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IMPACT OF ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY AND EMOTIONALLY FOCUSED THERAPY ON WORK ETHICS AMONG FEMALE TEACHERS WITH MARITAL INSTABILITY

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Abstract
This study investigated the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) in enhancing work ethics among female primary school teachers experiencing marital instability in Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria. Marital instability, marked by persistent relational conflict, emotional detachment, and the threat of separation or divorce, often compromises teachers' emotional well-being and professional conduct. Given the significant role of teachers in shaping educational outcomes, the study explored whether structured psychological interventions could mitigate the adverse effects of personal distress on occupational ethics. A quasi-experimental design involving pre-test, post-test, and control groups was adopted. Ninety (90) female teachers experiencing marital instability were purposively selected using a multistage sampling procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to either ACT, EFT, or a control group. Data were collected using standardized instruments: the Marital Instability Index and the Short Form Work Ethic Occupational Inventory (SFWEOI), with reliability indices of 0.90 and 0.92, respectively. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at a 0.05 significance level. Findings revealed that both ACT and EFT significantly improved participants' work ethics compared to the control group. While ACT produced the highest post-test mean score, the difference between ACT and EFT was not statistically significant. These results suggest that both interventions are effective in enhancing professional behaviour and emotional regulation among female teachers facing relational challenges. The study concludes that ACT and EFT are valuable tools for promoting ethical engagement and resilience in educational professionals and recommends their integration into school-based counselling and teacher support programs.
Keywords: Acceptance and commitment therapy, Emotionally focused therapy, Female teachers, Marital instability and Work ethics

Introduction

In the contemporary educational landscape, the responsibilities of teachers extend far beyond curriculum delivery. They are expected to demonstrate a high degree of professional ethics, emotional resilience, and a commitment to the holistic development of their students. Among the most essential attributes of a teacher's professional life is work ethics, which encompass values such as diligence, discipline, accountability, and integrity (Akinbode, 2018). These values not only influence a teacher's classroom performance but also shape students' moral and academic development. However, teachers, particularly women, are often subjected to various psychosocial stressors that can compromise these values. One of the most prominent among these is marital instability, a relational condition characterized by ongoing conflict, emotional estrangement, infidelity, poor communication, and, in many cases, a looming threat of separation or divorce. The emotional and cognitive burden imposed by such instability may result in decreased job satisfaction, low morale, absenteeism, and disengagement from work duties (Okonkwo & Eke, 2021).

Marital instability, characterized by chronic conflict, emotional detachment, and a heightened risk of separation or divorce, can have far-reaching psychological consequences. For female teachers, especially in urban settings like the Ibadan metropolis, the strain of unstable marital relationships often spills into their professional lives, leading to decreased job satisfaction, diminished productivity, absenteeism, and impaired ethical standards at work (Eze & Ndukaihe, 2020). The dual burden of managing domestic conflict and maintaining professional responsibilities intensifies stress levels and may result in emotional dysregulation and reduced organizational commitment. To address this psychological and professional dissonance experienced by female teachers facing marital instability, evidence-based therapeutic interventions such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) have gained prominence for their effectiveness in fostering emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and behavioural alignment with core personal values. These interventions are particularly suited to individuals coping with chronic stress, relational conflict, and the emotional toll of unresolved personal challenges which are factors that are common in cases of marital distress.

ACT, is a third-wave cognitive-behavioural therapy which is designed to help individuals develop psychological flexibility, which refers to the ability to remain in contact with the present moment and persist or change behaviour in alignment with chosen values, even in the face of unpleasant internal experiences (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012). ACT operates through six core processes—acceptance, cognitive defusion, present moment awareness, self-as-context, values clarification, and committed action. Together, these processes enable individuals to reduce experiential avoidance, respond mindfully to emotional triggers, and pursue meaningful activities despite psychological pain. Within occupational settings, ACT has demonstrated efficacy in improving stress management, increasing work satisfaction, and enhancing ethical conduct by enabling individuals to act in accordance with their professional values (Bond et al., 2013). Likewise, Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), grounded in attachment theory, focuses on restoring secure emotional bonds in adult relationships by fostering open communication, trust, and emotional responsiveness. EFT emphasizes the restructuring of negative interaction patterns and the enhancement of emotional accessibility between partners, which is essential for healing relational wounds and strengthening interpersonal resilience (Johnson, 2004). By guiding individuals through a process of identifying and expressing unmet emotional needs in a safe therapeutic environment, EFT helps resolve deep-seated conflicts and facilitates emotional repair. This approach not only improves romantic relationship quality but also promotes emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and interpersonal competence—skills that are transferable to the workplace.

Empirical studies have shown that individuals who undergo EFT report significant improvements in psychological well-being, relationship satisfaction, and emotional stability (Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). For female teachers navigating the complexities of marital discord, ACT and EFT serve as complementary tools for enhancing both personal well-being and professional conduct. Through increased self-awareness, emotional healing, and value-based action, these therapies can empower female educators to uphold their work ethics, maintain job performance, and contribute positively to the learning environment despite personal challenges. Despite the growing recognition of the psychological and professional challenges experienced by female educators especially those grappling with marital discord, there remains a notable dearth of empirical studies investigating the impact of structured psychotherapeutic interventions such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) on their professional functioning in Nigeria. While international literature has demonstrated the effectiveness of these therapies in improving psychological well-being, emotional regulation, and occupational outcomes, there is a paucity of context-specific research exploring how these interventions influence work ethics among Nigerian female teachers facing the strain of marital instability.

The Ibadan metropolis, one of the largest and most diverse educational zones in Nigeria, offers a strategically important setting for this investigation. As an urban center with a high density of public and private schools, Ibadan houses a substantial population of female teachers whose experiences are shaped by complex socio-

economic realities, cultural expectations, and urban stressors. Moreover, studies have reported a growing incidence of marital strain among working women in this region, often attributed to changing gender roles, economic pressures, and shifting family dynamics (Adebayo & Ogunyemi, 2019). These contextual factors make Ibadan not only a relevant site for assessing the real-world impact of ACT and EFT on teachers' work ethics, but also a microcosm through which broader insights can be drawn about the interplay between marital instability, psychological well-being, and professional ethics in similar urban Nigerian settings. Therefore, a focused empirical inquiry in this locale has the potential to fill a critical research void, support evidence-based mental health interventions, and ultimately enhance the productivity, emotional resilience, and ethical engagement of female teachers across the educational system.

Statement of the Problem

The quality of education in any nation is directly tied to the effectiveness, emotional stability, and ethical disposition of its teachers. In Nigeria, female teachers constitute a significant percentage of the teaching workforce, particularly at the primary and secondary school levels. However, many of these educators face complex psychological and relational challenges that affect their professional functioning. One of the most pervasive of these challenges is marital instability which is characterized by emotional disconnection, frequent conflict, separation threats, or divorce, which can result in deep emotional distress and diminished workplace performance. For female teachers, who often balance demanding home responsibilities with professional expectations, marital instability can lead to increased stress, emotional exhaustion, absenteeism, and a noticeable decline in work ethics, including reduced commitment, punctuality, accountability, and professional integrity. Despite the seriousness of this issue, there is a limited body of empirical research in Nigeria that investigates the impact of psychological interventions on enhancing work ethics among female teachers undergoing such distress. While Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) have been proven in other contexts to enhance emotional resilience, psychological flexibility, and interpersonal functioning, their application in the Nigerian educational system, particularly among female teachers dealing with marital instability, remains largely underexplored. It is therefore imperative to examine the effectiveness of ACT and EFT in mitigating the negative consequences of marital instability on female teachers' ethical behaviour and professional performance. Without empirical evidence to guide psychological and educational interventions, schools risk experiencing declining teacher morale, reduced student outcomes, and the erosion of professional standards. This study seeks to fill that critical gap by investigating how ACT and EFT can serve as restorative tools for enhancing the work ethics of female teachers facing marital challenges in Ibadan metropolis. The outcome is expected to inform school-based mental health services, policy formulation, and teacher support programs that prioritize emotional well-being and ethical sustainability within the Nigerian educational sector.

Research Question

The following research question raised to guide the conduct of the study

1. What is the difference in the effect on work ethics among female teachers exposed to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Emotionally Focused Therapy and the control group as measured by the post-test mean scores of marital instability?

Research Hypothesis

The following hypothesis postulated and tested in the study;

1. There is no significant difference in the impact of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Emotionally Focused Therapy and the control group on work ethics among female teachers as measured by the post-test mean scores of marital instability

Methodology

This study utilized a Quasi-experimental design. A major feature of a quasi-experimental design is that it is interested in the cause-effect of the variables in the research. It is a pre-test, post-test methodology with one

control group and one experimental group is used to investigate the effect of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Emotionally Focused Therapy on work ethics among female teachers with marital instability in primary schools in Ibadan, Oyo State.The target population of the stu This study employed a quasi-experimental research design, which is particularly suited for examining cause-and-effect relationships between variables where random assignment is not feasible. Specifically, the design adopted a pre-test, post-test structure involving one control group and one experimental group to evaluate the impact of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) on the work ethics of female teachers experiencing marital instability in primary schools within Ibadan, Oyo State. The target population consisted of female primary school teachers in Ibadan during the 2021/2022 academic session, estimated at 39,990 (Doris, 2022). A multistage sampling technique was used to select participants. In the first stage, five Local Government Areas (LGAs) within Ibadan were stratified. During the second stage, a hat-and-draw method was employed to randomly select five primary schools from each of the three chosen LGAs. The third stage involved the administration of a researcher-designed questionnaire to identify female teachers experiencing marital instability within the selected schools. This purposive sampling yielded a total of 90 participants, who formed the final sample for the study. The study's sampling frame was thus limited to female teachers in public primary schools in Ibadan, Oyo State, who were identified as experiencing marital instability. This study adapted Marital Instability Index by Edwards J.N., Johnson D., & Booth A., (1987) and Short Form Occupational Work Ethic Inventory (SFWEOI) by Latham and Pinder (2005) for collecting relevant data.

The validation of the research instruments was carried out by presenting the items to subject matter experts, who evaluated them for both face and content validity. Based on their feedback and recommendations, necessary revisions were made by the researcher to produce the final version of the instrument. Following this, the validated instrument was administered to the selected respondents for data collection. To determine the reliability of the instrument, a pilot study was conducted involving 20 participants drawn from a Local Government Area in Oyo State that was not included in the main study. The data from the pilot test were analyzed using the split-half method. The instrument was divided into two equivalent halves—one consisting of even-numbered items, and the other of odd-numbered items. Each participant's scores on both halves were computed, and the correlation between the two sets of scores was determined using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation with the aid of SPSS software. To further estimate the reliability of the entire instrument, the Spearman-Brown Prophecy formula was applied, allowing for an assessment of its internal consistency. The tools used for data collection included the Marital Instability Index and the Short Form Work Ethic Occupational Inventory (SF-WEOI), which yielded reliability coefficients of 0.90 and 0.92, respectively. These coefficient values indicate a high level of reliability, thus confirming the instruments as suitable for use in the main study. The data obtained from the study were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were employed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants. To test the research hypotheses, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was utilized, with the level of significance set at 0.05.

Results

The data gathered through the different research instruments were analyzed using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, selected based on the nature of each hypothesis. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for both the pre-test and post-test assessment measures. Additionally, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to evaluate the stated hypotheses. All tests were conducted at a 0.05 level of significance.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants Based on Age

Age	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
20-30 years	6	6.7	6.7	6.7
31-40 years	26	28.9	28.9	35.6

41-50 years	26	28.9	28.9	64.4
51-60 years	32	35.6	35.6	100.0
Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 displays the age distribution of the study participants. The highest proportion (35.6%) falls within the 51–60 years age bracket. Both the 31–40 and 41–50 age groups each account for 28.9% of the sample, indicating an even representation. The smallest representation (6.7%) is found in the 20–30 years age group. The cumulative percentages reveal that 64.4% of the participants are aged 40 years or below, while 35.6% are older than 40 years. These figures suggest that a significant number of participants (35.6%) are in the later stages of their careers (ages 51–60), with a considerable portion (28.9% each) in the mid-career range (31–50 years). The minimal representation of younger participants (6.7%) in the 20–30 years bracket may imply that the study sample is largely composed of seasoned professionals with considerable teaching experience.

Table 2: Distribution of Participants Based on Educational Qualification

Educational Qualification	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
NCE	27	30.0	30.0	30.0
First Degree	46	51.1	51.1	81.1
Postgraduate	17	18.9	18.9	100.0
Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 outlines the educational qualifications of the participants. A majority (51.1%) possessed a first degree, followed by 30.0% who held a Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE). A smaller segment, comprising 18.9%, had attained a postgraduate qualification. The predominance of participants with a first degree suggests that the study sample is composed largely of professionally trained individuals with a solid educational foundation.

Hypothesis One: *There is no significant difference in the post-test mean scores on the work ethics among participants exposed to the three experimental groups.*
The hypothesis was tested using the One-Way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at 0.05 level of significance. The results are presented Tables 3, 4 and 5.

Table 3: Pre-test and Post-test Mean Scores on Occupational Work Ethics Based on Experimental Group

Experimental Group		pre-test	post-test	Mean Difference
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	Mean	38.50	47.43	8.93
	N	30	30	
	Std. Deviation	5.89	1.57	
Emotionally Focused Therapy	Mean	37.77	46.07	8.30
	N	30	30	
	Std. Deviation	6.13	3.38	
Control	Mean	40.93	41.47	0.53
	N	30	30	
	Std. Deviation	4.63	5.23	
Total	Mean	39.07	44.99	
	N	90	90	
	Std. Deviation	5.69	4.47	

Table 3 indicates that prior to the intervention, the work ethics scores across all groups were relatively similar. The pre-test mean score for the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) group was 38.50, while the Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) group recorded a mean of 37.77, and the control group had a slightly higher mean of 40.93. Following the intervention, there was a significant improvement in work ethics among participants

in both the ACT (M = 47.43) and EFT (M = 46.07) groups. In contrast, the control group showed only a marginal increase to 41.47. These results suggest that both ACT and EFT were effective in enhancing participants' work ethics, with ACT demonstrating a slightly greater impact. The minimal change observed in the control group underscores the importance of the therapeutic interventions. To assess the statistical significance of these observed differences, an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted, and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: One-Way ANCOVA Result on Post-test Occupational Work Ethics due to Experimental Group

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares		Mean Square	F	p value
Corrected Model	832.77[a]	3	277.59	25.18	.000
Intercept	1930.31	1	1930.31	175.08	.000
Covariate (Work Ethics pre-test)	246.48	1	246.48	22.35	.000
Group	732.43	2	366.22	33.21	.000*
Error	948.22	86	11.03		
Total	183941.00	90			
Corrected Total	1780.99	89			

* Significant, p value < 0.05

The results of the ANCOVA analysis presented in Table 9 reveal a statistically significant effect of the intervention on participants' occupational work ethics, $F(2, 86) = 33.214$, $p < 0.05$. Since the computed F-value exceeds the critical value at the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that the interventions—Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)—had a meaningful impact on improving work ethics among participants. In contrast, participants in the control group exhibited minimal change. Consequently, the alternative hypothesis is accepted, confirming that there is a significant difference in the post-test mean scores of occupational work ethics across the groups. To determine which specific group comparisons contributed to the significance, a post-hoc multiple comparison test was conducted, the results of which are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Multiple Comparison of Experimental Groups on Work Ethics

(I) Experimental Group	(J) Experimental Group	Mean Diff (I-J)	Std. Error	P value
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	Emotionally Focused Therapy	1.146	.859	.186
	Control	6.699*	.871	.000*
Emotionally Focused Therapy	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	-1.146	.859	.186 n.s.
	Control	5.553*	.881	.000*
Control	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	-6.699*	.871	.000*
	Emotionally Focused Therapy	-5.553*	.881	.000*

* Significant, p value < 0.05 n.s. = not significant, p value > 0.05

Table 5 presents the outcomes of the multiple comparison analysis conducted to identify significant differences in post-test work ethics scores among the intervention groups. The analysis revealed statistically significant differences between the following pairs Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) vs. Control Group: A mean

difference of 6.699 with a p-value of .000 indicated that participants who received ACT reported significantly higher levels of work ethics than those in the control group. Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) vs. Control Group: A mean difference of 5.553 and a p-value of .000 also showed that participants in the EFT group had significantly improved work ethics compared to the control group. However, the comparison between the ACT and EFT groups yielded a mean difference of 1.146 with a p-value of .186, which is not statistically significant. This finding suggests that while both ACT and EFT interventions were effective in enhancing occupational work ethics relative to the control group, no significant difference was observed between the two therapies. Nevertheless, ACT demonstrated a slightly greater impact, although the difference was not enough to reach statistical significance.

Discussion of the Findings

The demographic data presented in Table 1 reveal a notable concentration of participants within the 51–60 years age bracket (35.6%), followed by equal proportions (28.9%) in the 31–40 and 41–50 age ranges. Only 6.7% of the participants fell within the 20–30 years age group. This distribution suggests that the majority of the respondents are in mid-to-late stages of their professional careers. The minimal representation of younger teachers may reflect broader trends within the Nigerian education system, where teaching at the primary level is often occupied by more experienced individuals, possibly due to high turnover rates among early-career teachers or the relatively low appeal of the teaching profession among younger graduates (Okonkwo & Eke, 2021). These findings align with those of Adebayo and Ogunyemi (2019), who observed that older female teachers, particularly those with over two decades of experience, are more likely to remain in teaching positions despite personal and marital challenges. This may be due to job security, institutional loyalty, or the accumulation of service years required for retirement benefits. The dominance of older and mid-career participants may also explain the receptiveness and engagement observed in therapeutic interventions like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), as these individuals might possess the maturity and reflective capacity necessary to internalize psychological strategies for personal and professional growth (Bond et al., 2016).

In Table 2, the educational qualifications of participants show that a majority (51.1%) held a first degree, followed by 30.0% with a Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), and 18.9% with postgraduate qualifications. This distribution highlights the presence of a well-educated and professionally trained teaching workforce. The high number of first-degree holders suggests that most participants have undergone structured pedagogical training and are likely familiar with ethical standards, classroom management, and the demands of the teaching profession. This finding corroborates the work of Akinbode (2018), who emphasized that teachers with higher educational qualifications tend to exhibit greater professional ethics, better job commitment, and improved classroom outcomes, especially when supported by effective psychosocial interventions. Furthermore, the presence of 18.9% of participants with postgraduate education reinforces the idea that professional development is valued among female teachers in the Ibadan metropolis. This educational background may have contributed to their ability to engage meaningfully with the therapeutic content of the ACT and EFT interventions, which require a level of self-awareness, reflection, and abstract reasoning. Prior research by Eze and Ndukaihe (2020) supports this, noting that educational attainment often influences teachers' capacity to manage stress, adopt new coping strategies, and maintain work ethics despite external stressors such as marital instability.

The results of the hypothesis testing reveal that both Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) significantly enhanced work ethics among female teachers dealing with marital instability, compared to those in the control group. This finding underscores the therapeutic potential of both interventions in improving professional behaviour, emotional regulation, and personal commitment in the face of psychosocial distress. The notable improvement in the ACT group, although not statistically greater than that of the EFT group, suggests that ACT may have had a slightly stronger impact on work-related behaviour. This can be attributed to the core principles of ACT, which emphasize psychological flexibility, mindfulness, and values-driven action. These components help individuals accept their internal emotional experiences, defuse from

negative thoughts, and commit to behaviours aligned with their core values—even in the presence of marital strain. This outcome is consistent with the findings of Bond et al. (2013) and Hayes et al. (2012), who reported that ACT interventions significantly improve job performance, ethical responsibility, and emotional well-being, particularly in high-stress work environments. Similarly, the effectiveness of EFT in this study aligns with previous research by Johnson (2004) and Wiebe & Johnson (2016), who demonstrated that EFT is effective in addressing emotional distress by improving attachment security, emotional communication, and relationship satisfaction. These improvements are especially relevant to female teachers coping with marital conflict, as resolving relational tensions may reduce emotional exhaustion and improve their commitment and ethics in the workplace.

The lack of a statistically significant difference between the ACT and EFT groups suggests that both therapies are comparably effective in enhancing work ethics. This supports the position of LeJeune (2020), who emphasized the importance of individualized therapeutic approaches in psychological interventions. Depending on the specific psychological needs, relational context, or coping preferences of the individual, either ACT or EFT can be adopted to achieve positive outcomes. For instance, while ACT may be more suitable for individuals struggling with internal distress and negative self-talk, EFT may be ideal for those whose work behaviour is influenced by unresolved interpersonal or marital issues. These findings are particularly relevant in the Nigerian educational context, where teachers often face compounded pressures from personal, societal, and institutional demands (Okonkwo & Eke, 2021). Teachers navigating marital instability may suffer from reduced emotional availability, low morale, and poor ethical engagement, which in turn impact student learning and school performance. The demonstrated effectiveness of ACT and EFT in this study suggests that integrating such interventions into school-based counselling programs could play a significant role in restoring emotional balance and professional integrity among affected teachers. In conclusion, the study highlights the transformative potential of both ACT and EFT in addressing the psychological effects of marital instability and improving work ethics among female teachers. The findings not only support their continued use in psychological and educational settings but also emphasize the importance of tailoring interventions to individual needs to achieve optimal outcomes.

Recommendations

1. School administrators and education stakeholders should incorporate structured psychological interventions like ACT and EFT into existing counselling services for teachers. These therapies have demonstrated effectiveness in improving work ethics and emotional regulation among female teachers facing marital challenges.
2. Training programs should be organized for school counsellors and psychologists to equip them with practical knowledge and skills in delivering ACT and EFT. This will enable them to provide timely and evidence-based support to teachers struggling with emotional distress and ethical disengagement.
3. Schools should establish systems to identify early signs of emotional burnout or marital distress among teachers. Providing early intervention using ACT or EFT can prevent the deterioration of work ethics and overall job performance.
4. The Ministry of Education and school management boards should formulate policies that prioritize the mental health of teachers. These policies should encourage access to counselling services and create safe spaces where teachers can seek help without stigma.
5. Organizing regular workshops or seminars on work ethics, emotional resilience, and stress management can reinforce the core principles promoted by ACT and EFT. This will not only enhance professional conduct but also foster a positive school climate.

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