen items (3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 18, 20, 21, 22, 25, 27, 28 and 29) are scored directly and 17 items are scored in reverse. Rathus (1973) reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of .78 and evidence of validity against independent ratings of assertive behaviour. Anumba (1995) provided Nigerian norms of 48.25 for men and 48.61 for women and reported a concurrent validity coefficient of .25 with the Index of Peer Relations. In this study, participants who scored above the norm for their gender were classified as assertive and those who scored at or below it were classified as non-assertive.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988) contains 12 items that measure perceived support from family, friends and a significant other, with four items for each source. Items are rated on a seven-point scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*very strongly agree*), and higher scores indicate greater perceived support. Zimet et al. (1988) reported internal consistency coefficients of .85 to .91 for the subscales and .88 for the total scale. Among Nigerian adolescents, Aloba et al. (2019) confirmed the three-factor structure of the scale and reported good internal consistency and measurement invariance across gender. Participants were classified into low and high perceived social support groups on the basis of their total scores.

Marital Stress Inventory

The Marital Stress Inventory (MSI; Omoluabi, 1994) is a 50-item scale developed for Nigerian samples to assess sources of marital stress and the person's reactions to them. Items are scored directly, and higher scores indicate greater marital stress. Omoluabi (1994) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .92 and a concurrent validity coefficient of .32 with Hudson's Index of Marital Satisfaction. The MSI has been used in recent Nigerian studies of married adults (Israel & Kpaduwa, 2026).

Procedure

The researcher obtained permission from church leaders before data collection. Clergy were approached in their churches, offices and, where they preferred, their homes. The researcher introduced the study, explained its purpose and assured participants that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential and would be used only for research. Participation was voluntary, and participants could decline or withdraw at any time. Those who agreed completed the questionnaire in about 20 minutes and returned it to the researcher. Spouses were not approached, and no identifying information was recorded on the questionnaires.

Design and Statistical Analysis

The study used a cross-sectional survey design. Because each independent variable was represented by two groups, data were analysed with a 2 (assertiveness: assertive, non-assertive) × 2 (perceived social support: low, high) × 2 (spousal age difference: shorter, longer) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA), with marital stress as the dependent variable. Partial eta squared (η^2) was used as the measure of effect size, and values of .01, .06 and .14 were taken as small, medium and large, respectively (Cohen, 1988). Analyses were conducted with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of marital stress for each level of the three independent variables.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Marital Stress by Assertiveness, Perceived Social Support and Spousal Age Difference

Variable	Group	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Assertiveness	Assertive	113	44.06	10.74
	Non-assertive	137	43.07	10.10
Perceived social support	Low	137	43.15	9.69
	High	112	43.88	11.03
Spousal age difference	Shorter	147	44.31	10.38
	Longer	103	42.40	10.67

Note. Higher scores indicate greater marital stress. One participant had missing data on perceived social support.

As Table 1 shows, the differences between groups were small. Assertive clergy (M = 44.06, SD = 10.74) and non-assertive clergy (M = 43.07, SD = 10.10) reported similar levels of marital stress, as did clergy with low (M = 43.15, SD = 9.69) and high (M = 43.88, SD = 11.03) perceived social support. Clergy in marriages with a shorter spousal age difference reported slightly higher marital stress (M = 44.31, SD = 10.38) than those in marriages with a longer age difference (M = 42.40, SD = 10.67).

Table 2. Summary of the 2 × 2 × 2 Analysis of Variance on Marital Stress

Source	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*	Partial η^2
Assertiveness (A)	6.26	1	6.26	0.06	.806	.000
Perceived social support (B)	2.29	1	2.29	0.02	.882	.000
Spousal age difference (C)	379.45	1	379.45	3.66	.057	.015
A × B × C	386.51	1	386.51	3.72	.055	.015
Error	25,123.41	242	103.82			

Note. The model was a full-factorial 2 × 2 × 2 design. The table reports the main effects and the three-way interaction.

The first hypothesis, which stated that assertive and non-assertive clergy would differ significantly in marital stress, was not supported, $F(1, 242) = 0.06$, $p = .806$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$. The second hypothesis, which stated that clergy with high and low perceived social support would differ significantly in marital stress, was also not supported, $F(1, 242) = 0.02$, $p = .882$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$. The third hypothesis, which stated that clergy in marriages with shorter and longer spousal age differences would differ significantly in marital stress, was not supported at the .05 level, $F(1, 242) = 3.66$, $p = .057$, partial $\eta^2 = .015$. Although this effect did not reach significance, its size was small rather than negligible, and the direction suggested slightly lower marital stress among clergy in marriages with a longer age gap. The three-way interaction of assertiveness, perceived social support and spousal age difference was also not significant, $F(1, 242) = 3.72$, $p = .055$, partial $\eta^2 = .015$.

Discussion

This study examined whether assertiveness, perceived social support and spousal age difference were associated with differences in marital stress among clergy in Owerri. None of the three factors produced a statistically significant difference, and the effect sizes for assertiveness and social support were close to zero. These results should be interpreted with care, because a non-significant result does not show that a factor has no role; it shows that the present data did not provide clear evidence of a difference.

The first finding was that assertive and non-assertive clergy did not differ in marital stress. This result does not agree with studies from Indonesia and Iran that linked assertiveness with better marital outcomes (Abdolalipour et al., 2024; Zalki & Tondok, 2024). One possible explanation lies in the cultural and occupational setting of the participants. Florian and Zernitsky-Shurka (1987) showed that the meaning and expression of assertiveness differ across cultures. In Nigerian Christian homes, and particularly in clergy homes, open assertion may be balanced by teachings that favour humility, patience and submission. Clergy who are assertive in leading a congregation may not carry the same style into the home, and clergy who are less assertive may rely on prayer, mediation by elders or quiet accommodation to manage conflict. It is also possible that assertiveness affects marital stress only when it is combined with warmth and good timing. Lavner et al. (2016) found that communication and satisfaction influence each other, and that communication skills on their own explain only part of the change in marital quality. A general measure of assertiveness, such as the RAS, may therefore be too broad to capture the specific communication behaviours that matter within marriage.

The second finding was that clergy with high and low perceived social support did not differ in marital stress. This result differs from Nigerian studies of married adults in which social support was linked with greater marital satisfaction and better mental health (Akanbi, 2014; Israel & Kpaduwa, 2026). It is, however, consistent with research on clergy, which suggests that the support available to pastors does not always reduce family stress (Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003). For many clergy, the people who offer support are also members of the congregation whose expectations contribute to the demands of ministry. Help from such sources may come with conditions, may increase the sense of being watched, or may not address private marital concerns that clergy are unwilling to share. The stress-buffering hypothesis also predicts that support matters most when stress is high (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The mean marital stress scores in this sample were moderate, and the buffering role of support may become visible only in groups under more severe strain. The MSPSS also measures general support from family, friends and a significant other,

and it does not separate support from the spouse from support from the congregation, which may have different meanings for clergy.

The third finding was that clergy in marriages with shorter and longer age differences did not differ significantly in marital stress, although the difference came close to the conventional level of significance and the effect size was small. Contrary to the concern often expressed in counselling settings that large age gaps cause strain, the direction of the difference suggested slightly lower stress among clergy with a longer age gap. This pattern is partly in line with Olatubi et al. (2022), who found that age difference with a spouse was positively associated with marital satisfaction among Nigerian healthcare workers. In many Nigerian homes, it is expected that a husband will be older than his wife, and an age gap may be associated with clear role expectations that reduce some forms of conflict. Lee and McKinnish (2018), however, showed that the benefits of age-gap marriages may fade over time, and Daniel (2026) found no significant link between age gap and marital satisfaction in Lagos. Because the present design was cross-sectional, it cannot show whether the pattern would hold across the course of marriage. A replication with a larger sample would help to determine whether this small effect is reliable.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the marital stress of clergy in this sample was not explained by general personal and relational factors such as assertiveness, social support and age difference. The vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) suggests that marital outcomes depend on the interplay of enduring vulnerabilities, external stressors and adaptive processes. The present study measured one possible vulnerability and two broad resources, but it did not measure ministry demands, financial pressure, boundary intrusions or the dyadic coping processes that couples use (Bodenmann, 2005). Studies of clergy families have repeatedly identified these ministry-specific factors as the main sources of marital strain (Darling et al., 2004; Morris & Blanton, 1994). It is likely that such factors explain more of the variation in clergy marital stress than the variables examined here.

Implications of the Findings

The findings have some practical implications for churches, counsellors and clergy. First, marriage counsellors who work with clergy should be cautious about assuming that assertiveness training alone will reduce marital stress. Communication training may be more useful when it is adapted to the religious and cultural values of the couple and focuses on specific marital situations rather than general assertive behaviour.

Second, the lack of a clear link between perceived social support and marital stress suggests that churches should look at the kind of support they offer clergy families, not only the amount. Support that is confidential, free from congregational judgement and directed at the marriage itself, such as access to trained counsellors outside the local church, may be more helpful than general goodwill from members (Darling et al., 2004; Makena et al., 2023).

Third, the small difference observed for spousal age difference suggests that counsellors should not treat an age gap as a source of marital strain in itself. Premarital and marital counselling may be more effective when it considers how a couple understands and manages age-related roles, rather than the age gap alone.

Finally, because ministry demands appear to be central to clergy marital stress in other settings, denominations may consider policies that protect family time, provide adequate stipends and set reasonable limits on the availability expected of clergy (Frederick et al., 2023; Morris & Blanton, 1994).

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered. First, participants were selected by convenience sampling from ten churches in Owerri, and the sample may not represent clergy across Imo State or Nigeria. Second, the sample contained four times as many men as women, which limits what can be said about female clergy. Third, the independent variables were measured as continuous scores and then divided into two groups. Dividing continuous scores in this way reduces statistical power and may hide differences that a regression approach could detect. Fourth, all measures were self-reported, and clergy may have under-reported marital stress because of the expectation that their homes should be exemplary. Fifth, the cross-sectional

design does not permit conclusions about cause and effect. Finally, data were collected from one spouse only, so the study could not examine how both partners experience stress within the same marriage.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Future studies should use larger and more representative samples of clergy from different denominations and states, with a better balance of men and women. Researchers should treat assertiveness, social support and age difference as continuous variables and use regression or moderation analysis. Measures of ministry demands, financial strain, boundary ambiguity and dyadic coping should be included. Data from both spouses would allow the use of dyadic methods, and longitudinal designs would show how marital stress changes over the course of ministry. Qualitative interviews with clergy and their spouses could also reveal how culture and faith shape the meaning of assertiveness, support and age within clergy marriages.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Churches and denominations should provide confidential counselling services for clergy couples, preferably through professionals who are independent of the local congregation.
2. Marriage enrichment programmes for clergy should address ministry-related stressors, such as time demands, finances and intrusions on family life, alongside communication skills.
3. Clergy should be encouraged to set clear boundaries between ministry and family life and to take regular rest with their families.
4. Church leaders should review the welfare of clergy, including stipends and housing, to reduce financial pressures that may affect marital life.
5. Counsellors should avoid treating spousal age difference as a cause of marital stress in itself and should explore the couple's own understanding of roles and expectations.

Conclusion

This study found that assertiveness, perceived social support and spousal age difference were not associated with statistically significant differences in marital stress among 250 clergy in Owerri. The effect of spousal age difference was small and close to significance, with slightly lower stress among clergy in marriages with a longer age gap. These findings suggest that the marital stress of clergy may depend more on the demands of ministry and on how couples cope together than on the general personal and relational factors examined here. Further research that measures ministry-specific stressors and includes both spouses is needed to guide the design of support for clergy families in Nigeria.

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