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Sexual Spousal Abuse And Emotional Homeostatic Disequilibrium (EHD) Among Married Secondary School Teachers In Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Keywords:

Emotional
Homeostatic
Disequilibrium
(EHD); marriage;
sexual spousal
abuse; teachers

This study considered the phenomenon of emotional homeostatic disequilibrium (EHD) that adversely affects individuals, to unveil factors that instigate it. It was carried out in the area of counseling psychology. The purpose was to determine whether or not sexual spousal abuse is related to EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria (N=766). This quantitative study adopted an ex post facto correlation design, while two research questions and two null hypotheses guided the study. Results of the study indicated a significant relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD ($F=98.01$, $r=0.58$, $p<0.05$), and a moderating influence of cultural values/beliefs in that relationship among the participants ($F=53.617$, $p<0.05$). Specifically, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological and emotional toll of sexual spousal abuse and informs more effective support and intervention strategies.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:

Emotional
Homeostatic
Disequilibrium
(EHD); pernikahan;
kekerasan seksual
pasangan; guru

Studi ini meneliti fenomena ketidakseimbangan homeostatis emosional (EHD) yang berdampak buruk pada individu, untuk mengungkap faktor-faktor yang memicunya. Tujuannya adalah untuk menentukan apakah pelecehan seksual pada pasangan berhubungan dengan EHD di kalangan guru sekolah menengah yang sudah menikah di Rivers State, Nigeria (N=766). Alasan pemilihan topik ini karena masalah EHD telah menimbulkan banyak kerugian di masyarakat sehingga memerlukan penyelidikan. Penelitian kuantitatif ini mengadopsi desain korelasi ex post facto, sementara dua pertanyaan penelitian dan dua hipotesis nihil memandu penelitian ini. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya hubungan yang signifikan antara pelecehan seksual pada pasangan dan EHD ($F=98.01$; $r=0.58$; $p<0.05$), dan terdapat pengaruh moderat dari nilai-nilai budaya/keyakinan dalam hubungan tersebut di antara partisipan ($F=53.617$, $p<0.05$). Secara khusus, penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih dalam tentang dampak psikologis dan emosional dari pelecehan seksual pada pasangan dan memberikan dukungan dan strategi intervensi yang lebih efektif.

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INTRODUCTION

Background Of The Study

Marriage is believed to be the oldest institution in human civilization. It is understood that marriage as an organized form of living does not exist among creatures other than humans and, as a result, it forms the family unit which constitutes the basic and essential unit of society. Akhtar, Nash, & Probert (2020) and Sandberg (2021) described marriage as the approved social pattern whereby two persons agree to live as husband and wife to establish a family. It is also believed as a permanent union, at least by the intention of both husband and wife, for mutual companionship, procreation, and assistance, and for creating an environment to raise children. Marriage has equally been seen as a social group and a social system that serves various functions in society right from the beginning of the world (Azizi, Haji-Alizadeh & Shah-Abadi, 2023). For instance, some psychologists and psychiatrists believe that marriage is a complex social system that tries to satisfy the huge emotional and sexual needs of humans, the aspect of the id that Sigmund Freud talked about in the human personality structure.

A good marriage provides several benefits. Individuals who are happily married tend to live longer and healthier than those who are either divorced or unhappily married. People in happy marriages experience lower physical and emotional stress. On the other hand, a bad marriage increases the risk of diseases and even shorter life span. These people are vulnerable to numerous physical ailments, such as high blood pressure and heart diseases, as well as psychological problems, such as anxiety, depression and substance abuse (Tahir, 2021).

However, despite the importance of marriage in the development of society, the marriage institutions in Nigeria, and perhaps the world over, have been plagued by a phenomenon called emotional homeostatic disequilibrium (EHD) in recent times. EHD is taking its toll on the marriage institution so much that many spouses and their partners no longer enjoy the peaceful companionship that characterizes marriage. EHD refers to

Sexual Spousal Abuse And Emotional Homeostatic Disequilibrium (EHD) Among Married Secondary School Teachers In Rivers State, Nigeria
Ebikabowei Musah

a psycho-emotional disorder that disrupts the functionality of human beings. According to Okorodudu (Musah, 2022), it is a condition whereby a spouse loses their ability to control or keep their emotions proportionately to be at peace with both self and others around them. It is a condition in which unpleasant experiences of a spouse generate negative emotional attitudes that adversely affect their daily functioning. Okorodudu (Musah, 2022) further explained that the consequences of EHD are very devastating.

Okorodudu (Musah, 2022) also explained that people who experience EHD tend to exhibit behaviors that do not conform to societal expectations. The reason is because they no longer have control over their own behaviors. Unfortunately, some people experiencing EHD have inadvertently violated societal laws and received commensurate punishments following the stipulated laws. There are cases of victims of EHD becoming schizophrenic. Some others display fearfulness, chronic anxiety, depression, suicidal tendencies, and even homicide in the more extreme cases. EHD can also weaken one's immune system and thereby expose the individual to contagious viruses.

It is noteworthy that some people experiencing EHD do not vent their harmful EHD behaviors on other human beings, properties and pets, but on themselves. That is why it is common to observe persons who are moody, depressed, overly anxious, fearful, and so on. The rationale behind this study was the negative effects of EHD on individual development, and by extension, the society at large. According to Ndubuisi (2023), the EHD phenomenon may be attributed to internal and external factors within the family structure over time. Going by Ndubuisi's (2023) assertion, it is presumed that sexual spousal abuse could be a factor for EHD in marriages.

Sexual spousal abuse is any form of sexual misbehavior that a marital partner does to their spouse, including rape and other forms of non-consensual sexual contact. Most experts agree that sexual abuse is never only about sex. Instead, it is often an attempt to gain power over others (Emeka, Odika & Igboanugo, 2022). When an individual is sexually abused, they are forced, tricked, or manipulated into sexual activities. Sexual abuse can happen anywhere, in person or even online (Suhita, Ratih, & Priyanto, 2021; Oberoi, Patil, & Satyanarayana, 2020). Bano (2021) defined sexual abuse as an undesired sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats, or taking advantage of victims who are unable to give consent, in which victims can be exploited for pleasure or gratification. Sigurdardottir & Halldorsdottir (2021) referred to sexual abuse as a range of behaviors that involve unwanted, coercive, or forceful sexual contact

or conduct. Sexual abuse can include rape, attempted rape, and any form of unwanted sexual advances (including touch).

A lot of scholars have revealed an association between sexual abuse and EHD symptoms. For instance, [Schnittker \(2022\)](#) stated that sexual abuse is a devastating violation that undermines one's feelings of safety and trust toward their partner or spouse. [Emeka, Odika & Igboanugo \(2022\)](#) further explained that sexual abuse is a pervasive problem. It is common for sexual abuse victims to experience symptoms in the aftermath of their abuse, including vivid flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance, numbness, guilt, depression ([Benites-Meza, Herrera-Anazco, Alvare, Mougenot, & Benites-Zapata, 2023](#); [Fielding-Miller, McDougal, Frost, Masuku, & Shabalala, 2024](#)), jumpiness, or irritability. Victims of sexual abuse can experience severe and chronic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) e.g., body aches, fatigue, flashbacks, headaches, insomnia, and nightmares ([Meadows et al., 2020](#)). In the two weeks following an abuse, 94 percent of women in one study reported experiencing symptoms of PTSD such as flashbacks, insomnia, hyper-vigilance, and avoidance. They also struggle with anger, anxiety, fear and depression. Likewise, [Sherman et al. \(2023\)](#) discovered an association between depression and PTSD among sexually abused subjects in their investigation.

In another development, [Emeka, Odika & Igboanugo \(2022\)](#), [Bagwell-Gray \(2021\)](#) and, [Wilson & Smirles \(2020\)](#) stated that the effects of sexual abuse can last a lifetime. [Longinus \(2020\)](#) also found out in his investigation that sexual abuse can lead to lifelong trauma and can damage a victim emotionally throughout their life. According to them, victims of sexual abuse may deal with eating disorders ([Heilman & Bright, 2022](#)), difficulty in coping with stress, self-harm, suicidal ideations ([Mainali et al., 2023](#)), and even suicide attempts. Other impacts include sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies and/or children, feelings of shame, guilt, isolation, and substance abuse. Victims may also develop relationship problems with family, friends, and partners. There is also a probability of developing sexual dysfunction and fertility issues later in life.

Cultural values/beliefs also constitute a variable in this study. [Ajayi, Chantler, & Radford \(2021\)](#) defined culture as the sum of the ideas, beliefs, customs, values, knowledge, and material artifacts handed down from one generation to the next. [Childress, Shrestha, Kenensarieva, Urbaeva, & Schrag \(2023\)](#) considered it as the behavior patterns, beliefs, and all other products of a group of people that are passed on

Sexual Spousal Abuse And Emotional Homeostatic Disequilibrium (EHD) Among Married Secondary School Teachers In Rivers State, Nigeria

Ebikabowei Musah

from generation to generation. Cultural values and beliefs are highly influential in shaping individual behavior, including in the occurrence of violent behavior. According to [De Silva, Dharmasiri, & Dissanayake \(2023\)](#), cultural values and beliefs define behaviors and establish norms for attitudes and behaviors within families. Different cultural norms and values support different types of violence. For instance, traditional beliefs that man has a right to control or discipline women through physical means make women vulnerable to violence by intimate partners ([Gobin & Gómez, 2022](#)). Equally, cultural acceptance of spousal abuse as a private affair hinders outside intervention and prevents those affected from speaking out and gaining support ([Lomazzi, 2023](#)).

Furthermore, it may be presumed that there is a connection between one's cultural values/beliefs and EHD. Individual behavior is essentially a reflection of a person's culture, in that one is socialized by their culture to promote certain behaviors. Different cultures socialize their members to express emotions that they consider beneficial to both the individual and the society. Hence, some cultures approve of some emotions and disapprove of others. For example, in the Ijaw culture of southern Nigeria, the expression of extreme anger attracts severe social criticism while long-term depression is considered a budding sign of mental illness.

A person's cultural background influences their experience and expression of emotion ([Tsai, 2024](#)). [Keltner, Sauter, Tracy, Wetchler, & Cowen \(2022\)](#) and [von Suchodoletz & Hepach \(2021\)](#) point out that cultural differences influence emotion regulation strategies. It means that various cultures socialize their indigenes to control their emotions in line with their own cultural standards. Guidelines, expectations, rules, and structure are provided by culture to help individuals understand and interpret behaviors. Various ethnographic studies have indicated that cultural differences exist in social effects, especially as it concerns emotion determination.

Depending on which emotions are preferred in a particular culture, culture also influences how emotions are experienced. For instance, happiness is commonly regarded as a positive emotion in every culture. [von Suchodoletz & Hepach \(2021\)](#) stated that in countries with individualistic tendencies like the United States, happiness is considered an immense, achievable, and internal experience, while in collectivist nations like Japan, emotions like happiness are highly relational and involve various social and external factors, that are resident in shared experiences with other individuals. In explaining the Utku Eskimo populations, Briggs ([He, Muhlert, & Elliot, 2021](#)) revealed

that anger was seldom expressed and that in the rare incidence of its expression, the consequence is societal ostracism. Universally speaking, however, people from other cultures may regard Nigerians as very emotional because loud displays of emotion in public are normal and accepted in the Nigerian culture (Elasri & Boubekri, 2020).

Research Gap

This research obtained initial quantitative data from the participants of this study that showed dissatisfaction and unhappiness in their marriages. About 780 married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria reported unhappiness in their marital relationships. The preliminary data obtained from these subjects contradicts the study result of Conger (2024), which found that among other things, marriage was the single most reliable happiness indicator for individuals. However, a research gap was discovered in Conger's study, particularly in his research method. His study adopted a library-based design, utilizing secondary data as opposed to an empirical study that uses primary quantitative data. Conger (2024) reviewed literature from previous studies to conclude that married individuals tend to report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction than singles and that married couples often benefit from emotional support, companionship, and shared experiences.

Conger further stated that discovering a soulmate brings happiness and makes life worth living, and that marriage also appears to promote better health. He added that across nations and ethnic groups, people reported greater happiness from marriage than from career, community, or money. According to him, a 2005 survey from the Pew Research Center substantiates these assertions by revealing that 43% of married respondents reported that they were "very happy" compared to 24% of unmarried individuals (Pew Research Center, 2006).

Based on the research gap in Conger's study, the present study sought to negative negative emotions among married individuals. Specifically, this study intended to determine a relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria. Therefore, the study proposed the following question: What is the relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria?

Rationale For The Study

The rationale for studying the relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD is multifaceted and rooted in the need to understand the psychological and emotional impacts of such abuse. Some key reasons for conducting this investigation are as follows:

Understanding psychological consequences. Sexual spousal abuse is a severe form of intimate partner violence that could lead to significant psychological distress. Investigating the connection between this form of abuse and EHD can help elucidate the specific emotional outcomes that victims experience (Niolon, Estefan, Kearns & Dahlberg, 2022).

Improving mental health intervention. By identifying how sexual spousal influences emotional expression, mental health professionals may develop more targeted and effective interventions. Understanding the emotional profiles of abuse victims would allow for tailored approaches that address their unique emotional needs (Hacialefendioğlu, Yılmaz, Koyutürk, & Karakurt, 2021).

Raising awareness and educating. This study contributed to public awareness and education about the profound effects of sexual spousal abuse. It highlighted victims' emotional struggles, which could foster greater empathy and support from the community as well as influence policy and advocacy efforts (Orchowski, Yusuf, Oesterle, Bogen, & Zlotnick, 2020).

Informing prevention programs. Insights from this research might inform the design of prevention programs aimed at minimizing sexual spousal abuse. By understanding the emotional consequences, prevention efforts may also incorporate components that address emotional health and resilience (Sierra, Arcos-Romero, Álvarez-Muelas, & Cervilla, 2021).

Facilitating early detection. Recognizing patterns of negative emotional expression associated with sexual spousal abuse allows early detection and intervention. Healthcare providers, social workers, and other professionals can be trained to recognize these emotional indicators and provide timely support (Bender et al, 2022).

Contributing to theoretical frameworks. Investigating this relationship would enhance theoretical frameworks in psychology and social sciences. It may also contribute to a deeper understanding of how trauma and abuse affect emotional regulation and expression, enriching academic discourse and guiding future research (Tarzia, 2020).

Supporting victims' recovery. Acknowledging and validating the emotional experience of abuse victims is crucial for their recovery. Studies on negative emotional expression may help victims to feel understood and supported, which is an important step in the healing process (Gibby & Whiting, 2023).

Policy development. Evidence from this research would inform policymakers in developing laws and regulations to better protect individuals from sexual spousal abuse and provide comprehensive support services for victims (Fernet, Hébert, Brodeur, & Théorêt, 2019).

Novelty Of The Research

The novelty of this research first lies in the specific focus on sexual spousal abuse. While there is extensive research on intimate partner violence (IPV) broadly, focusing specifically on sexual spousal abuse provides deeper insights into the unique psychological and emotional impacts of this type of abuse. This specificity allows for a more nuanced understanding of trauma and its consequences.

This study also used EHD as a key variable. By examining EHD as a core outcome, the research contributes to a more detailed understanding of how victims process and display their emotions in response to sexual abuse by a partner. The focus helps highlight the distinct ways that emotional deregulation manifests in such contexts.

There is also a highlight on the integration of contemporary theories and models. Utilizing modern psychological theories, such as attachment theory and emotional regulation models, the research might offer new perspectives on the mechanisms linking sexual spousal abuse and EHD. For instance, recent studies have explored IPV, providing a theoretical framework for intervention.

The study also examined the impact of culture and social contexts. New research often explores how cultural, social, and economic contexts influence the experience and expression of emotions in victims of sexual spousal abuse. This includes understanding variations in emotional expression across different societies, which is crucial for developing culturally sensitive interventions.

Another novelty of this research is the focus on longitudinal and developmental outcomes. Longitudinal studies can track the long-term emotional and psychological impacts of sexual spousal abuse. This approach helps in understanding how early experiences of abuse affect emotional development over time.

This study also stressed the importance of policy and intervention development. By providing detailed insights into the emotional repercussions of sexual spousal abuse, the research contributed to the development of effective policies and intervention programs. This can lead to better support systems for victims and more effective prevention strategies.

Purposes/Hypotheses Of The Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria with cultural values/beliefs as the moderator between the relationship.

Two research questions and two null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. The research questions were: 1) What is the relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria? 2) What is the moderating influence of cultural values/beliefs in the relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria?

The two alternative hypotheses were: 1) There is a significant relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria, and 2) There is no significant moderating influence of cultural values/beliefs in the relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted the ex post facto correlation with moderation design. The researcher studied real-life situations in which the subjects had experienced the context under study. The method involves data collection and analysis of the variables retrospectively to ascertain how any or some of them influence or are related to one another ([Rasimin & Yusra, 2020](#); [Ina, Marzuki & Alfiansyah, 2021](#)).

Sampling Technique And Research Sample

All married secondary school teachers in Rivers State constituted the study population, about 8.499 (4.752 men and 3.747 women). A sample size of 766 (11%) married secondary school teachers was selected through a stratified random sampling procedure based on the senatorial zone, local government area, gender, and number of

schools. This sample size is in line with Althubaiti (2022), Rahman (2023), and Asenahabi & Ikoha (2023) who stated that for a population of a few thousand people, 10% of the population should be used as the sample. The criteria for inclusion of participants in this study were, being married for at least 5 years, aged between 30 years and a little above 50 years, and being a teacher in a government-approved secondary school in Rivers State of Nigeria. Even though married, no retired teacher (whether male or female) participated in this study. Equally, no teacher from non-government-recognized secondary schools was included in this study.

Instruments Of Measurement

The 11-item Sexual Spousal Abuse Scale (SSAS) with items like “*My spouse forces me to have sex*”, the 15-item Emotional Homeostatic Disequilibrium Scale (EHDS) with items like “*I often feel worthless*”, and the 9-item Cultural Values/Beliefs Scale (CVS) with items like “*My culture deems a man as socially superior to a woman*” were constructed by the researcher to collect data on sexual spousal abuse behaviors, EHD and cultural values/beliefs indicators. The instruments were 4-point Likert scales (SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree and SD = Strongly Disagree).

The three instruments were face-validated by experts in measurement and evaluation. Then, the content and construct validities of the instruments were estimated using the multivariate factor analysis. The principal component analysis (PCA) using the Varimax Kaiser Normalization extraction method was utilized to estimate the content and construct validities. Using the extraction method, the cumulative variance expressed the content validity of each instrument. Each scale demonstrated good content validity of all items as the total percentages of items in each scale were 71.6%, 95.4%, and 87.8% respectively. The unexplained variances were altogether very minimal. On the other hand, the construct validities were estimated by the rotated factor loading matrix. The Eigenvalues above one were used to select items that genuinely measured similar constructs. For example, the items in SSAS had a factor loading matrix that ranged from 0.734 to 0.904, EHDS from 0.917 to 0.993, and CVS from 0.492 to 0.996. The reliability analysis using Cronbach’s α showed all instruments had satisfying reliability (SSAS = 0.99, EHDS = 0.99, and CVS = 0.82).

Data Collection Technique

The researchers administered the instruments to the respondents in person across several schools. Two research assistants helped in distributing and collecting copies of

Sexual Spousal Abuse And Emotional Homeostatic Disequilibrium (EHD) Among Married Secondary School Teachers In Rivers State, Nigeria

Ebikabowei Musah

the instruments. After participants filled out the instruments, the team immediately collected the copies to avoid sample mortality. There was no room for participants to keep instruments longer than necessary.

Before the administration of the instruments, respondents were provided with information regarding the focus of the study as well as guaranteed anonymity and data confidentiality. They were also informed that the student was strictly for academic purposes. Participants then gave their consent verbally before partaking in the exercise.

Data Analysis Technique

Correlation and regression statistics were used to answer the research questions and to test the null hypotheses at $p < 0.05$. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was used for the data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Correlation Between Sexual Spousal Abuse And EHD

Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the study's participants (N=766).

Table 1.
 Demographic Data Of Research Respondents

No	Criteria	N
1.	Sex	
	Men	314
	Women	452
2.	Age	
	30- 40 years old	395
	41-50 years old	233
	Above 50 years old	138
3.	Region	
	Rivers East	301
	Rivers Southeast	262
	Rivers West	203
4.	Location	
	Urban	383
	Rural	383

Based on regression analysis, there was a positive correlation between sexual spousal abuse and EHD among study participants (Mean=10.66; SD=3.84; $r=0.58$), which answered the first research question about the relationship between sexual spousal

abuse and EHD. The adjusted r^2 of 0.34 shows that 34% amount of the variance in EHD among married secondary school teachers was accounted for by the impact of sexual spousal abuse.

Table 2.

Regression Analysis Between Sexual Spousal Abuse And EHD

Source	SS	df	MS	F	B	β	SE	t	p
Regression	9097.218	1	2274.305	98.01	-0.09	-0.13	0.09	-3.29	0.001
Residual	17658.36	764	23.204						
Total	26755.58	765							

$p \leq 0.05$ significance level; N= 766

The result showed that sexual spousal abuse is significantly related to EHD among participants of this study ($F=98.01$, $p<0.05$), meaning that the null hypothesis was rejected.

Cultural Values/Beliefs As A Moderator In The Relationship Between Sexual Spousal Abuse And EHD

The result in Table 3 reveals a linear correlation between cultural values/beliefs and EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria (Mean=22.13; SD=4.21; $r=0.47$). The results answered the second research question; cultural values/beliefs moderate the relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD among research participants. The r^2 of 0.22 shows that 22% of the variance in EHD was accounted for by the impact of cultural values/beliefs.

Table 3.

The Role Of Cultural Values/Beliefs As Moderator Between Sexual Spousal Abuse And EHD

Source	SS	df	MS	f	B	β	SE	t	p
Regression	5882.521	1	1470.630	53.617	-	-	-	-	-
Residual	20873.06	764	27.428						
Total	26755.86	765							
Cultural values/beliefs					0.33	0.24	0.05	7.17	0.000

$p \leq 0.05$ significance level; N= 766

The result reveals that cultural values/beliefs significantly relate to EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria ($F=53.617$, $p<0.05$), meaning that the null hypothesis was rejected.

Discussion

The study found a significant relationship between the independent and dependent variables among the research participants. In Nigeria, especially in Rivers State, cases of sexual abuse, even when reported to authority figures, are considered domestic or matrimonial affairs that should not be brought to public notice.

The result of this investigation corroborates those of other scholars. For instance, Longinus (2020) revealed that sexual abuse can lead to lifelong trauma that disrupts victims emotionally throughout their lives. Schnittker (2022) and Wilson & Smirles (2020) also revealed that sexual abuse victims experience various symptoms including vivid flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance, feeling numb, guilty or depressed, and being jumpy or irritable. Schnittker (2022) added that victims of sexual abuse can experience severe and chronic symptoms of PTSD. Radell, Hamza, Daghustani, Perveen, & Moustafa (2021) discovered that sexual spousal abuse is a risk factor for depression in adulthood. Similarly, Benites-Meza, Herrera-Anazco, Alvare, Mougenot, & Benites-Zapata, 2023 revealed a nexus between sexual spousal abuse and symptoms of depression, and such abuse independently doubles the probability of depression in pregnant Peruvian women. Mainali et al. (2023) also revealed that sexual spousal abuse victims were at risk of developing complex psychopathological and chronic suicidal thoughts.

Regarding the moderating impact of cultural values/beliefs, the study revealed that there was a significant moderating influence of cultural values/beliefs in the relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria. Cultural values/beliefs tend to influence individual behaviors since people are expected to conform to their cultural standards. They also play a vital role in moderating the relationship between sexual abuse and EHD by influencing how individuals perceive and respond to abuse. Some reasons to explain this include the perception of abuse, whereby in the Ijaw culture that has rigid gender roles and strong patriarchal values, abuse is normalized or minimized. Victims, in this culture do not recognize certain behaviors as abuse or consider them socially acceptable. In the Ijaw culture where this investigation was carried out, this normalization leads to a muted emotional response compared to cultures where abuse is condemned.

From the coping mechanisms perspective, cultural values/beliefs shape the support systems available to victims. In cultures that have strong community support

and promote open discussions, abuse victims might find it easier to seek help and cope with their emotions. Conversely, in the Ijaw culture where discussing sexual abuse is taboo, victims suffer in silence, thereby exacerbating EHD symptoms like depression, anxiety, and fear.

Stigma and shame also account for this. The Ijaw culture places a high value on family honor and reputation which makes victims feel ashamed or guilty about the abuse, leading to stronger EHD behaviors. The fear of bringing shame to the family prevents victims from seeking help, which in turn worsens their EHD symptoms.

Another factor is empowerment and independence. In the Ijaw culture where women are seen as subordinate to men, victims feel trapped and powerless, leading to higher EHD symptoms. Moreover, in the Rivers State where the legal system is indifferent or hostile to abuse victims, EHD symptoms are more pronounced due to a lack of recourse and support. Overall, cultural values/beliefs shape the context in which abuse occurs and is responded to, thereby influencing the severity and nature of the emotional impact on victims.

This result corroborates the findings of [Ajayi, Chantler, & Radford \(2021\)](#), who stated that the cultural context should be considered in assessing their degree of emotional experience. Similarly, [Childress, Shrestha, Kenensarieva, Urbaeva, & Schrag \(2023\)](#), [Macêdo IRP et al. \(2021\)](#), and [Lomazzi \(2023\)](#) revealed in their separate studies that cultural values/beliefs help promote and/or perpetuate sexual abuse in marriages. Furthermore, [Gobin & Gómez \(2022\)](#) found that cultural values/beliefs influence the expression of EHD among individuals. Likewise, [von Suchodoletz & Hepach \(2021\)](#), [Keltner, Sauter, Tracy, Wetchler, & Cowen \(2022\)](#), and [Tsai \(2024\)](#) said that cultural values/beliefs play a strong role in the expression of emotions. The similarity of these results with this present one may be attributed to the fact that sexual spousal abuse occurs globally and the consequences are more or less similar.

Furthermore, sexual spousal abuse profoundly affects EHD due to its deep psychological impact on victims. Some key reasons why sexual spousal abuse leads to EHD include trauma response, as sexual abuse can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with varying symptoms, e.g., flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety and uncontrollable thoughts about the event, all of which contribute to EHD. Another reason is fear and anxiety. Sexual abuse victims often experience intense fear and anxiety, both during and after the abuse. This can manifest as generalized anxiety, panic attacks, and

Sexual Spousal Abuse And Emotional Homeostatic Disequilibrium (EHD) Among Married Secondary School Teachers In Rivers State, Nigeria

Ebikabowei Musah

an ongoing sense of dread or hyper-vigilance. The constant state of alertness can be emotionally exhausting and debilitating (Suhita, Ratih, & Priyanto, 2021).

Sexual spousal abuse is also strongly associated with the development of depression. Victims may feel a pervasive sense of sadness, hopelessness, and helplessness. The abuse can erode self-esteem, leading to a sense of worthlessness that exacerbates depressive symptoms. Many victims of sexual spousal abuse experience strong feelings of shame and guilt, often irrationally blaming themselves for the abuse. These emotions can be overwhelming and contribute to a negative self-image and self-hatred, further impacting mental health (Longinus, 2020).

Victims may also experience intense anger and rage, both towards the perpetrator and themselves. This anger can be internalized, leading to self-destructive behaviors, or externalized, causing problems in relationships and social interactions. Sexual spousal abuse often involves a violation of trust, particularly if the perpetrator is someone with whom the victim had been in a deep intimate relationship. This can lead to long-lasting difficulties in trusting others, forming intimate relationships, and maintaining healthy social connections (Wilson & Smirles, 2020).

As explained in the previous parts, this type of abuse can have immense effects on EHD. For instance, victims often experience a wide range of intense emotions, including depression and anxiety. Chronic feelings of sadness and persistent anxiety are common and may lead to withdrawal from social interactions and daily activities. Victims of sexual spousal abuse may exhibit heightened anger and irritability which can be directed toward the abuser or others. This can also manifest as frustration and aggression. Many victims may feel intense shame and guilt, blaming themselves for the abuse. This can further suppress their emotional expression as they might fear judgment or disbelief (Sierra, Arcos-Romero, Álvarez-Muelas, & Cervilla, 2021; Emeka, Odika & Igboanugo, 2022).

On why cultural values/beliefs can moderate the relationship between sexual abuse and EHD, it should be understood perception of abuse can vary widely across cultures, with some norms and beliefs about gender roles and marital relationships leading to certain behaviors not being recognized as abusive. This affects how victims understand and react to their experiences; potentially minimizing the perceived severity of the abuse and the EHD symptoms it generates (Gobin & Gómez, 2022; He, Muhlert, & Elliot, 2021; Kitayama & Salvador, 2024). Overall, cultural values/beliefs play a critical

role in moderating the relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD by shaping perceptions, responses, support systems, coping mechanisms as well as legal and institutional responses ([Walter, Shenaar-Golan & Routay, 2021](#)).

Moreover, cultural norms around communication, especially regarding personal and family matters, can determine how freely victims express their emotions and seek support. These cultural factors can either exacerbate or alleviate the emotional consequences of sexual spousal abuse; making cultural context a significant factor in understanding and addressing the emotional impacts of such abuse ([Elasri & Boubekri, 2020](#)).

The constant fear of further abuse can lead to hyper-vigilance and an exaggerated reflex, making the victim easily frightened or jumpy. Other serious effects are numbness and dissociation. To cope with the trauma, some victims may emotionally shut down or dissociate, appearing detached and unresponsive to emotional situations. Moreover, victims may equally have low self-esteem and self-worth. The abuse can severely impact a victim's self-esteem, leading to feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy. This can result in a reluctance to express emotions openly ([Sigurdardottir & Halldorsdottir, 2021](#)); [Radell, Hamza, Daghostani, Perveen, & Moustafa \(2021\)](#)).

These emotional impacts can interact in complex ways, often reinforcing each other and making it difficult for victims to break free from the cycle of abuse and emotional turmoil. Hence, support from counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, supportive social networks, and safe environments is crucial for helping victims process their emotions and begin healing ([Tarzia, 2020](#); [Thomas & Kopel, 2023](#)).

Cultural values/beliefs also impact coping mechanisms. Some cultures emphasize resilience and endurance, while others encourage help-seeking and emotional expression. These cultural coping strategies influence how victims manage their emotions and seek support ([Matsumoto & Wilson, 2022](#)). Gender roles within a culture can further influence emotional expression; in cultures with rigid gender expectations, men might feel pressured to suppress their emotions, while women might face barriers in seeking help ([Vore, 2020](#)).

Legal and institutional responses to spousal abuse are also shaped by cultural values/beliefs. Cultures with strong legal protections and proactive responses can provide victims with a sense of support and validation, reducing the negative impacts of abuse ([da Silva et al., 2020](#)). In contrast, in cultures with weak legal frameworks or

Sexual Spousal Abuse And Emotional Homeostatic Disequilibrium (EHD) Among Married Secondary School Teachers In Rivers State, Nigeria
Ebikabowei Musah

where abuse is not taken seriously, victims may feel helpless and more emotionally distressed (Fonseca et al, 2023).

Communal support, such as from family, community, and religious organizations, is also shaped by cultural values/beliefs. In cultures with strong communal support, victims may receive better emotional and practical support that helps mitigate EHD symptoms (Lomazzi, 2023; von Suchodoletz & Hepach (2021)). On the other hand, in cultures where discussing personal issues is discouraged, victims might struggle to find support, exacerbating their EHD symptoms.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that sexual spousal abuse is related to EHD among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria and that cultural values/beliefs moderate the relationship between sexual spousal abuse and EHD. This study provides new insights into intimate partner relationships and the emotional experience and expression of individuals. By grounding their practice in the results of this study, psychologists and counselors can increase the effectiveness of their interventions in marital issues which would lead to better outcomes for clients. This will also assist psychologists and counselors in better understanding clients' experiences, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors as well as navigating through complex ethical dilemmas and maintaining professional integrity.

Suggestions

The following suggestions are made based on the study's findings: there should be concerted efforts by social workers, psychologists, and counselors toward curbing or reducing the impact of the EHD phenomenon among married secondary school teachers in Rivers State of Nigeria. Marital counseling services should also be made available to participants of this study. On that premise, therefore, participants of this study are urged to access the services of psychologists and counselors whenever there is a need to do so. It is further suggested that scholars and researchers should replicate this study in the same or a different setting with a wider representative sample.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) of this article declare no conflict of interest.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Ebikabowei Musah: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration; Resources; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Writing, Review, & Editing.

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Ebikabowei Musah

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