

Cultural Pedogamy: Towards an Eco-Cultural Theory of Early (Child) Marriage



Ngoran Mathew Banlanjo*

The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

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***Corresponding author:** Ngoran Mathew Banlanjo, The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

Abstract

Early marriage, particularly (early) girl-child marriage, is prevalent in many indigenous ethnic and cultural communities in around the world and in Cameroon. In spite of this, and despite the fact that studies have continued to be carried out on the phenomenon to elicit its causes and effects on individuals and practicing communities, no study has attempted to develop a psychological theory of the practice based on the practice itself. Most of the theories that have informed studies on early marriage practices have either been mainstream psychological theories; only one Africentric theory so far, namely the social ontogenetic theory of development, has made a contribution to explaining the practice from an African point of view. The theory of cultural pedogamy is developed from findings from the study titled "Early girl-child marriage: An exploration of its psychosocial practices and effect in four cultural communities in Cameroon." The communities sampled included the Mbororo-Fulani communities of Sabga and Ndawara, the Moghamo cultural community, the Nwe Mundani and the Lower Mboh. This study utilized the sequential exploratory design and data were collected from four cultural communities using questionnaire, key informant interviews and focused group discussions. Data collected from interviews were analyzed using the process of thematic analysis with the support of Atlas. ti version 5.2 software (Atlas Ti GMBH 2006). Findings from the study revealed that the practice of early marriage is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs, norms, values, perceptions and expectations as well as in socio-economic conditions and has psychosocial, socio-economic and educational limitations on the girl-child. Quantitative data revealed that of the 36 respondents in the sub-sample of child-wives and former child-wives, 44.4% were in forced early marriages; 52.8% were completely dependent on their husbands financially and materially; none of them was in a legally registered marriage; 88.6% did not know the legal age for marriage in Cameroon; 85.7% said their husbands did not treat them as equals; 63.3% reported that they lacked decision making rights in their marital homes; 94.1% had attempted school but all of them were currently dropouts as none was schooling while in marriage; 74.2% had ended school before the age of 15 years; 85.6% of them were illiterate and all expressed the willingness to return to school if given the opportunity. Furthermore, a significant 94.1% of this sample perceived early marriage as a violation of the human rights of the girl-child and above 90.0% indicated that they lacked happiness and fulfilment in their marriages. The theory of cultural pedogamy argues that cultural pedogamy results largely from several endo-ethnic-cultural factors which include cognitive cultural factors (cultural belief systems, cultural norms and values, and culture-determined perceptions), and socio-cultural factors (socio-cultural expectations, cultural practices and traditional/cultural institutions). These cultural factors have developed through a cognitive causal sequence. The interaction between the cognitive endo-ethnic-cultural factors and between the cognitive and non-cognitive factors determines the strength of the practice and its endurance over time.

Keywords: Pedogamy; Early marriage; Ethno-cultural

Introduction

Early marriage of girls as an indigenous cultural practice in Africa and other regions around the world is among the burning issues that occupy central stage in debates on equity and sustainable development across the world. The phenomenon of early marriage (sometimes also referred to as child marriage) has often been defined in international legal instruments of the United Nations as any marriage in which one of the parties is an individual less than 18 years

of age [1-4] UDHR, 1948) yet there is no global consensus across national legal systems and cultures on the conception of "child" and "childhood" and what should be considered as "early" in marriage practices of different cultures and legal systems. Although the practice of early marriage targets not only young girls but also boys, studies have established that the practice significantly involves far more girls than boys [2,5,6]. The drivers of the practice are largely culture-specific even though there are some drivers that cut across

several contexts of prevalence; thus, different cultures that practice early marriage do so for specific cultural reasons that may differ across cultural contexts of practice [7]. The prevalence rates of the practice across different geographical contexts is largely dependent on the strength of the existing drivers of the practice, the context-specific perceptions of the practice, and the attitudes which the practice and its effects (both ontogenetic and socio-economic) evoke in agent populations. The effects of the practice, including the psychosocial consequences, are generally cross-culturally similar and tend to impact more on child wives than child husbands [8]. Scholars have tended to perceive the practice as gender discriminatory and as constituting significant health, socio-economic and educational limitations on affected girls and thus deconstructive of their prospects to attain human flourishing in these dimensions. As such, the practice itself, its underpinning drivers and consequences have become a cause for concern in a global context committed to sustainable human development and the promotion of equity among men and women in all areas of life. The focus of the rhetoric on the practice has been to expose the limiting effects of the practice especially on the girl-child, and to push for the universal conceptualization and reconceptualization of the practice as discriminatory, as a cultural conspiracy against the girl-child, as a violation of gender fairness, and as an expression of patriarchal gender-based violence, one which limits women's right of access to and enjoyment of equal opportunities for a better life with men. Thus, most studies on the practice recommend efforts aimed at its global eradication. In fact, findings and recommendations from studies on early marriage globally have inspired advocacy goals that have become the compass of several international developmental agendas. Millennium Development Goal #3 advocates for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women. Sustainable Development Goal #5 calls on nations to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls while Goal #10 calls on member states to reduce inequalities within and among countries. With so much advocacy on ending early marriage globally, it is necessary that theoretical frameworks that address the practice be developed to shed lights on what pathways for change can be pursued to make eradication of the practice effective and global.

The Need for A Theory of Early Marriage

One of the gaps in existing studies on early marriage generally and early (girl-child) marriage in particular is the absence of a theoretical framework on early marriage itself. Studies that seek to address the problem of early marriage practices have often been informed by mainstream theories in psychology and related disciplines which were developed for other reasons but which have implications for understanding the phenomenon and practice of early marriage. Unfortunately,

no study has so far generated a theoretical framework of early marriage itself based on its findings in the context in which the study was carried out. This lack of a theoretical framework on early marriage has left several indigenous perspectives of the practice unexplored, suggesting that not only knowledge systems that embed the practice but also significant lessons implied in the practice remain largely ignored and unknown. Applying theories from psychology and related disciplines has been instrumental in isolating some of the drivers and effects (such as health and psychosocial effects) of the practice of early marriage. Yet there remains a lot about the concept and practice that needs to be captured in a theoretical framework of early marriage (such as the cognitive perspectives to the practice) and which applied theories from mainstream psychology have not been able to sufficiently explain. For instance, Maslow's needs-based theory explains early marriage practices from the perspective of its drivers and consequences, concluding that the practice is needs-motivated and tends to be needs-creating in its effects. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory views early marriage as a result of socialization patterns that take place within the micro, meso and macro systems of a child's cultural worldview [9]. Erikson's psychosexual theory (particularly the fourth and fifth stages of psychosexual development) perceives the practice in terms of the concretization of social priming roles and identity affirmation [10]. Nsamenang's Social Ontogenesis views early marriage as a consequence of successful social development or emergence of an individual in line with certain culture-specific parameters [11]. A theoretical framework that addresses the cognitive factors behind the practice of early marriage and explains the interaction and interrelation of the different factors (cognitive, socio-cultural, existential etc.) that underpin, entrench, sustain and perpetuate early marriage is necessary [12,13].

What a Theory of Early Marriage Should Address

Early marriage is largely a cultural phenomenon. This means that the practice of early marriage can largely be explained in terms of cultural factors. This is not to say that in actual practice every incident of early marriage is driven by factors imbedded in culture or that culture is all sufficient to explain the reasons why people sometimes marry early. However, culture provides the larger justification for most cases of early marriage and many cases of early marriage which are not primarily culture-motivated (such as economically driven early marriages) nevertheless are inspired by or find support in culture. Thus, in developing a theory of early marriage, it is important to address the following: to isolate the fundamental assumptions on which such a theory is based, to explain the factors that entrench the practice and how these factors are sequenced, to account for the interrelationships between the different factors that embed the practice of early marriage

and how variations in these factors or in the nature of their interactions impact on the strength of the practice, and how these factors and their interrelationships can be managed to effectively end the practice of early marriage.

Theory Vis a Vis Cultural Variations in Conceptions And Practices

This paper proposes a model of early marriage theory termed the ethno-cultural theory of pedagogy. This theory is developed from my studies on early marriage practices in the context of indigenous cultural communities of English speaking Cameroon. Its basis is therefore entirely Africentric. However, just as every theory developed in the context of one worldview or culture has implications for understanding behaviour across cultures, the ethno-cultural theory of early marriage is not limited in its applicability to the indigenous African cultures and phenomena from which it was developed. It can and should have universal applicability in being able to explain especially early marriage practices in non-African cultures. This is not to say that the theory has no cross-cultural limitations. Inasmuch as every theory is limited in its applicability to contexts foreign to those from which they were developed, it is expected that the ethno-cultural theory of pedagogy will not be an exception. Instead, among its merits, if any, should be that its limitations inspire the development of new and better indigenous theories in those contexts where its shortcomings are identified. In Africa, this will significantly enrich Africentric contributions to psychology and expand possibilities for an understanding of the rich and diverse worldviews that are the heritage of Africa.

The Ethno-Cultural Theory of Pedagogy: An Africentric Model

By pedagogy is meant marriage in which at least one of the spouses is a child below the age of 18 years and thus a minor by law. This theory is based on four fundamental cultural assumptions namely:

- a) Firstly, the assumption that one's existence and one's social ontogeny (particularly the existence and social development of the girl-child) are predetermined to a large extent by factors inherent in culture (cognitive cultural factors and social-cultural factors).
- b) Secondly, is the assumption that the existential ideal, as presented by culture, is for the girl-child to conform/comply with or abide by the expectations of her culture as enshrined in beliefs, norms, values and perceptions about marriage in relation to women and girls.
- c) The third assumption is that the valuation of the girl-child is largely extrinsic as it depends to a greater extent on the degree of her conformity and compliance with social-cultural expectations.

- d) Fourthly, the assumption that in the context of traditions of early marriage, the social dimension of the selfhood of the girl-child (her selfhood as a product of social and cultural conditionings) is more emphasized than the personal dimension of her selfhood (her selfhood as the reflection of her personal values, preferences, aspirations, life visions and life goals) as her priming is primarily done in preparation for social roles. Thus, within the spectrum of these assumptions, the culture of early marriage presents itself as a form of socio-cultural conditioning or determinism.

Based on the above assumptions, this model (the ethno-cultural theory of pedagogy) has the following tenets: Firstly, Pedagogy in culture (Cultural Pedagogy) is largely a result of several endo-ethnic-cultural factors which include cognitive cultural factors (cultural belief systems, cultural norms and values, and culture-determined perceptions), and socio-cultural factors (socio-cultural expectations, cultural practices and traditional/cultural institutions). These factors both engender the practice and sustain it. Non-endo-ethnic-cultural factors such as poverty and social adversities can also give rise to incidences of early marriage but their efficacy and the strength of endurance of the practice that results from them depends on the availability and degree of efficacy of cognitive-cultural factors and socio-cultural factors in those contexts.

Secondly, these cultural factors have developed through a cognitive causal sequence in which cognitive beliefs engender cultural values and norms. These two together shape/determine perceptions that reinforce the beliefs, norms and values and are the reason for the practices and institutions that immediately influence the prevalence. Hence the cultural practice of early girl-child marriage is mediated from belief systems through this cognitive causal sequence.

Thirdly, belief systems have a direct proportional relationship with the consequent factors in the cognitive causal chain. The stronger the belief systems, the more valued and abiding would be the norms and values, the stronger and more enduring would be the perceptions and the more prevalent and effective would be the practices that sustain pedagogy. The stronger the cognitive cultural factors, the stronger their influence and reinforcement of the socio-cultural factors, the more effective the practice and the more prevalent the incidences of early girl-child marriage. The weaker the cognitive cultural factors, the weaker their influence and reinforcement of the socio-cultural factors, the less effective the practice and the less prevalent the incidences of early girl-child marriage.

Furthermore, the relationship between cognitive cultural factors of early marriage and socio-cultural factors of early marriage is not only directly proportional but also reciprocal as both factors mutually reinforce each other. The stronger and more effective the socio-cultural factors of early marriage, the stronger

their reinforcing power on the cognitive cultural factors and the stronger the causal influence of cognitive cultural factors on the socio-cultural factors. The weaker and less effective the socio-cultural factors of early marriage, the weaker their reinforcing power on the cognitive cultural factors and the weaker the causal influence of cognitive cultural factors on the socio-cultural factors.

Where pedogamy is unwilled by the individual (as in forced marriages) or when an individual finds it difficult to break free from the mesh of an already contracted early marriage, there is a possibility of laps into cognitive, social and existential dissonance which constitutes a real threat to the psychological health of the girl-child. Cognitive Dissonance – Discomfort resulting from the gap between the beliefs, values and norms of one's culture on the one hand and one's own personal ideals on the other hand. Social Dissonance - Discomfort resulting from the gap between social expectations and cultural practices on the one hand and one's vocational/career dreams on the other hand. Existential Dissonance - Discomfort arising from the gap between the life a girl in early marriage is compelled to live (including lost opportunities) and the ideal life she would have loved to create for herself.

Moreover, to effectively eliminate or at least minimize the strength of the practice, its rate of prevalence and its effects and risks to the girls and boys who are victims of it requires addressing fundamentally the root causative factors namely the cognitive cultural factors (belief systems, norms, values and perceptions) that entrench and sustain it.

Finally, the degree to which pedogamy can thrive or endure over time depends on the following external influences

- a) Exposure to adverse non-cultural factors such as poverty and social instability
- b) Exposure to (similar) beliefs, norms and values that reinforce those of the cultural group
- c) Exposure to counter or antithetical beliefs, norms and values
- d) Openness to influences from urbanization and modernity
- e) While the first two influences tend to enhance the prevalence of the practice, the last two tend to inhibit its prevalence and weaken its effectiveness. For these inhibitive external influences on the practice of early marriage to be effective
- f) They must offer prospects of better alternatives to early marriages
- g) They must respect and affirm the dignity and pride of the girl-child more firmly and practically than the agent culture of early marriage does.

Conclusion

Early marriage practise continues to widen the gender gaps between men and women and to disadvantage victim girls who have no further opportunities to pursue their life dreams beyond marriage. The cultural drivers and consequences of the practice tend to present an image of the practice as militating against a psychology of human flourishing and wellbeing. Efforts to promote human wellbeing and a psychology of human flourishing among all persons and particularly among women and girls call for conceptualizations of the practice as dehumanizing, marginalizing and violating the rights of victim girls. It also calls for a need to capture the practice in a theoretical framework that guides advocacy and the design of interventions towards the eradication of the practice.

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