

Natural Family Planning (NFP): Its Role in Enhancing Harmony in Marriage

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Introduction

As an alternative method of child spacing and birth control, natural family planning (NFP) is gradually gaining more and more acceptability by spouses who for various reasons find other methods of contraceptives unsuitable. Among Catholics, for instance, artificial methods of family planning are considered immoral, and therefore, unacceptable. One criticism against NFP is that it involves cumbersome charts and observations all the time, to the extent of making sexual interactions between married couples lose spontaneity. Lewit (1974) emphasises the timing of coitus of the NFP users. Another common criticism is that the method has high failure rates. Brennan and Klaus, however, have come up with three categories of pregnancies that occur during NFP method use. These are:

1. Method related pregnancies;
2. Teaching related pregnancies; and
3. Informed choice pregnancies.

If these categories are observed, NFP as a method of family planning should not necessarily have a high failure rate.

Unlike contraceptives, NFP is unlikely to present any side effects on the users. Some scholars have also stated that NFP may create closer ties to the users since, by its very nature, it requires the full commitment and self-discipline of both partners, if it is to succeed (Klaus and Fagan 1981). Both the husband and wife will need to discuss their fertility situation, before each sexual interaction (Borkman 1979). This way, both will be responsible for the outcome of their sexual intimacy without interpersonal accusations (Klaus et al 1975).

It must be pointed out from the onset that in this study, the investigator was not looking into the details of NFP training or determining the successes and failures of NFP as a method of family planning. The specific aim of the study was to determine if NFP, as an intervention in the marital life of the enrolled user-couples, had any effects on their social interactions during a period of one year.

The only literature available during the study dealt with NFP as a method of family planning. Billings et al (1980), Kleiman (1983), and Rice et al (1981) have documented details about the fertile phases of women users, definitions, history and methodologies of NFP. Another category of scholars have looked into the social perspective and the effectiveness of NFP (Borkman 1979; Klaus 1979 and 1980; Klaus et al 197, 1981; and Klaus (personal communication). Tietze and Lewit (1974) have recorded a statistical evaluation of contraceptive methods.

Most of these studies were done in developed countries, where literacy levels are much higher and hence the respondents could respond to mailed questionnaires, observe Symptom-Thermal and Calendar Methods; and also read their fertility charts.

This study was biased towards observing the changes in the social interactions of the user couples and in determining whether these changes were influenced by the introduction of NFP into their lives. Some of the couples were illiterate and relatively poor. No systematic studies or literature on the subject relating to the Kenyan situation were available for comparison. This study is an attempt to contribute to this subject.

The main objective of the study was to assess the level of interaction of individual married spouses at the point of entry to the course in NFP and again after one year of practising NFP. The

next objective was to assess whether NFP, as an intervention, has caused any remarkable changes in the couples' marital relations.

Methods of Study

A pilot survey was done by the investigator and two final year medical students from the University of Nairobi Medical School. The findings from the pilot survey were used to construct questionnaires which were again pretested and improved on. The exercise was repeated several times until the research team's scoring and rating was almost uniform. The survey was carried out between September and November, 1984, a pretest study was done in December 1984, and the post-test a year later in December 1985.

A sample of thirty (30) married couples were drawn randomly from a larger one of about one hundred couples who had enrolled for a natural family planning course at the Nyahururu Parish of the Diocese of Nyeri, one of the oldest Catholic Church centres in Kenya. A structured questionnaire which had been formulated, piloted and improved on, was administered to the study sample in a pretest and a post-test phase of the study. The two phases of the study were one year apart. In each study phase, interviews were conducted on couples in their homes. The interviewer recorded any information that was either observed or came up during interview sessions and during casual discussions.

The variables considered in the study were based on the characteristics of the family, such as socio-economic status, the number of offsprings, socialization of the offsprings, education and occupation of spouses, influences of the extended family in decision-making processes, religious background, levels of communication or intimate interactions of the spouses, excessive alcohol consumption, problem solving processes and use of leisure time among many others.

The questionnaires were used to elicit

information on the above factors. Each question was given several responses/options although the respondents were given a chance to give additional responses. The interviewers had acquired response-listening skills as well as observational skills, such as noting the order of importance of each response.

The alternative responses were not read to the respondent, but from the pilot, the interviewers were able to check the answers beside the given responses and score a grade ranging from zero to five (0 - 5). The highest score was five (5) for each question and highest total score for all the questions was one hundred and twenty one (121). Each couple's total score was calculated into a percentage score using the denominator of 121.

There were situations where a question had two parts, for instance, 'if the answer is yes, what are the reasons?' For those who answered no to such questions, a denominator of (one hundred and eleven) 111 instead of 121 was used to calculate the percentage score.

The total percentage score for each couple was used to rate the level of their social interactions as, good, fair or poor. The ratings were interpreted as follows:

Score	Percentage	Interaction Level
Good	80-89	High
Fair	70-79	Medium
Poor	60-69	Low

The higher the score, the better the level of interaction. Aware of the limitations of measuring human relations on a numerical scale, these numerical values were still used to determine the levels of interactions of the respondents for lack of a better scale. The scores of the pretest and the post-test studies were compared to see whether the individual couples gained, lost or remained static in their scores after the NFP intervention.

In order for the reader to understand the analysis of the data, it would be important to note that the tables refer to couples and not individual spouses.

The totals were therefore, thirty (30) couples, not (60) sixty individuals. During the post-test, important changes in the lives of the couples, such as an increase in the number of offspring, were observed and recorded separately. During the pilot and the study periods, rapport developed between the interviewers and the respondents. The final year medical students displayed a mature approach to both the nature of the study, and to the married couples studies. One of the students was married. Informal discussions and observations developed easily and provided invaluable insights to the interpretation of the data from the formal questionnaire. While these data have not been shown on the tables in this paper, they enriched the entire report.

Results of the Study

The characteristics of the respondents were analysed and the data presented as follows.

Religion

All the respondents, except four, were Catholics. Of the four non-Catholics, two were Presbyterian, one was a Jehovah's Witness, and the other was from the African Independent Church. The Catholics were randomly picked from fourteen different congregations scattered in the parish within a radius of one to forty kilometres from Nyahururu township.

Age of the respondents

The males ranged in age between 24-66 years; half of them were in their thirties, seven in their early and mid-forties, two were 51, and two in their mid-sixties; and four were in their mid-twenties.

The females ranged between 20-44 years of age; eighteen were below thirty years, eight were in their thirties, and four in their early to mid-forties. The couple married the longest were the 51

year-old male and the 44 year-old female. They had been married for 27 years and had 13 living children.

In general, the older couples, who also had longer marriages, tended to have larger families. The youngest couple, 24 and 21 years old, had been married for five years and had two children. One couple had just been married and they had a baby during the post-test study. The eldest men (in their sixties) had both remarried after being widowed. Their new wives, both in their thirties, each had over nine living children.

Socio-Economic Status

The majority of the couples were small scale farmers. Seven of the couples did not own any land. Of these landless men, one was running a small tailoring business in the local township where he lived with his wife and two children. Three were employees of the Forest Department at Marmanet and Ndaragua forests, where they lived with their families as squatters. Another three landless couples lived on their parent's land where they were allocated small portions of land to grow their food. Fifteen of the couples owned two to five acres, while one owned six acres where the wife raised dairy cows. The man was a school teacher and they had nine children.

Among the males, only 13 (43.3%) had a regular source of cash income. Two of these were running small businesses, one was a local mechanic, two were employed as drivers, another was an evangelist at the local church, another a part-time blacksmith, three were casual labourers in the forest department, and three were primary school teachers. Only two females had a regular cash income. One was a primary school teacher and the other was a tailor at the family business. All the other women worked as small scale farmers.

Education level

Five of the females had never been to school; two (the teacher and tailor) had completed high school. The rest had done between three to seven years of primary education.

Four of the males were illiterate, five had completed high school, fifteen had completed primary school, while the rest had between three to six years of primary school (Table 1).

Table 1

<i>Level of Education of Couples</i>				
	None	Primary	H. School	Total
Males	4	21	5	30
Females	5	23	2	30

It appeared that the males who had higher education married women who had similar higher levels of education while those without formal education similarly married women who had no formal education. The relationship of education to marriage is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

<i>Marriage and Education of Spouses</i>					
Education in years	Males				
	0-3	4-7	8-11	Total	
Total	0-3	3	4	2	9
Females	4-7	4	11	3	18
	8-11	0	1	2	3
	Total	7	16	7	30

The mean for education was 5.0 years for females and 6.3 years for males. The above table shows associative mating. In relation to levels of education, it would appear that 'like married like'.

Comparison of pre and post-test scores

During the pretest and the post-test, only five couples acquired the highest scores of 80-89, and only one couple out of these five managed to maintain this high score throughout the two studies. The other four dropped into the medium score, while another four couples from the middle score gained in score during the post-test to fill those places. This means that, although the number in the highest score remained five, the individual couples were different. Couples changed places such that some went up while others dropped in scores.

At the end of the study, thirteen couples went up in scores while twelve went down in scores. Only five couples had their score remain constant. Table 3 does not indicate who moved where; it shows the pattern of scoring according to the levels of education during the pre and post-study.

Score and average family education

The average family education appeared to have some influence on the family score. The couples with higher education scored higher grades, between medium to high scale. The illiterate couples scored between low and medium grades and, all but one, remained in these grades during the post-study. The family scores according to the average family education is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Family Score and Average Family Education

Educ. in years	Family Score							
	60-69		70-79		80-89		Total	
	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post
0-3	3	3	3	2	0	1	6	6
4-7	4	8	13	9	2	3	19	20
8-11	0	0	2	3	3	1	5	4
Total	7	11	18	14	5	5	30	30

Frequency of marital sex

One of the questions asked was how many times per week each couple had sexual relations. During the pretest and the post-test, the majority of the couples reported three times every week. One couple reported that they had sex five times a week. A few couples, where the husband worked and stayed from home, reported fewer times per month (Table 4).

Table 4

Frequency of Marital Sex by Number of Couples

Frequency per week	Number of couples	
	Pre-test	Post-test
2-3 times	20	18
once	5	3
once every 2 weeks	2	8
once or less every month	3	1
Total	30	30

One observation that came out quite clearly was the freedom with which women discussed these intimate matters during the post-test. In the pretest, many of the women could hardly look up during these discussions. They were too shy to contribute and the husbands did all the talking. In the post-test, the situation was quite different; both the spouses talked freely. This freedom could be a result of the exposure the NFP course had given them over a year.

Perceived role of Marital Sex

The attitude of the couples towards marital sex changed significantly during the post-test study (See Table 5).

Table 5

The most important role of marital sex

	Number of couples	
	pre-test	post-test
Stated achievement	10 (33.3%)	21 (70%)
Expression of love	5 (16.6%)	3 (10%)
Procreation	11 (36.6%)	5 (16.6%)
Fulfil physical need	4 (13.3%)	1 (3.3%)
Fulfil emotional need	30 (99.98%)	30 (99.9%)
Total		

From the above table, the pretest study shows that 20 (twenty) couples had listed fulfilment of physical needs, procreation, and emotional needs, in descending order, as the most important achievements of marital sex. Ten (10) couples mentioned expression of love as the most important. In the post-test, 21 (70%) reported expression of love as the most important role in marital sex, an increase of eleven (11) couples from the pretest. The roles of procreation and fulfilment of emotional needs were reduced during the post-test. Since nothing else in the lives of these couples had changed significantly, this change of attitude could be attributed to the NFP intervention.

Reasons for refusal of marital sex

In the post-test, twenty three (76.6%) of the couples reported fertility as the major reason for refusal of sex. This is a big contrast to the pretest study, where only five (16.6%) of the couples had mentioned it. Similarly, the pretest study showed that fifteen (50%) of the couples reported menstruation as a reason for avoiding marital sex. In the post-test, only five (16.6%) of the couples maintained this attitude. Similarly, the response 'not inclined', almost disappeared during the post-test. Only two couples gave it as a reason for avoiding sex.

Use of leisure by the couples changed from pretest to post-test studies. In the pretest, only

thirteen (43.3%) of the couples spent their leisure time together. In the posttest, twenty (66.6%) of the couples spent their leisure time together.

Asked if there were alternatives to sex when it must be avoided, 24 (80%) of the couples did not know any during the pretest. The other 20% mentioned coitus interruptus, which, of course, means genital contact. However, in the post-test, 27 (90%) reported many non-genital ways of expressing love in marriage. These included holding each other and caressing, which the Kikuyu refer to as *Nguiko*.

This added information was interpreted, not so much as newly acquired knowledge, but rather as a change of attitude of the respondents. It would appear like they had overcome their inhibitions (Table 6).

Table 6

Reasons for refusal of sexual relations

Reasons given	No. of couples	
	Pretest	Post-test
Fertile time	5 (16.6%)	23 (76.6%)
Menstruation	15 (50%)	(16.6%)
Not inclined	10 (33.3%)	2 (6.6%)
Total	30	30

Conclusions

It is complex to assess human relations since many complex factors influence the making of a good or bad relationship. As already mentioned, economic, offspring, and other social concerns may affect the couple's mutual interactions or even the stability of their marriage. Marital relations cannot be singled out and discussed in isolation of these other factors. It is with this awareness that the author used the criteria of scores as an indicator for good, moderate or poor marital interactions among the NFP user couples in Nyahururu parish.

Some of the conclusions arrived at are

summarised below. With or without the scores, one thing that did come out most clearly, was the development of free communication process between the spouses. This was observed during the casual discussions by the investigators throughout the two studies, and the differences were obvious after the post-test.

Summary of Conclusions

- Thirteen couples gained scores, five remained constant, and twelve went down in their scores.
- Fifteen couples had new babies, and five were expecting. Eight of them volunteered to disclose whether or not the pregnancies were planned. Twelve were unwilling to discuss the situation. The investigator respected this and did not pursue the subject.
- The spouses level of verbal communication in sex matters and fertility had changed greatly (had been facilitated by NFP).
- The women kept repeating that their husbands cannot take things for granted any more. 'He has to consult the record book, and discuss it with me.'
- For some women, the fact that marital sex was no longer taken for granted created a feeling of anticipation and, hence, arousal, if the timing was right.
- Some husbands expressed their amazement at the complexity of female fertility, which they had learnt from the NFP course. This awareness may create mutual respect of the spouses' fertility.
- 'Fertile period' was given by the majority of couples as the major reason for avoiding sex at times.
- 'Expression of love' was reported as the most important achievement of marital sex.
- The spouses, especially males, were beginning to show more attention to the marital partner in decision-making, and less loyalty to the social obligations within their kin groups. The community is patrilineal, where the man's kin

can sometimes be too powerful for the wife to participate in major family decisions. A landless male who has to depend on his father's land is more powerless in socio-economic decisions.

- One of the reasons given for unplanned pregnancies during NFP was irrational behaviour by drunken husbands. 'I gave you the record book, but you threw it aside,' one disappointed and pregnant woman accused her husband during the post-test interview. Apologetically, he replied, 'I have already promised you I will stop drinking.' Judging from the way she eyed him, it was apparent this woman had heard the excuse before.

Although this study dealt with a small sample, and a short intervention period, it would appear that NFP had brought about new ways of thinking to the user couples studied. The author would like to revisit these couples after a period of several years and see how much of these changed attitudes had been retained.

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