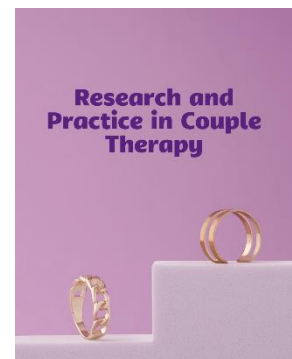


# Impact of Reflective Dialogue Intervention on Marital Metacognition and Marital Conflicts

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of a Reflective Dialogue Intervention on enhancing marital metacognition and reducing marital conflicts among married individuals in Nigeria. A randomized controlled trial was conducted with 30 married participants (15 in the intervention group and 15 in the control group) selected from community centers in Nigeria. Participants in the intervention group underwent eight 75–90 minute sessions of reflective dialogue training over an eight-week period, while the control group received no intervention during the study. Data were collected at three time points: pre-test, post-test, and five-month follow-up. Standardized tools were used to assess marital metacognition and marital conflict. Data were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni post-hoc tests via SPSS-27, with significance set at  $p < .05$ . Results showed a significant main effect of time and group, as well as a significant interaction effect for both marital metacognition ( $F(2,54) = 26.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .51$ ) and marital conflict ( $F(2,54) = 28.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .50$ ). Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons indicated significant improvements in marital metacognition and reductions in marital conflict from pre-test to post-test ( $p < .001$ ), with no significant regression at follow-up ( $p > .05$ ), confirming the sustained impact of the intervention. The Reflective Dialogue Intervention proved effective in significantly enhancing marital metacognitive awareness and reducing conflict intensity over time. These findings suggest that fostering reflective communication and cognitive-emotional insight within couples can lead to lasting improvements in relationship quality, particularly in culturally diverse contexts such as Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Reflective dialogue, marital metacognition, marital conflict, cognitive regulation

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## Introduction

Marital relationships are among the most emotionally intense and psychologically complex social bonds humans form. The quality of a marital relationship directly impacts individual psychological well-being, parenting quality, child development, and overall family functioning (George et al., 2014; Kornaszewska-Polak, 2016). Central to the maintenance of marital satisfaction and the prevention of relational decline is the ability of couples to manage and repair conflict through reflective, intentional dialogue (Rober, 2015). However, in many contexts, particularly in countries like Nigeria where socio-economic and cultural stressors often compound interpersonal strain, unresolved conflict and poor metacognitive regulation within the marital context can result in destructive relational cycles (Adaliku, 2013; Mtenga et al., 2016).

Conflict in marriage is not inherently harmful. In fact, it can serve as a developmental opportunity when couples are equipped with the skills to navigate it reflectively and empathetically (Kulik et al., 2016; Mosek-Eilon et al., 2013). Yet, when conflicts

become chronic, intense, or unregulated, they are strongly associated with emotional disengagement, dissatisfaction, and long-term psychological distress (Ellison et al., 2016; Yi & Park, 2011). Recent research emphasizes that the manner in which couples engage in and process conflict—particularly the role of marital metacognition (i.e., awareness and regulation of one's thoughts and emotions in relational contexts)—is a crucial mediating variable in marital quality (Alikhani & Farhadi, 2019; Hibel et al., 2019).

Marital metacognition refers to the cognitive processes that individuals use to monitor, reflect on, and control their own thinking and emotional responses within the marital relationship. It influences how partners interpret one another's behaviors, how they manage internal emotional reactions, and how they communicate during relational stress (Chan & Leung, 2020; Yang & Doh, 2019). Deficits in metacognition have been linked to biased interpretations, increased defensiveness, and escalation of conflict, while improved metacognitive capacities predict more constructive dialogue, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving (Ross et al., 2020; Shabani et al., 2019). Interventions that target metacognition have been shown to reduce reactivity and promote reflective engagement, ultimately strengthening marital resilience (Mahoney et al., 2021; Rober, 2015).

In recent years, the construct of reflective dialogue has emerged as a promising therapeutic approach for enhancing marital communication and regulating conflictual patterns. Rooted in dialogical therapy, cognitive-behavioral frameworks, and relational mindfulness, reflective dialogue facilitates the development of mutual perspective-taking, emotional awareness, and conscious self-regulation (Nagda et al., 2012; Shillings & Jones, 2020). Through intentional and structured conversational exchanges, couples are encouraged to articulate internal experiences, listen non-defensively, and jointly reflect on the emotional meanings embedded in their interactions (Fahed & Abboud, 2022; Rober, 2015). This approach differs from traditional conflict resolution methods that focus solely on behavioral change or problem-solving by targeting the underlying cognitive and emotional processes driving marital conflict.

The application of reflective dialogue as a structured intervention is particularly salient in sociocultural contexts marked by gender role expectations, communication taboos, or emotional suppression—characteristics present in many Nigerian marital systems (Adalikwu, 2013; Mtenga et al., 2016). In such contexts, promoting metacognitive awareness through dialogical tools can enable couples to reframe conflict as a collaborative space rather than a threat. This not only helps in reducing negative affect but also enhances mutual understanding and emotional safety (Ivchenkova, 2020; Yuan-ping et al., 2023). In fact, studies have shown that couples who engage in perspective-rich conversations during relational distress demonstrate greater emotional regulation and satisfaction over time (Kulik et al., 2016; Mahoney et al., 2021).

Despite the documented benefits of reflective interventions, most marital programs still overlook metacognitive training as a core component. Moreover, much of the existing literature on marital conflict resolution focuses on Western populations, thereby limiting cross-cultural generalizability (Ellison et al., 2016; Shillings & Jones, 2020). Given Nigeria's unique blend of collectivist values, patriarchal family structures, and economic pressures, it is critical to empirically test whether reflective dialogue interventions can meaningfully impact marital dynamics in such settings (Adalikwu, 2013; Fahed & Abboud, 2022).

Furthermore, the psychological consequences of marital conflict are far-reaching. Research shows that unresolved marital tension contributes to parenting stress, poor child outcomes, and even intergenerational patterns of emotional insecurity (George et al., 2014; Yang & Doh, 2019). At an individual level, chronic exposure to marital conflict is associated with increased depression, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem (Chan & Leung, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). In a recent study by Yuan-ping and colleagues (2023), early parental conflict was found to be a significant predictor of depressive symptoms among older adults, mediated by enduring internalized emotional schemas (Yuan-ping et al., 2023). These findings underscore the urgent need for interventions that not only address behavioral conflict but also target the internal processes that sustain it.

The effectiveness of reflective dialogue approaches has also been supported in therapeutic contexts beyond marriage. For instance, Maxwell and Chesler (2019) demonstrated that reflective dialogue improves emotional safety, empathy, and cognitive flexibility in intergroup racial dialogue settings (Maxwell & Chesler, 2019). Similarly, Nagda et al. (2012) developed a critical-dialogic model for conflict engagement that highlights the transformative potential of dialogical reflection in emotionally charged interpersonal contexts (Nagda et al., 2012). These approaches underscore the value of reflective capacity in reshaping defensive communication patterns and fostering mutual understanding, which are equally essential in the marital context.

It is also important to note that conflict in marriage is not monolithic. Shabani et al. (2019) pointed to the role of psychological capital in moderating the relationship between work–family conflict and marital conflict, indicating that internal psychological resources shape how external stressors are processed within the couple system (Shabani et al., 2019). Similarly, Skomorovsky et al. (2015) found that family stress exacerbates intimate partner violence among military couples, particularly when emotional regulation capacities are low (Skomorovsky et al., 2015). These findings reinforce the need to intervene not only at the behavioral level but also at the cognitive-emotional level, specifically through metacognitive regulation training.

Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that marital conflict is closely tied to individual differences in emotional processing and cognitive style. For instance, Yi and Park (2011) found that personality mismatches between spouses over the course of a marriage significantly contribute to conflict levels (Yi & Park, 2011). Likewise, Son et al. (2021) demonstrated that marital conflict negatively impacts marital satisfaction and that this relationship is mediated by emotional availability and caregiving involvement, particularly among parents of young children (Son et al., 2021). These studies collectively affirm that emotional self-awareness and cognitive reflection are essential to healthy marital functioning.

The present study responds to these gaps by investigating the effectiveness of a structured Reflective Dialogue Intervention in improving marital metacognition and reducing marital conflict among Nigerian couples.

## Methods and Materials

### Study Design and Participants

This study employed a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design to evaluate the effectiveness of a Reflective Dialogue Intervention on marital metacognition and marital conflicts. A total of 30 married individuals (15 couples) from Nigeria were recruited through public community announcements and referrals from local counseling centers. Participants were required to have been married for at least two years, aged between 25 and 50, and not currently undergoing psychological treatment. After completing baseline assessments, participants were randomly assigned to either the intervention group ( $n = 15$ ) or the control group ( $n = 15$ ) using block randomization to ensure balance in group sizes. The intervention group participated in eight 75–90 minute reflective dialogue sessions over eight consecutive weeks, while the control group received no intervention during the study period. A five-month follow-up was conducted to assess the sustainability of the intervention's effects.

### Measures

To assess marital metacognition, the study utilized the Marital Metacognition Questionnaire (MMQ) developed by Bahrami and Yousefi (2016). This instrument is specifically designed to measure metacognitive processes in the context of marital relationships and consists of 28 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire encompasses three subscales: (1) Awareness of Marital Thoughts, which examines individuals' ability to recognize their cognitive patterns in marital situations; (2) Cognitive Confidence in Marital Judgments, assessing trust in one's cognitive interpretations of marital events; and (3) Cognitive Regulation in Conflict Situations, which evaluates how individuals

regulate their thoughts during marital disagreements. Higher scores indicate more adaptive and reflective metacognitive functioning within the marital context. The MMQ has demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values for the subscales ranging from 0.78 to 0.87, and its construct validity has been confirmed in both clinical and non-clinical samples.

To measure marital conflicts, the present study employed the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ) originally developed by Sanai Zaker (2000). This 42-item scale evaluates the severity and patterns of conflict between spouses across seven dimensions: Reduction of Cooperation, Reduction of Sexual Relationships, Increased Emotional Reactions, Increase in Support from Others, Division of Financial Affairs, Attraction to Others, and Role of Children in Conflict. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always), with higher scores reflecting more intense or frequent marital conflict. The MCQ is widely used in marital and family therapy research in Iran and has shown strong psychometric properties. The internal consistency reliability of the full scale is reported at 0.93, with subscale reliabilities ranging from 0.79 to 0.91. Validity has been established through factor analysis and correlations with related constructs, supporting its use as a reliable and valid tool for assessing marital discord.

### Intervention

The Reflective Dialogue Intervention is an 8-session structured program aimed at enhancing marital metacognition and reducing conflict through intentional, structured, and emotionally attuned conversations between spouses. The core goal is to develop awareness of one's thoughts, emotional regulation during conflict, perspective-taking, and constructive communication patterns. Each session builds on the previous one through experiential activities, guided dialogue, and skill-building exercises under the facilitation of a trained counselor or therapist.

#### Session 1: Establishing Safety and the Framework of Reflective Dialogue

The first session introduces couples to the goals and structure of the intervention. The facilitator establishes group norms around confidentiality, emotional safety, and mutual respect. Participants are educated on the purpose of reflective dialogue and the role of metacognition in marital dynamics. Couples are encouraged to identify their typical communication patterns, especially during conflict, and reflect on how thoughts and assumptions influence their responses. A short reflective exercise helps partners begin observing their inner dialogue during marital interactions.

#### Session 2: Exploring Internal Dialogue and Metacognitive Awareness

This session focuses on raising awareness of one's internal narrative during marital interactions. Participants engage in exercises to track automatic thoughts and assumptions that arise in response to their partner's behavior. Psychoeducation on metacognition is provided, including the concepts of "thinking about thinking" and differentiating between thoughts and facts. Each partner practices articulating their inner thoughts aloud while the other listens non-defensively. The goal is to develop a nonjudgmental awareness of one's cognitive patterns in relational contexts.

#### Session 3: Identifying Patterns of Conflict and Emotional Reactivity

In this session, couples map out recurring conflict patterns and the emotional triggers underlying them. With the help of a structured worksheet, each partner identifies specific situations where conflicts escalate and reflects on the internal dialogue that fuels emotional reactivity. The facilitator introduces basic emotional regulation strategies (e.g., grounding, deep breathing) and supports the couple in practicing these during a low-stakes dialogue. Couples are guided to notice how shifts in thought and emotion alter conflict trajectories.

#### Session 4: Practicing Reflective Listening and Dialogical Presence

This session deepens dialogical practice by teaching reflective listening skills. Partners learn to mirror, validate, and summarize each other's statements without inserting interpretations or defenses. The concept of "dialogical presence" is emphasized—staying present and open to the other's inner world without judgment. Structured dyadic exercises help couples practice taking turns in expressing and receiving thoughts and emotions. The aim is to cultivate empathy, metacognitive regulation, and de-escalation in conflictual exchanges.

#### Session 5: Challenging Cognitive Distortions in Marital Thinking

Here, couples are introduced to common cognitive distortions (e.g., mind reading, catastrophizing, black-and-white thinking) that exacerbate conflict and miscommunication. Through guided cognitive restructuring exercises, partners identify and challenge distorted thoughts about themselves and each other. The focus is on replacing reactive, rigid beliefs with more flexible and reality-based interpretations. Couples practice this in a reflective dialogue format, with the goal of increasing mutual understanding and reducing biased perceptions.

#### Session 6: Metacognition in the Heat of Conflict

This session simulates real-life conflict scenarios in a safe, therapeutic setting. Couples are invited to bring in recent disagreements and apply the reflective dialogue tools they have learned. With therapist facilitation, they pause during emotionally charged moments to reflect on their thoughts and feelings in real time. The goal is to interrupt reactive cycles and instead engage in conscious, regulated exchanges. Debriefing follows each dialogue to reinforce learning and highlight shifts in metacognitive stance.

#### Session 7: Rebuilding Trust Through Transparent Communication

Building on the skills developed, this session emphasizes the role of transparency, vulnerability, and metacognitive sharing in rebuilding marital trust. Couples practice dialogues focused on sensitive topics such as unmet needs, past injuries, or fears of disconnection. Through structured disclosure and validation exercises, partners experience the safety of being seen and accepted. Reflective writing and storytelling tasks are used to support deeper understanding and empathy.

#### Session 8: Integration, Commitment, and Future Planning

The final session reviews the key skills learned and reflects on changes observed in marital interaction patterns. Couples engage in a structured reflection activity to assess growth in metacognitive awareness, emotional regulation, and conflict management. The session includes a future-planning component where partners co-create a "relational maintenance plan" to continue using reflective dialogue practices post-intervention. A closing ritual or appreciation exchange strengthens emotional bonds and reinforces commitment to mutual growth.

### Data analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were first computed to summarize participant demographics and baseline measures. To evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention over time, Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted with time (pre-test, post-test, follow-up) as the within-subject factor and group (intervention vs. control) as the between-subject factor. When significant interaction effects were found, Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc tests were used to identify specific differences between time points. The level of significance was set at  $p < .05$ . Assumptions of normality, sphericity, and homogeneity of variances were examined and satisfied prior to performing the ANOVA tests.

## Findings and Results

The participants in this study included 30 married individuals, of whom 17 (56.7%) were female and 13 (43.3%) were male. The age distribution showed that 10 participants (33.3%) were between 25 and 30 years old, 12 participants (40.0%) were between 31 and 40, and 8 participants (26.7%) were aged 41 to 50. In terms of educational attainment, 8 participants (26.7%) held a secondary school diploma, 14 (46.7%) had completed a bachelor's degree, and 8 (26.7%) had postgraduate degrees. Regarding the length of marriage, 11 participants (36.7%) had been married for 2–5 years, 13 participants (43.3%) for 6–10 years, and 6 participants (20.0%) for more than 10 years. The majority, 24 participants (80.0%), reported living in urban areas, while 6 participants (20.0%) resided in rural regions.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Marital Metacognition and Marital Conflict Across Groups and Time Points**

Variable	Group	Pre-test (M ± SD)	Post-test (M ± SD)	Follow-up (M ± SD)
Marital Metacognition	Intervention	81.46 ± 6.92	96.78 ± 7.33	95.25 ± 7.02
	Control	82.11 ± 7.21	83.04 ± 6.88	82.57 ± 7.09
Marital Conflict	Intervention	108.63 ± 8.47	92.37 ± 7.85	93.14 ± 7.91
	Control	107.28 ± 7.69	106.17 ± 8.04	105.93 ± 7.88

As shown in Table 1, the intervention group exhibited a substantial increase in marital metacognition from pre-test ( $M = 81.46$ ,  $SD = 6.92$ ) to post-test ( $M = 96.78$ ,  $SD = 7.33$ ), with the effect mostly sustained at follow-up ( $M = 95.25$ ,  $SD = 7.02$ ). In contrast, the control group's scores remained stable across time points. Regarding marital conflict, the intervention group showed a significant reduction from pre-test ( $M = 108.63$ ,  $SD = 8.47$ ) to post-test ( $M = 92.37$ ,  $SD = 7.85$ ), with consistent levels maintained at follow-up ( $M = 93.14$ ,  $SD = 7.91$ ). The control group, however, exhibited no meaningful change across the three phases.

Prior to conducting the repeated measures ANOVA, all statistical assumptions were examined and met. Normality was confirmed by evaluating skewness and kurtosis values, which were within acceptable ranges (e.g., skewness for marital metacognition pre-test = 0.14, kurtosis = -0.49). The Mauchly's Test of Sphericity was non-significant for both dependent variables (e.g., marital conflict:  $\chi^2(2) = 3.21$ ,  $p = .201$ ), indicating that the assumption of sphericity was satisfied. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances revealed non-significant results across time points for both outcome variables (e.g., post-test metacognition:  $F(1,28) = 1.27$ ,  $p = .269$ ), suggesting homogeneity of variances. Therefore, the data met all required assumptions for conducting repeated measures ANOVA.

**Table 2. Repeated Measures ANOVA for Marital Metacognition and Marital Conflict**

Variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	$\eta^2$
Marital Metacognition	Time	2920.41	2	1460.21	24.87	<.001	.48
	Group	1953.67	1	1953.67	22.45	<.001	.45
	Time × Group	2845.26	2	1422.63	26.91	<.001	.51
	Error	3291.43	54	60.95			
Marital Conflict	Time	3712.88	2	1856.44	29.12	<.001	.52
	Group	1884.52	1	1884.52	19.86	<.001	.42
	Time × Group	3567.91	2	1783.96	28.74	<.001	.50
	Error	3440.36	54	63.71			

Table 2 presents the repeated measures ANOVA results. For marital metacognition, significant main effects were found for time ( $F(2, 54) = 24.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .48$ ) and group ( $F(1, 54) = 22.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .45$ ), as well as a significant interaction between time and group ( $F(2, 54) = 26.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .51$ ), indicating that changes over time were significantly different across groups. A similar pattern emerged for marital conflict, with significant main effects for time ( $F(2, 54) = 29.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ,

$\eta^2 = .52$ ), group ( $F(1, 54) = 19.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .42$ ), and a strong interaction effect ( $F(2, 54) = 28.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .50$ ). These results confirm the intervention's substantial effect on both outcome variables.



**Table 3. Bonferroni Post-Hoc Comparisons for Marital Metacognition and Marital Conflict**

Variable	Comparison	Mean Diff.	SE	p
Marital Metacognition	Pre-test vs Post-test	-15.32	2.13	<.001
	Post-test vs Follow-up	1.53	1.76	.398
	Pre-test vs Follow-up	-13.79	2.08	<.001
Marital Conflict	Pre-test vs Post-test	16.26	2.36	<.001
	Post-test vs Follow-up	-0.77	1.89	.692
	Pre-test vs Follow-up	15.49	2.24	<.001

Bonferroni post-hoc results (Table 3) revealed that marital metacognition significantly improved from pre-test to post-test (mean difference = -15.32,  $p < .001$ ), with no significant decline between post-test and follow-up ( $p = .398$ ), suggesting maintenance of gains. A similar trend was found in marital conflict, where scores decreased significantly from pre-test to post-test (mean difference = 16.26,  $p < .001$ ), with no significant increase at follow-up ( $p = .692$ ). These comparisons confirm the stability of the intervention effects over time.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a structured Reflective Dialogue Intervention on enhancing marital metacognition and reducing marital conflicts among married individuals in Nigeria. Based on repeated measures ANOVA, the findings demonstrated statistically significant improvements in marital metacognition and reductions in conflict levels among participants in the intervention group compared to those in the control group. Moreover, the improvements were sustained at the five-month follow-up, indicating the durability of intervention effects over time. These results suggest that engaging in structured, metacognitively-informed dialogue fosters not only immediate cognitive-emotional regulation but also long-term relational growth.

The increase in marital metacognition observed in this study aligns with the growing literature on the role of metacognitive awareness in marital functioning. The intervention enabled participants to articulate internal thoughts, distinguish between reactive assumptions and reality-based appraisals, and reflect on the relational consequences of their emotional responses. These are key components of what Rober (2015) calls "dialogical space," wherein each partner can safely explore and express their inner experience without fear of being attacked or dismissed (Rober, 2015). Similarly, Chan and Leung (2020) emphasized that the ability to mentalize and reflect on one's emotional reactions in the context of relational stress is a foundational skill for navigating marital challenges effectively (Chan & Leung, 2020). The current findings support the assertion that increasing metacognitive capacity within marriage fosters not only greater emotional insight but also greater mutual understanding and reduced reactivity.

The findings also reveal a significant decline in marital conflicts among those who received the intervention. This supports prior research which has demonstrated that poor metacognitive processing contributes to misinterpretations, emotional escalation, and rigid interaction patterns (Ellison et al., 2016; Yi & Park, 2011). When couples lack awareness of their internal dialogue or fail to question automatic thoughts, they are more likely to engage in reactive behaviors that perpetuate conflict (Shabani et al., 2019). Through reflective dialogue, participants in this study were able to slow down the emotional momentum of arguments, access deeper meaning behind their reactions, and shift toward more collaborative communication. Such outcomes echo the findings of Mahoney et al. (2021), who found that spiritual and emotional intimacy during marital transitions predicted lower conflict levels when partners were able to engage in respectful and self-aware discussions (Mahoney et al., 2021).



In terms of sustainability, the five-month follow-up data indicated that the positive effects of the intervention were maintained over time. This long-term impact supports the theoretical assumption that internal cognitive restructuring, when practiced in a relational context, leads to enduring behavioral change. As shown in studies by Son et al. (2021) and Yuan-ping et al. (2023), long-term relational functioning is influenced less by the absence of stress and more by how partners process and respond to that stress (Son et al., 2021; Yuan-ping et al., 2023). The reflective dialogue method teaches couples to pause, reflect, and reframe in real-time—a skill set that, once internalized, continues to shape future interactions. It is likely that metacognitive growth enhances self-regulatory functioning across broader relational domains, which may explain the long-term efficacy observed in this study.

Furthermore, the findings contribute to the intercultural expansion of the reflective dialogue model. Much of the literature on reflective or dialogical interventions has emerged from Western or clinical contexts. By implementing and validating the approach within the Nigerian sociocultural framework, the present study confirms its adaptability and relevance across diverse marital systems. This is especially significant given the unique challenges faced by Nigerian couples, including patriarchal norms, economic stressors, and stigmatization of emotional vulnerability in relationships (Adaliku, 2013; Mtenga et al., 2016). The ability of reflective dialogue to generate openness, regulate power dynamics, and foster shared meaning positions it as a culturally sensitive and scalable tool for improving marital relationships in similar global contexts.

Notably, the outcomes of this study are also in line with research exploring the role of emotional self-regulation and shared meaning in reducing marital strain. Zhang et al. (2022) demonstrated how unresolved marital conflict contributes to emotional dysregulation and disengagement in parent-child and spousal relationships (Zhang et al., 2022). In this regard, reflective dialogue appears to serve as an interruptive mechanism, challenging maladaptive emotional cycles and fostering a sense of safety in vulnerability. Similarly, Ross et al. (2020) found that when couples collaboratively address economic and emotional stressors through mutual recognition and shared responsibility, marital quality is preserved even under strain (Ross et al., 2020). These insights support the use of dialogical methods as not merely therapeutic techniques, but as frameworks for relational justice and resilience.

Moreover, the findings resonate with the model proposed by Nagda et al. (2012), which suggests that conflict engagement must be grounded in critical reflection, emotional attunement, and openness to transformation (Nagda et al., 2012). Reflective dialogue in this study offered a platform for this engagement, allowing couples to explore not just surface behaviors but the deeper narratives that shape them. In this way, the intervention also aligns with Kornaszewska-Polak's (2016) notion of marital dialogue as a continuum between rupture and repair, rather than a binary state of harmony or breakdown (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2016). The focus on intentional, regulated reflection enables couples to move more fluidly through this continuum, reducing the polarization often seen in conflict-prone relationships.

Lastly, the study offers empirical support for theories that emphasize the bidirectional relationship between cognitive insight and emotional safety. Couples who are able to step back, consider alternative perspectives, and name their emotions without defensiveness are more likely to de-escalate conflict and reinforce trust over time. This finding echoes conclusions drawn by Hibell et al. (2019), who found that marital conflict sensitizes parents to emotional cues but that self-awareness and co-regulation can buffer against reactive parenting and spousal hostility (Hibell et al., 2019). It also reflects Ascher et al.'s (2010) insights into how emotional expression—when met with validation rather than criticism—enhances marital satisfaction even in the context of chronic stress or illness (Ascher et al., 2010).

While the findings of this study are promising, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size ( $n = 30$ ) limits the generalizability of the results, particularly across different ethnic, socioeconomic, or religious subgroups within Nigeria. Additionally, the use of self-report measures may have introduced social desirability bias, especially in

reporting conflict-related behaviors. Although participants were assured of confidentiality, cultural stigma around marital issues may have influenced the accuracy of disclosures. Moreover, the study did not include observational or third-party assessments of marital interaction, which could have provided more objective measures of behavioral change. Finally, while the five-month follow-up offers some insight into the sustainability of the intervention, longer-term outcomes remain unknown.

Future research should aim to replicate this study with larger and more diverse samples, including rural populations and interethnic couples, to enhance ecological validity. Investigating the moderating effects of factors such as gender roles, attachment styles, and spiritual beliefs could also offer richer insight into how reflective dialogue functions across varied contexts. In addition, future studies might integrate multimethod assessments—such as video-coded interaction analysis or physiological measures of emotional arousal—to triangulate self-reported data. Longitudinal designs extending to one year or more would also help determine the lasting impact of the intervention on relational stability, parenting quality, and individual mental health.

The results of this study suggest that reflective dialogue interventions can be integrated into marital counseling programs, particularly in settings where traditional conflict resolution strategies have proven ineffective. Practitioners should consider embedding metacognitive training into their work with couples to foster deeper emotional regulation and perspective-taking. Given the cultural adaptability of the intervention, it can be tailored for faith-based, community-based, or educational contexts where couples seek relational support. Additionally, short-term training programs for family therapists and counselors could focus on facilitating dialogical skills as a preventative measure against escalating marital distress.

### **Declaration of Interest**

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors equally contributed to this study.

### **Transparency of Data**

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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