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Towards the development of culturally responsive marriage interventions: traditional and modern perceptions

Kabaro Grace Neswiswa  and Susanne Jacobs 

Faculty of Health Sciences, COMPRES (Community Psychosocial Research); CCYC (Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies), North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Traditional marriage systems reinforce positive marital outcomes, but modernization, neglecting core values of indigenous practices, upsurges divorce. Here described are perceptions of two influential groups, leaders, and practitioners, involved in mediating traditional marital systems in the community of the Royal Bafokeng Nation in South Africa. Qualitative face-to-face interviews with 12 leaders reveal the necessity to restore non-negotiable traditions to preserve marriages. A focus group discussion with ten social services practitioners shows practices as biased and outdated, articulating negotiation and integration of strengths of traditional and modern systems. Findings point to the first steps key to growing theory and approaching the development of culturally appropriate interventions for Black African couples, for instance, identifying evidence-based interventions, conducting baseline research, and expanding or adapting interventions to meet current needs.

KEYWORDS

Traditional marriage systems; modern marriages; culturally responsive; marriage programs; social work

Introduction

Numerous marital problems experienced by couples worldwide and in South Africa (SA) raise concerns (Mohlatlole et al., 2018). Black African married couples are no exception, with relationships often ending in divorce (SA, 2020). Of the total divorce cases reported in 2020, mostly affected were Black African couples (47%), followed by White (23, 9%), Colored (15, 3%), Indian (6, 1%), and lastly mixed population groups (3, 0%) (SA, 2020). In addition, traditional marriages increasingly adapt to Western systems. Modernization, globalization, and westernization regarding political, social, environmental, and economic factors often undermine traditional marriage systems' core moral values, gradually neglecting indigenous practices (Mathafeni & Doğan, 2019; Sennott et al., 2020) and confusing all stakeholders. Many couples now are cohabiting, causing a decline in marriage rates, parents no longer have control over who their children marry, and bogadi has become more expensive (Mathafeni & Doğan, 2019).

However, most communities regard core moral values such as respect, integrity, duties, and honesty, seen for example, in bogadi negotiations, family involvement, children's wellbeing, traditional couple counseling, and specific rituals embedded in conventional marriage guidance systems, although varying, as worthy of being preserved (Monye, 2017). Therefore, changed systems require interventions incorporating modern needs without losing core traditional values important to communities (RBN, 2017).

Literature provides insights on African traditions about bogadi (bride-price), child marriages, customary marriages, rituals, and go laya (traditional counseling) (Bekker & Buchner-Eveleigh, 2017; Parker, 2015; Rudwick & Posel, 2014). However, research on culturally appropriate interventions to support Black African married couples is scant (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2020). We share insights

gained on current perceptions of leaders and practitioners on integrating traditional and modern elements to support, strengthen, and preserve marriage in the Royal Bafokeng Nation governance (RBN) in the North-west Province of SA.

A new marriage policy addressing the current dilemma of regulating religious, child, fraudulent, convenience, polygamous, and non-citizens marriages in SA will soon replace the current insufficient Customary Act. Currently, the act is only applicable during a court divorce, offering little support to couples during the marriage life (Button et al., 2016). The new law recognizes leaders amongst other stakeholders as key to providing inputs, enabling legal recognition in concluding customary marriages (Motsoaledi, 2019), and could form a fitting backdrop for issues that arise, thereby confirming support to couples in Black African communities.

Social services practitioners (SSPs), including senior and junior social workers and auxiliary social workers, represent modern institutions advocating on behalf of vulnerable groups. Social workers render generic services in various programs such as casework, victim empowerment, and marriage enrichment, mainly providing pre-and post-marital counseling assisted by auxiliary social workers rendering preliminary assessments. Accurate knowledge about community needs concomitantly, recognizing the essential role of traditional leadership to ensure policies and marriages are culturally appropriate and correlate with modern requirements. Consequently, the perceptions of both leaders and SSPs regarding culturally proper interventions can contribute meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue on integrating current with traditional marriage, values, and systems core to indigenous communities (Hunter, 2016).

This study demonstrates that traditional non-negotiable practices in core values can be balanced and incorporated into contemporary settings. Integrating modern best practices makes it possible to restore, preserve and develop marital relations.

The RBN and traditional marriage procedure

Specific customs constitute traditional African marriage but may differ from one culture to another. Although global factors influence conventional family systems, evident traditions, and beliefs such as the involvement of families, bogadi negotiations, go laya, and certain spiritual rituals have stood the test of time, suggesting their value to the success of new marriages (Maluleke, 2012).

The RBN owns 1400 km² of land in SA's North-West province (Thornhill & Selepe, 2010). Widely known as "forward-thinking" (Cook, 2013), Bafokeng have implemented an integrated model of indigenous and modern systems for effective governance (Van der Linde, 2015).

Leaders play varying roles. Leading the RBN is the hereditary king (kgosi), Leruo Molotlegi, assisted by hereditary headmen (traditional leaders), who lead 72 traditional wards (makgotla), making up 29 Bafokeng villages (Cook, 2013). The supreme council, constituting headmen and democratically elected and appointed councillors, serves as a legislature and oversees budget expenditure and policies (RBH, 2014).

Like most African traditional communities, Bafokeng consists of several groups derived from relationships established by blood and marriages (Khunou, 2017). The lapa (basic family unit) constitutes husbands, wives, and children (Coertze, 1987), with men, as heads. In case of problems between couples, the kutle (family group) is the first point of laying a complaint (Coertze, 1987). The kutle, headed by the common elder, constitutes several households and keeps families in order (Khunou, 2017). A case is handed over to the kgotla (ward) only when the kutle has attempted and failed to resolve a matter. The kgotla constitutes several dikutle, headed by a traditional leader (RBH, 2014). Each kgotla has its ward court, trying cases by elders who assist the leaders (Khunou, 2017). Where the kgotla cannot resolve disputes, leaders refer to the traditional court at the Bafokeng civic center in Phokeng (Khunou, 2017). Couples can seek redress through the contemporary courts if the aggrieved party is not satisfied with the outcomes resulting from this conventional process (Khunou, 2017).

In African traditional societies, marriage is between the couple, their families, and the community (Moeti & Mokgolodi, 2017). Family involvement extends beyond the marriage celebration into traditional counseling to support couples (Thabede, 2008). Although support by families can lead to perceptions of interference, it helps preserve the marriage because couples cannot divorce without the consensus of the two families (Baloyi, 2014).

Bogadi, through cattle and money, establishes and concludes a marriage, indicating respect for families and ancestors (Segami & Van Eeden, 2020). A wedding, not negotiating bogadi by the couple's families, is illegal (Coertze, 1987), invalid, and subject to doom and misfortune for life (Parker, 2015).

Children are core (Monye, 2017) within the context of traditional African marriages, providing meaning and happiness to couples and preserving the family line. No children imply that marriage is non-existent (Ogoma, 2014).

To achieve positive outcomes for solid relationships and signify respect, friendship, love, and trust (Harris et al., 2016). Other principles include intimacy, commitment, sense of humor, honoring, overcoming conflict, self-disclosure, and expressing needs and feelings (Leeuw, 2015). Highly regarded are words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, spending quality time together, and physical touch Chapman (2013) cited in (Leeuw, 2015).

Consequences of modern influence on traditional marriage systems

SA has undergone globalization, reconstruction, and reconciliation post the apartheid regime (Sennott et al., 2020). A result of modernization is the breakdown of conventional family structures, customary practices, beliefs, and attitudes, risking family breakdown, separation, or divorce in the future (Mohlatlole et al., 2018). Individuals try to fit into the new dispensation (Molotlegi, 2003). Challenges include unemployment, poverty, inequality, gender-based violence, co-habitation, HIV/AIDS, and more orphaned and vulnerable children (Hall & Richter, 2018; Sennott et al., 2020).

Healthy marriages benefit individuals, families, and communities psychologically, socially, and economically (Ojukwu & Kadurumba, 2014), providing couples with emotional and sexual fulfillment (Mohlatlole et al., 2018).

Methodological approach

Against the background, choosing a qualitative descriptive design allows for straightforward descriptions of perceptions where little is known (Sandelowski, 2000) about how traditional systems support marriages, as here, the RBN. The design, uniquely diverse (Freshwater, 2020), allowed for the application of individual and focus group interviews on the same study (Sandelowski, 2000).

Sampling approach and sample

The sample consisted of 12 leaders, male, equal in rank within leadership roles in their makgotla, ages between 40–80 years, selected from a population of 72, and ten female SSPs, a combination of all-inclusive non-probability purposive sampling.

The traditional council of the RBN, Research and Health and Social development services departments granted permission to conduct the study. A facilitator (mediator) trained on the study's objectives and voluntary participation recruited participants; the process entailed face-to-face meetings with the target populations conducted at the Bafokeng civic and Phokeng trauma centers. Interested participants enlisted names and contact details, then a week later provided written consent and only then scheduled interviews were conducted by the co-researcher, a female social worker by profession, aged 37, with 13 years of experience working in the RBN, assisted by a fieldworker, knowledgeable on the research and confidentiality.

Guiding research question and interview questions

Following a review of the literature, the interview guide focused on exploring and describing contemporary perceptions of leaders and SSPs on the fundamentals of marriage systems, their roles strengths, and stumbling blocks of the traditional governance system; the needs of couples; and practical recommendations to support marriages.

Data collection

Data collection took place at the Bafokeng civic center within twelve months (2018 – 2019). Individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasting about 60 minutes each were conducted with leaders and a focus group of 90 minutes with SSPs, reaching data saturation. This sample size is large enough to explore perceptions (Fusch & Ness, 2015). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Setswana, and translated to English by the co-researcher. The principal researcher, co-researcher, and a co-coder, separately, to avoid bias, analyzed and interpreted data from both sets using Tesch's (1990) eight steps of coding. Finally, all three parties compared data and combined themes.

Trustworthiness of the methods

To ensure and assess the trustworthiness of the research process, Guba's (1981) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability cited (Shenton, 2004) described in detail the methods used: informed consent, voluntary participation, familiarity with the culture of the RBN, with researchers spending ample time reflecting on data and field notes. Using two research sample groups (leaders and SSPs) to validate data (Fetters et al., 2013) increased credibility and transferability to other Black African contexts.

Ethical aspects

The host university ethics committee granted permission to conduct the study (NWU-00089-17-S1). Ethical operational measures and preventative strategies involved voluntary participation, written informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity, using pseudonyms, differentiated as L1–12 (leader interviews) and SSP1–10 (the focus group discussion with practitioners). The risks of involvement included recalling negative lived experiences needing further intervention (pre-arranging a counseling service), possible conflict of interest, and coercing participants since the co-researcher is also within the employ of the RBN. An independent facilitator recruited participants to minimize identified risks.

Findings

Findings resulted in four themes: 1) traditional marriage systems: customs to retain 2) traditional marriage systems: roles and challenges in supporting marriages 3) modern influence on traditional marriage systems and 4) traditional, modern and spiritual factors possibly contributing to positive outcomes.

Traditional marriage systems: customs to retain

Marriage valued as an institution is core to a healthy Bafokeng nation, ensuring order and growth. Leaders articulate strong convictions that are non-negotiable in the protection of marriages. Traditions explicitly expressed as non-negotiable in successful marriages focus on retaining core

support structures for marriages. L1 and L8 especially mention parental involvement, family meetings, bogadi negotiations, traditional wedding celebrations, and solemnization in church. Additionally, they note essential traditions indicative of an adequately planned Bafokeng traditional marriage. These traditions include animal slaughtering, couple guidance, placing a white flag at the wedding venue entrance, singing praise songs, preparing traditional food, feasting, signing bogadi letters, and wearing traditional attire from kgakana (Bafokeng traditional fabric). Failure to comply with basics may lead to the marriage being unsuccessful. Still, practices such as bogadi could cause financial barriers, inducing cohabitation, and declining numbers of marriages.

Marriage concluded without parental blessings is unacceptable and invalid. The community involved in go laya, as conducted traditionally, stays essential. Besides legitimizing marriage, go laya equips couples with new skills and correct behavior and affirms new roles with in-laws. As participants explain, “In giving guidance a man is told how he is supposed to treat his wife; a woman how she is supposed to treat her husband” (L3). “. . . when I give him guidance, I do so correcting his weaknesses in front of the family he is marrying from, so that they know his weaknesses and that I have given him guidance . . .” (L1). “. . . If [bogadi] is paid, you go to Home Affairs to sign, according to tradition, you did not sign because you are not going to perform your duties [at your in-laws] if you were not given guidance . . .” (SSP9).

To have children conceived in wedlock is core to a Bafokeng marriage. A childless marriage is considered a bad omen, especially to women as child-bearers. L2 articulates: “We know that there must be children. It would be a bad omen again for children not to be there. As a result, it was a belief that there should be children in marriage.”

Besides the firm conviction that marriage is foundational, marital status “earns” couples the eligibility for residential property. Providing couples residential land is intended to secure the well-being and future of children in the community. Therefore, in case of divorce, the land and related immovable assets become the children’s property. “We give out a stand, so that the children born of these married people, it is their stand. The father and the mother have their own homes, these children not, so now we give them a stand so that when they say we are going home, there is home . . . not pointing at the mothers’ or fathers’ home)” explains L5. “We still fight when a man and a woman divorce so that the house is not sold, it must remain the property of the children of that marriage” states L11. “That home belongs to the children . . . they mean that the woman must go back to her family and you also to your family” adds L3. In this manner, the wellbeing and the future of Bafokeng children is secured beyond divorce.

In summary, specific customs contribute toward positive marriage outcomes and are worthy of being preserved. Children born within marriage are core to a healthy Bafokeng community, ensuring order and growth. Dikutle are necessary; their involvement is encouraged from the onset of the negotiations and post-marriage.

Traditional marriage systems: roles and challenges in supporting marriages

The structural design contributes to the variety of roles and sources of support for the Bafokeng traditional governance system and its success. First from immediate parents (lapa), then consultation with the kutle, the kgotla, and lastly, the traditional court. As L9 explains, “Um, the system, it starts first at the family, then goes to kutle, then to the bigger kgotla. Yes, that on its own is support because um, for these many levels to be there . . . we are making it hard for people to divorce (giggling). So, we really discourage divorce and we actually make the process to be long . . .”

SSPs recognize and acknowledge the RBN governance system’s traditional role in supporting and preserving marriages because they listen to difficulties, keep family issues internal, and refer to external sources when necessary. As some of the participants shared:

“The system is aware of the problems that exist in marriages, so they welcome married couples when they come to them at makgotla, they come to hear what they say if there’s a need they see the social worker but there are those cases which ends at makgotla which means that they are capable of

resolving issues within the system” (SSP10). “Also that having the support of Makgotla, it helps to [preserve] marriages” (SSP8).

Although acknowledging the value of the RBN governance system, SSPs regard some marital traditions as stumbling blocks, causing conflict, are outdated, and gender-biased. For instance, sayings about a woman belonging to her husband’s family even beyond death (*lebitla la mosadi ke ko bogadi*) require a woman to endure/be strong in all circumstances (*mosadi o tshwara thipa ka fo bogaleng*). SSP8 explained, “You belong to another family, even though you encounter problems, don’t come and say “I am back home. You have to face your challenges there and be strong and try to have some coping strategies.” By contrast, SSPs believe traditions favor men.

SSPs further note the discrimination against non-Bafokeng people living in the RBN. As SSP5 explains, “. . . the stumbling block is discrimination of people who come outside who are not Bafokeng. . .” SSP9 adds, “A man married a woman who is not a Mofokeng (singular for Bafokeng) and when they fought and went to the kgotla, this woman . . . they are not listening to her, so all the [favor] goes to the man. . . If you are married here at the RBN, and you are not a Mofokeng, it does not work for you.” Another challenge is the likelihood of in-law interference and lack of confidentiality. As some shared:

“. . . Sometimes you will find them afraid that I can’t share my things with [leader] because we are related. I don’t want him to hear my problems” (SSP2). “. . . you don’t have the opportunity to explore all the options as a couple because the in-laws are literally there, often they don’t need an invitation they just comment on everything” (SSP3).

Accordingly, SSPs perceive the traditional marriage system as too closed-up and systematic. SSP3 states, “it denies couples exposure to other interventions such as counseling” . . . beneficial in strengthening marriage.

Most leaders disagree, however, that Bafokeng traditions protect women’s rights. “You run to kgosana when there are problems based on our tradition. That’s where . . . you will get protection . . . It’s midnight. A man takes a rod and wants to hit you, you run to kgosana,” reports L2. “Yes . . . we have challenges of other families we were talking about at the beginning, which are not well-mannered. They go and insult [the woman] but she is protected because kgotla will protect her. We have a traditional court to protect her . . .” Says L7.

Although SSPs regard themselves as crucial in supporting marriages, some leaders regard SSPs as outsiders, gender-biased, promoting modern laws, interfering with traditions, and encouraging couples, especially women, to divorce.

In our culture, you don’t run for [contemporary] counseling, because we know if we run there, and there it is a woman, they will take sides with you, you will be surprised the divorce papers coming before we try with the elders to bring us together (L3).

. . . right now, we . . . quickly run to the Western ways, we are already involving people who were not part of this marriage, you social workers! . . . (L7).

We would not allow a situation where the social worker and the courts get involved, no, because we know when you get there, they ask you do you still love him/her? When you say no, they bring a paper to say you must divorce . . . (L11).

Not operating in isolation external stakeholders such as pastors (solemnizing marriage, providing spiritual guidance and biblical values); SSPs counseling, mediation, and marriage enrichment programs; and courts are consulted.

Differences in the perception of leaders and SSPs are evident. Leaders perceive the Bafokeng traditional governance system as capable and supported by the church. Nonetheless, SSPs recognize the strengths of the traditional RBN governance system in defending and preserving marriages. Though SSPs perceive certain traditions as gender-biased and a stumbling block in marriages, leaders maintain that Bafokeng practices protect women.

Modern influence on traditional systems

Traditionally, systems included mediation by family members, then the kgotla led by leaders and lastly the traditional court. However, leaders and SSPs express frustration with modernization, specifically increased democracy, human rights, stemming from the fourth industrial revolution, the influence of Western culture, and socio-political factors as a stumbling block adversely impacting community governance.

Moreover, modern influences contribute to adverse marital outcomes. Confusion exists regarding leaders' changing roles in up-keeping marriage traditions and incorporating new laws brought on by civil courts. Contemporary practices include amongst others, contracts, legal marriage certificate letters, cohabitation, and children born out of wedlock. Traditional core values, beliefs, rituals, and family structures such as family involvement, bogadi negotiations are undermined.

Some of the difficulties expressed are modern influences contributing to the neglect and abandonment of traditional roles and disturbance of marriage rituals, very prominent and structured and of great importance in the past. "New ways of doing things," include increasing independence of women, changes in traditional gender roles, and labor migration (working away from home). "... so it's just confusing now in the time we are living in ... the government of the day failed to ensure we have stable families ... you are not supposed to allow that there be some laws that are loose ... which will eventually lead to us all South Africans to end up not knowing our origin and culture, where we come from, because there is chaos" says L 11 with 37 years of experience.

Change of traditional systems and structures results in uncertainty: loss of identity and control by men as well as boundaries of mediation by leaders and supporting families. Some leaders report: "... we are frustrated, ... because of our government laws, it has given women the powers equal to the men's ... since the women were allowed to work ... their marriages no longer last... she is independent ... , she no longer respects the husband" reports (L7).

Traditionally gender roles involved men as heads of the household, providing for the family, and women managed household responsibilities such as cooking and overall caring. As SSP8 and L7 reported "... a woman must not work, but is supposed to stay at home and make sure that everything is taken care of ... " "When God created a woman and a man, he meant for a man to take care of a woman. Right now, a woman is the one taking care of a man, [laughing] that's why things are not going well"

Leaders believe non-adherence to traditions and following modern trends results in loveless, short-term marriages, pre-marital sex, children born out of wedlock, cohabitation, and lack of endurance, leading to a high divorce rate. As L9 states, "... right now a person can marry anyone ... but ... there is a lot of divorces ... our modern marriages are not the same as the marriages of the past ... " L11: "When there's a problem, let's use the available resources first, or kgotla or churches, before we involve the legal sources ... When you leave the legal court one part must be guilty, but in the traditional court no one is guilty when the problem is resolved."

Most leaders indicated confusion about their changing roles regarding mediation: Consequently, some leaders are no longer directly involved in mediating marital cases. "Yes, a lot of [couples] came to me ... I still helped them to make peace... I listened to their [issues] ... it is our tradition," L2: "I refer them to social workers ... they will help ... " said (L6). "... as a traditional leader, um, I do not interfere in family matters, I am involved with matters about the [ward]" (L1).

Leaders expressed the need for makgotla to be empowered to support couples and adapt to a new role. L12 reports, "... we as kgotla, do not have the capacity in terms of marriages. We did not do [contemporary] marriage counseling ... but to be honest, new marriages require the experience of people who specialize in marriages. Therefore, we need to have an institution; we need to have a program where we will have people who are trained in marriage matters ..."

Simultaneously, SSPs also seem to be more tolerant of transformation as it liberates women from oppressive traditions. To a certain extent, leaders and SSPs agree that the Bafokeng community must adapt to the modern needs of the community in general, however not disregarding core traditions

such as parental involvement, bogadi negotiations, and couples actively participating within the set RBN activities such as makgotla meetings. SSP1 stated, "... [bogadi] should be paid ... for them to feel like they are married ... " L12 added, "... things have changed today ... but we are trying not to divert completely ... because tradition is tradition ... bogadi is still paid, [family] meetings will always be there ... "

In summary, most leaders expressed role confusion, inadequacy and lack of confidence in handling marital crises and consequently rely on makgotla, traditional courts and SSPs to assist. Leaders need capacity building to support contemporary marriages more effectively. Both leaders and SSPs support the retention of certain traditions that preserve the core values of marriage as well as the vision of the Bafokeng community.

Traditional, modern and spiritual factors contributing to positive marriage outcomes

Traditional, modern, and spiritual factors are important in sustaining marriages. Leaders and SSPs note actions supporting and upholding solid marital bonds, including new couples transitioning into new roles by recognizing and delineating roles and responsibilities. As some leaders report: "... a woman must be meek ... she must be submissive to the man" for the marriage to thrive" L12 emphasized. "... a [man] must provide for the family," says L11.

Additionally, couples should agree on commitment, mutual respect, and confidentiality (no outsiders and non-relatives). They should express affection toward one another, resolve conflicts through healthy communication, share feelings, work together on handling family affairs, and receive regular marriage guidance, counseling, and marriage seminars. For example, L3 states, "... I must know how to speak to my wife, how I am supposed to respect her."

Values are important and reflected in successful marriages through respect, gratitude, cooperation, submissiveness, enthusiasm, humility, sacrifice, forgiveness, good management, accountability, endurance, and effort in overcoming marital problems.

Importance of spirituality in building positive marital outcomes

Spiritual belief contributes toward positive marital results and is consistent with Bafokeng traditions, encouraging marriage and discouraging divorce. Marriage, created by God, is viewed as a life-long covenant.

Although acknowledging their Christianity, some leaders also recognize that ancestral worship believed in enforcing a blessing in the marriage, thus connecting the couple, their families, and ancestors. Some leaders reported: "... a lot of us are Christians" (L11). "Christianity ... must be included ... because it is important" (L7). "Slaughtering a cow from this certain family, that thing is to connect the ancestors. People, we should not forget that ancestors exist. ." (L4)

In summary, traditional principles, modern trends, and spiritual factors contribute to positive marriage outcomes.

Discussion

Information about how traditional systems supported marriages and how the current Bafokeng governance system integrates traditional and modern elements to strengthen and preserve marriages is scarce.

The study sought to explore the perceptions of traditional leaders and practitioners of conventional marriage systems of the Royal Bafokeng Nation in South Africa. Traditionally, divorce was discouraged at all costs; problems were addressed according to a set system (Coertze, 1987) and ensured better marital outcomes.

The most obvious is that leaders perceive non-adherence to traditions as contributing to chaotic family relationships and rapidly increasing divorce. Perhaps the most important result was that although marital systems are worthy of being preserved, leaders are confused by the "changed" system

and experience tension regarding their boundaries and role as leaders supporting dwindling marriages. Leaders are uncertain about how to keep up traditions while at the same time integrating modern needs. Still, leaders take their leadership role seriously and esteem RBN as visionary and open to change but stand firm that certain traditions and core values are essential and need upholding.

Practices that are non-negotiable and foundational

Family involvement is significant for Bafokeng marriages from the onset. Traditional counseling by family equips teams with skills to manage roles and behaviors, eliminating marriage failure (Moeti & Mokgolodi, 2017). Moreover, having received guidance from the family bestows couples honor and respect and affirms the legitimacy of the wedding and advice for other teams. By implication, families share responsibilities for the success of the marriage and strengthen relational bonds. Support from the onset of negotiations symbolizes marriage between two families (Segami & Van Eeden, 2020) and provides relief through immediate traditional counseling as well as mediation during conflicts (Ogoma, 2014).

What is also surprising is that having children is crucial and imperative in marriage, to the extent that lack of children implies the wedding is incomplete (Coertze, 1987) or non-existent (Ogoma, 2014). Children are necessary for procreation (Monye, 2017) but more so because they increase a man's power and create beneficial alliances with other clans (Bekker & Buchner-Eveleigh, 2017).

Involvement with the family goes hand in hand with the importance of caring for the well-being of children, core to the RBN. Children raised in a solid and balanced marriage bring their best to the fore. A relationship exists between stable families and well-ordered societies, reducing the chances of children misbehaving (Ogoma, 2014).

Because children are so important, communal land title rights secure their future well-being. Here the RBN differs from other African traditional communities (Cook, 2013). Customary land regulations permit only married people to residential stands (Van der Linde, 2015). Divorce disowns both spouses' right to land but not the children, as nothing must negatively impact children's well-being, demonstrating how children are protected and supported.

Views of leaders and SSPs in this study differ. SSPs provide professional services (pre-and post-marital counseling and marriage enrichment, among other interventions) to support healthy marriages. Similarly, civil courts provide mediation and legal protection services (Wang, et al. 2023). Institutions with legal responsibilities for protecting vulnerable groups like women and children and advocating against human rights violations or abuse are required. SSPs perceive family involvement as problematic and a possible reason for divorce. Problems point toward in-law interference, with couples commenting on a lack of confidentiality. Whereas couples through go *laya* regularly discuss issues of varying nature with people they know and live with, some fear discussing sensitive topics such as lack of sex (Ghule et al., 2015) with parents, relatives, and leaders.

One unexpected finding is that leaders do not fully understand the roles of practitioners representing current institutions and advocating for vulnerable groups such as women and children. According to leaders, SSPs and civil courts threaten, promote current laws, interfere with traditions, and encourage couples, especially women, to divorce. Leaders feel firm about SSPs and civil courts being a last resort after consultation with traditional internal resources. Consistent with (Spaumer & Prinsloo, 2017, p. 128, 132, 142) in this study, practitioners are outsiders, not trusted with internal family matters compared to families, pastors, and friends.

SSPs perceive patriarchy as an ongoing concern. Often regarded as patriarchal and biased toward women, traditions induce dependency and staying in abusive relationships (Gangoli, 2020). Spaumer & Prinsloo (2017, p. 46) asserts that African culture promotes patriarchy, perpetuating the subordination of women. It is somewhat surprising that leaders maintain Bafokeng traditions not to be gender-biased; they argue the RBN cares for women and children, as customary land regulations favor women over men. Unmarried men may not access residential stands except through inheritance, except for available women over 40 years who have children (Van der Linde, 2015). Thus, Bafokeng land

regulations generally encourage men to marry and again help preserve marriages out of fear of loss of land.

The difference in perceptions of leaders and SSPs on the traditional marriage system is evident. Although recognizing strengths in support of matrimony, SSPs condemn outdated gender-based stumbling blocks to growth and regard modernization as liberating from oppressive patriarchal traditions (Maluleke, 2012). Also, SSPs regard traditional systems as barriers to help-seeking from practitioners or legal services providing various options to strengthen marriages. Not trusting SSPs could hinder the facilitation of holistic approaches integrating traditional practices with contemporary needs.

Although both parties differ, leaders and SSPs regard traditional, modern, and spiritual factors to collectively contribute toward positive outcomes in marriage. Leaders, although defending traditions, to a certain extent, realize the inadequacy concerning contemporary challenges. Significant is that leaders voice first, their lack of confidence in handling marital crises, second, their need for training, and third, their willingness to work together with professional stakeholders. It means that opportunity to integrate conventional and contemporary best practices to establish culturally appropriate solutions to support couples of the RBN exists. Combining strengths to support current needs is possible. It aligns with literature (Cook, 2013), particularly when honoring core values important to the community, such as respect, gratitude, cooperation, submissiveness, enthusiasm, humility, sacrifice, forgiveness, good management, accountability, endurance, and effort to overcome marital problems.

Ongoing dialogs are necessary to clarify misconceptions. Through open discussions, communities can identify what works, is required, and is relevant for the future.

Limitations of the study

While this study can fill some knowledge gaps on culturally appropriate solutions to support couples, limitations exist. The qualitative exploratory nature does not allow for generalizable perceptions of SSPs, an all women sample, or of all RBN leaders, who are hereditary male headmen as per traditional RBN structures, who also differ in age, resulting in diverged perceptions of deeply rooted traditions. Understandings from women and leaders' wives may provide differing perspectives, influencing gender stereotypes, especially regarding patriarchy and gender-based violence, the same as the views of SSPs' focus group discussions, who were all females. According to Acocella (2012), members in focus groups can influence each other.

Also, this study does not probe and address deeper conflict or dilemmas arising, for instance, what RBN leaders and SSPs would consider legitimate grounds for divorce, what price they would be willing to pay to keep marriages, as well as actual views about marital partners' roles emanating from Westernization. Deeper answers would certainly add value to develop culturally receptive and current marriage interventions.

Recommendations include

Culturally appropriate interventions for couples of the RBN should incorporate core traditions and modern values that contribute to positive marital outcomes. Examples are the importance of family involvement from the onset of marriage, bogadi negotiations, the wellbeing of children, spirituality, both traditional and contemporary counseling. Contents should describe the value of marriages, the importance of children, marriage rituals and spirituality, the RBN traditional governance system and how it supports couples. Key steps in developing culturally relevant contents should include; identifying evidence-based interventions, conducting baseline research and expanding or adapting interventions to meet needs. Future studies should provide deeper probes to clarify existing conflicts or dilemmas arising from this study necessary for culturally responsive solutions. Interventions should aim to restore trust in conventional approaches eliciting voluntary help-seeking. Content should highlight the value of family contribution, a stakeholder forum promoting role differentiation, better

collaboration, and cross-referrals between traditional and modern institutions could highlight the importance of solid relationships influencing the strength of entire family structure. SSPs should receive training on RBN traditions, to firstly upsurge respect and secondly facilitate the integration of core traditions and values into practice, ultimately delivering more culturally appropriate services. Leaders also need to be trained to understand couples' diverse needs to accommodate modern institutions expanding support. Policy-wise and based on Bafokeng culture, stakeholders can approach various courts when makgotla have failed to assist, starting first with the traditional court, with the contemporary court as a last resort. As marital challenges in SA increase, especially amongst Black African couples, the demand grows to explore culturally- appropriate solutions to support current needs. This study contributes to the under-researched theory on cultural diversity, norms, and attitudes toward marriage.

Conclusion

Despite contrasting perceptions, certain conventions stay core to sustainability in relationships, however challenging to integrate with modern trends practically. Articulating themselves as forward-thinking, leaders take their role seriously and acknowledge limitations as a stumbling block to growth. Findings point to the insight of leaders and practitioners into the worth of traditional and modern practices and willingness to negotiate. The value is the shaping of the first steps in growing theory and practice toward integrating, developing, and facilitating culturally appropriate family interventions applicable to Black African couples. Integrated solutions can meet the needs of couples to lessen chaotic family life, advance children and family well-being, and gain the support of stakeholders who may accelerate progress in the field. Ultimately the aim is to strengthen the community, as is stated in the RBN vision 2035.

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ORCID

Kabaro Grace Neswiswa  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6890-3386>

Susanne Jacobs  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1423-9923>

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