

## **Relationship between Family Life Cycle and Marital Satisfaction among Married Individuals in Guadalupe Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

The Family Life Cycle comprises those emotional and intellectual stages through which members of a family pass, from childhood to the years of retirement. Marital satisfaction is the enjoyment and contentment that couples feel from the love and support they give each other, despite the disappointments and difficulties of life. This study assessed the Relationship between Family Life Cycle and Marital Satisfaction, among Married Individuals in Guadalupe Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya. The study that formed the basis for this article was guided by Family System Theory as the theoretical framework. Quantitative Research Method was used. Multi-stage Sample Techniques were employed to select 351 participants. Rollins and Feldman Scales of Marital Satisfaction were applied to Family Life Cycle stages; Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test was used to collect data. The data was analyzed using the statistical package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 23<sup>rd</sup> version. The findings showed that the greatest number of participants 36.5% (n=128) were at stage V (having teenagers). The couples' marital satisfaction was greater in their earlier Family Life Cycle stages (I to IV), and declined in their later stages (V to VIII). There is a significant negative correlation between Family Life Cycle and Marital Satisfaction;  $r(351) = -.340, (p=.000)$ . The inverted V shape represents couples' marital satisfaction. The findings of the study indicated that the challenges of the stages of family life cycle affect couples' marital satisfaction. The study recommends that couples create time for each other, no matter what circumstances they are dealing with and work together on all issues that concern their family. Finding time for each other and working in unity amid all the challenges, will help couples get through the difficulties and avoid unnecessary misunderstanding thus improve their marital satisfaction. The findings of the study contribute to the literature on Family Life Cycle and Marital Satisfaction and pave way for future research.

**Key words:** Family System, Family Life Cycle, Married Individuals, Couples, Marital Satisfaction, An Inverted V shaped

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Date of Submission: 26-08-2022

Date of Acceptance: 10-09-2022

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### **I. Introduction**

Married couples wish to achieve Marital Satisfaction (MS) (Heshmati, Behnampour, Arabameri, Khajavi & Kohan, 2016). Thus, MS is an essential variable in the scientific study of relationships of happy couples and the foundation for understanding relationships in marriage (Funk & Rogger, 2007). MS is "a state of mind that reflects the perceived benefits and costs of marriage to a particular person" (Stone & Shackelford, 2007, p.1). If one experiences losses because of a partner, they feel dissatisfied with marriage and the partner. However, if benefits outweigh losses, they are satisfied with marriage and the partner. MS enables families to prosper.

Couples describe the quality of marital relationship according to their experience of family life (Pimentel, 2000). A stable marriage promotes psychological, physical and mental health in couples (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). MS may gradually decline with time. MS resemble U-shaped curve indicating a decline after early years, and a rise in later years (White & Edwards, 1990). Many researchers differ about the shape of MS. For example, Glenn (1998) compared marital cohorts in repeated cross sections from the General Social Survey and found a pattern of continuous decline in MS. Van Laningham, Johnson and Amato (2001) state that most studies that support the U-shaped curve have some serious methodological limitations. Therefore, the belief in

a U shaped correlation between FLC and MS is inconclusive. MS is attained when couples' needs are met; such as the need to be loved, to have positive companionship, and to effectively perform their roles (Farzaneh et al., 2016, [in Muthai, 2019]).

Inflexibility disrupts MS attainment to allow emergence of new ways of interacting with FLC changes to satisfy "developmental needs of its members within the family system (Goldenberg, 2004, p. 26). Carter and McGoldrick (2005) state that the family system is changing continuously. This causes emotional and intellectual pain as FLC advances. Each FLC stage has particular qualities testing the couples' ability to deal with difficult transitions (Gottman & Notarius, 2002).

Successful adjustment to challenges of FLC stages means couples can live a fulfilled life. Thus, the major task of FLC is creating the life that suits them (Human development teaching & learning group, 2019). To do this, couples commit to a lasting relationship as the first stage of FLC (Duvall, 1977). The developmental tasks for this stage involve moving from dependence to interdependence, creating the couple's identity, and strengthening their commitment to each other (Goldenberg, 2004). Couples should negotiate sharing responsibilities, solve marital conflicts, and address disappointments (VanLangingha, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). Transition from single to married life requires tremendous psychological adjustments (Cornelius and Sullivan, 2009). Good adjustment to initial FLC stages enables couples to face challenges and sustain happiness when they become parents (Proulx et al., 2017). Children bring parents joy, give their life a new meaning, and strengthen their bond thereby making the family united and stable. However, transition to parenthood tests a family's coping skills (Miller & Sollie, 1980). New parents may experience conflicts after getting children hence marital dissatisfaction (Knauth, 2001). Many researchers agree that MS declines during the first year of parenthood (Dosset et al., 2009; Simonelli et al., 2016; Bäckström et al., 18). This indicates the challenges first-time parents experience during transition to parenthood (Bäckström et al., 2018). The reason could be the change from childlessness to having children (Minuchin, 1974; Simonelli et al., 2016), childcare stress (Condon et al., 2004), reduced postpartum communication and responsiveness (Perren et al., 2005), and multiple activities performed simultaneously (Baxter et al., 2008). Once partners become parents, they experience more conflicts and dissatisfaction (Perren et al., 2005; Bouchard et al., 2006).

MS decline is significant and abrupt up to 1 year postpartum (Lawrence et al., 2008). Couples should rearrange roles to accommodate new children's developmental (Sanders, 2010). For example, young, fulltime, employed parents should balance work and domestic activities, and invent ways of sustaining their relationship (Kaslow, Smith, & Croft, 2000). Hines (1999) suggests that during this time, young couples should connect with their extended families for support. Marital conflicts can be more noticeable when children reach adolescence because of physical, psychological and social changes related to the transition (Collins, 1990).

Cognitive development towards more logical and abstract thinking makes adolescents more argumentative (Steinberg, 2001) hence intensity of parent-child conflict (Laursen, Copy, & Collins, 1998; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). Couples spent more time handling their adolescents thus affecting marital relationship (Markey, 2005). The conflict level between couples was found to be higher than any other FLC stages (Olson et al., 1983). During this stage, couples face challenges of looking after elderly parents. Consequently, some may strain financially (Parker & Patten, 2013).

After the challenging period comes the launching stage. Here, parents should accept that their young adults want independence. Some may still financially depend on their parents (Putz, 2004). After children leave home, middle age couples face each other again (Goldenberg, 2004). This stage is called empty nest (Dennerstein, Dudley & Guthrie, 2002). Some parents view it as losing parental role; others see it as a relief from role strain (Bouchard, 2013). During this stage, older parents suffer depression, loneliness, dissatisfaction with life and deterioration in cognition (Hagen, & DeVries, 2004; Kaur, & Gulati, 2016; Thapa, Visentin, Kornhaber, & Cleary, 2018). Rural China empty-nesters reported loneliness and depression than parents with children at home (Wu et al., 2010). After children leave home, some parents enjoy freedom, recouple, pursue interests, and catch up with extended family members (Bedfold, 1989; Fingerman, & Bermann, 2000).

Finally, couples face other major changes such as retirement, widowhood, becoming grandparents, health deterioration and, full time care by children as they age (Litwin, 1996). Couples can enjoy their grandchildren without the responsibility of rearing them (Newman & Newman, 2012). However, financially insecure parents can experience stress. This is also the time to prepare for death. MS results from hard work and collaboration by the couple. Constructive communication, intimacy, managing conflict, solving problems, and positive interaction help couples to attain MS (Fincham et al, 2006). The present study, from which this article came, employed the concept to understand the developmental tasks resulting from changes that take place at every FLC stage and its relationship with MS. The hypothesis is:

*H0. There is no statistically significant relationship between Family Life Cycle and Marital Satisfaction among Married Individuals in Guadalupe Parish, Nairobi.*

## II. Methodology

The study was conducted among 4000 couples in Guadalupe Parish. It employed the correlational research design to assess the relationship between FLC and MS. Multi-stage sampling technique was used to obtain a target sample of 351 respondents. Proportionate sampling was utilized to get a representative sample size from each of the two pastoral regions. Simple Random Sampling was used to recruit participants from eight FLC stages. 371 questionnaires were administered on Sundays in the parish hall. However, 351 were collected. Social demographic information was collected using questionnaires developed by the author.

The study employed Rollins and Feldman (1970) Scales of MS by FLC stages and 15 items of Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scales (1959) to assess MS level. The instruments used by Rollins and Feldman (1974) to measure MS by FLC stages were valid and reliable because their findings produced results similar to those of Pineo (1961) and Blood and Wolfe (1960). The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWSMAT) developed by Locke-Wallace, (1959) can be administered to one or both partners. It is “a multi-dimensional, reliable and valid measure of marital adjustment” (Jiang et. al., 2013, p. 2). The data was analyzed, using SPSS Version 23. The reliability of study instruments was assessed using the internal consistency method. The instruments to be considered reliable, a Cronbach coefficient of 0.7 or higher was required (Cronbach & Shavelon, 2004). From the reliability findings, MS by the eight FLC stages had a score of 0.717, while 15 items of Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scales had a score of 0.887, indicating that the multi questionnaires used in the study were internally consistent and reliable. Spearman Rank Order correlation was used to determine the relationship between FLC and MS. Tangaza University Research Ethics Committee (TUREC) and National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) approved this study. All participants signed consent forms, and were informed about their right to withdraw from participating in research at any time. All information was anonymously provided.

## III. Findings

Findings were presented in writing, tables and figures. The study highlighted demographic characteristics of respondents, discussed current FLC stages of couples, level of MS in FLC stages, the relationship between FLC and MS, and the shape of MS among married individuals in Guadalupe Parish. The findings are presented in sections 3.1- 3-6.

### 3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The participants’ socio-demographic characteristics were described by gender, age, years of marriage, education level and employment status. A total of 175 husbands (49.9%) and 176 (50.1%) wives filled the questionnaires from the two pastoral regions. Data collected under the category of age showed that the youngest participants were between 18-25 years and the eldest were 56 years and above. The greatest number of participants (138, 39.3%) were between 30-35 years, followed by (91, 25.9%) participants between 26-35 years, while (77, 21.9%) participants were between 46-55 years. The fewest participants (4, 1.1%) were between 18-25.

Participants had been married for 1 year or more. Couples married for 16-20 years had the highest percentage, 19.4% (n=68); 6-10 years registered 18.8% (n=66); interestingly, 11-15 years and 20-25 had both 16.9% (n=63); 26-30 years had 10.8% (n=38); 30 years and above had 10.3% (n=36), and 1-5 years had 4.8% (n=17).

Data was collected according to participants’ education level. Out of 351 participants, the highest percentage, 34.5% (n=121), had secondary education; 28.5% (n=100) had primary education; 20.5% (n=72) had diplomas; 10% (n=35) attained BA; 4.6% (n=16) attained MA; 1.7% (n=6) had no formal education; and 0.3% (n=1) attained PhD levels.

In regards to economic status, 37.6% (n=132) were self-employed, 29.3% formally employed, 16.2% (n=57) unemployed, 15.4% (n=54) casual laborers, and 1.4% (n=5) retired.

### 3.2 Family Life Cycle Stages of Couples

The study determined the stages of couples before assessing their satisfaction with the stages of FLC. The finding is presented in Table 1.

*Table 1: Family Life Cycle Stages of Couples*

Stage of the Life Cycle	Frequency	Percent
Stage I (Without children)	2	0.6%
Stage II (With the infant)	14	4.0%

Stage III (Preschool children at home)	29	8.3%
Stage IV (All children at school)	64	18.2%
Stage V (Having teenagers)	128	36.5%
Stage VI (Children gone from Home)	64	18.2%
Stage VII (Empty nest)	27	7.7%
Stage VIII (Retirement)	23	6.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>351</b>	<b>100%</b>

The findings in table 1 show that the greatest number of participants, 36.5% (n=128), were at stage V (having teenagers); 18.2% (n=64) at stage IV (All children at school) and VI (Children gone from home); 8.3% (n=29) at stage III (Preschool children at home); 7.7% (n=27) at stage VII (Empty nest); 6.5% (n=23) at stage VIII (Retirement); 4.0% (n=14) at stage II (With the infant); and 0.6% (n=2) at stage I (without children).

### 3.3 Level of Marital Satisfaction by the Stage of Family Life Cycle

The study further assessed the level of satisfaction with the present stage of FLC. The finding was presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Marital Satisfaction by Stages of Family Life Cycle

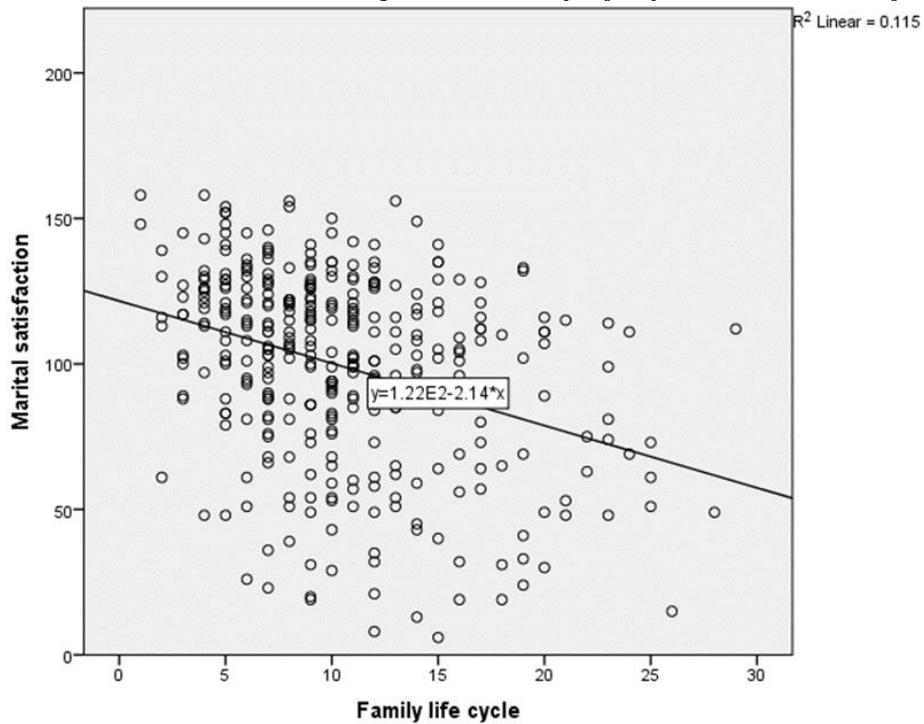
Stage of the Life Cycle	Level of Satisfaction	Frequency	Percent
Stage I (Without children)	Quite satisfying	2	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Stage II (With the infant)	Very satisfying	9	64.3
	Quite satisfying	3	21.4
	Somewhat satisfying	2	14.3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Stage III (Preschool children at home)	Very satisfying	13	44.8
	Quite satisfying	10	34.5
	Somewhat satisfying	3	10.3
	Not satisfying	3	10.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100.0</b>	
Stage IV (All children at school)	Very satisfying	27	42.2
	Quite satisfying	19	29.7
	Somewhat satisfying	14	21.9
	Not satisfying	4	6.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100.0</b>	
Stage V (Having teenagers)	Very satisfying	27	21.1
	Quite satisfying	37	28.9
	Somewhat satisfying	35	27.3
	Not satisfying	29	22.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>100.0</b>	
Stage VI (Children gone from Home)	Very satisfying	15	23.4
	Quite satisfying	21	32.8
	Somewhat satisfying	14	21.9
	Not satisfying	14	21.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100.0</b>	
Stage VII (Empty nest)	Very satisfying	2	7.4
	Quite satisfying	10	37.0
	Somewhat satisfying	4	14.8
	Not satisfying	11	40.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100.0</b>	
Stage VIII (Retirement)	Very satisfying	9	39.1
	Quite satisfying	3	13.0
	Somewhat satisfying	2	8.7
	Not satisfying	9	39.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

Findings in table 2 indicate that 64.3% of the participants were at stage II of FLC, had an infant, and were very satisfied. However, 40.7% of the participants were at stage VII of FLC (Empty nest); they found this stage as not satisfying.

### 3.4 Relationship between Family Life Cycle and Marital Satisfaction

The study assessed the relationship between FLC and MS a bivariate correlation analysis was conducted, using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (r). The findings was presented in figure 1.

Figure 1. Scatter Plot on the Relationship between Family Life Cycle and Marital Satisfaction



Findings in figure 1 (the scatter plot) showed that there is evidence of a negative linear relationship between FLC and MS. Therefore the study further assessed the relationship between Family Life Cycle and marital satisfaction using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (r). The finding was presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Relationship between Family Life Cycle and Marital Satisfaction

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Stage I	Pearson Correlation								
	Sig. (2-tailed)								
	N	351							
2 Stage II	Pearson Correlation	.292**							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000							
	N	351	351						
3 Stage III	Pearson Correlation	.285**	.354**						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000						
	N	351	351	351					
4 Stage IV	Pearson Correlation	.345**	.422**	.503**					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000					
	N	351	351	351	351				
5 Stage V	Pearson Correlation	-.209**	-.091	-.152**	-.068				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.087	.004	.203				
	N	351	351	351	351	351			
6 Stage VI	Pearson Correlation	-.379**	-.107*	-.234**	-.152**	.235**			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.046	.000	.004	.000			
	N	351	351	351	351	351	351		
7 Stage VII	Pearson Correlation	-.316**	-.150**	-.245**	-.172**	.123*	.613**		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.005	.000	.001	.021	.000		
	N	351	351	351	351	351	351	351	
8 Stage VIII	Pearson Correlation	-.291**	-.150**	-.183**	-.138**	.066	.523**	.498**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.005	.001	.010	.220	.000	.000	
	N	351	351	351	351	351	351	351	351
Marital satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	-.546**	-.338**	-.421**	-.421**	.248**	.484**	.469**	.433**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	351	351	351	351	351	351	351	351

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The summary of the correlation test (r) findings in table 3 indicates that there is a significant negative correlation between FLC and MS,  $r(351) = -.340, (p = .000)$ . These findings imply that higher scores on MS correlate with the initial FLC stages, while later stages correlate with low MS levels.

### 3.5 Shape of Marital Satisfaction

Based on the findings on relationship between FLC and MS, the shape of couples' MS was illustrated as shown in figure 2.

Figure 2. Curve on Marital Satisfaction over the Family Life Cycle

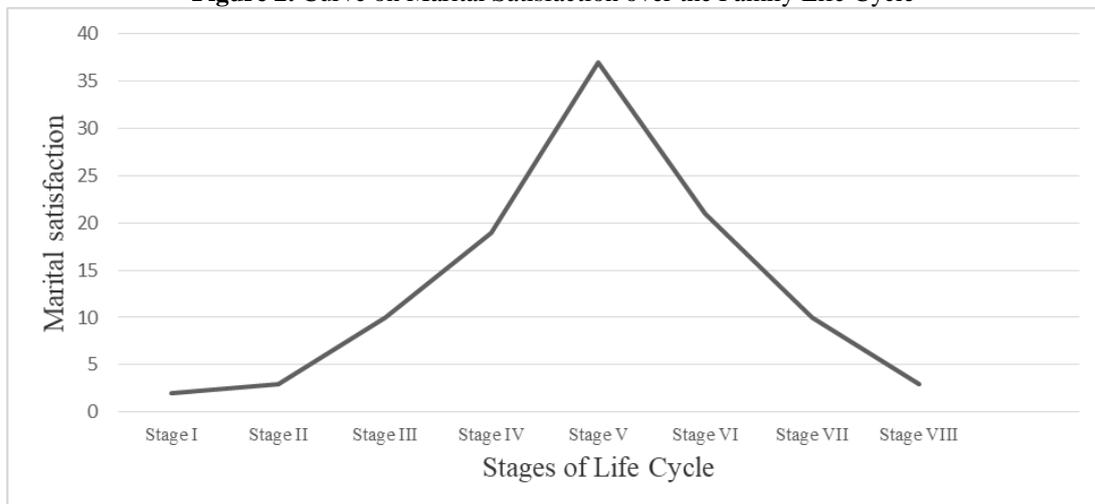


Figure 2 indicates that MS in FLC stages is inverted V shape. This implies that MS is greater in earlier stages of FLC (stages I to IV), and declines between stages V to VIII of FLC.

### 3.6 Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypothesis, a bivariate correlation analysis was conducted using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (r). Pearson Correlation was employed since the variable A (FLC) and variable B (MS)

were measured in the interval scales, based on the cumulative scores. There was a linear relationship between the variables. In assessing this relationship, a scatter plot between FLC and MS was conducted (figure 1). This was followed by the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) analysis (table 3). The finding showed that there is a significant negative relationship between variable A and B,  $r(351) = -.340, p = .000$ . The null hypothesis was therefore rejected.

#### **IV. Discussion of the Findings**

FLC transition affects MS within family system. Every transition in FLC requires individuals to reorganize their lifestyle to meet the challenges (Gerson, 1995). According to the finding, 36.5% (n=128) were at stage V (family with adolescent stage) of FLC. 64.3% of couples at stage II (with an infant), 44.8% at stage III (pre-school children at home) and 42.2% at stage IV (all children at school) found their lives very satisfying are different from those of other researchers who have researched on a similar topic. For example, MS declines after the first child is born; this can continue till the child is 2 years (Bogdan et. al., 2022). Further, the findings of Doss et al. (2009), Simonelli et al. (2016), and Bäckströmet al. (2018), show that MS decreases during the first year of parenthood.

The findings of the present study show that 40.7% of couples at stage VII of FLC (Empty nest) were not satisfied. They agree with previous studies that the empty nest stage has various challenges for parents. Wilk (2016) elucidates that parents may feel loneliness, sadness and depression when their children leave home. They must adjust to a life without children around. For example, the elderly may have mental health issues that make them feel unsatisfied with life at the empty-nest stage (Liu &Guo, 2008). Couples, at this stage, suffer from illnesses and psychological problems due to dissatisfaction (Badiani& De Sousa, 2016). These findings expose that couples experience new challenges at each stage of FLC.

In contrast with the previous studies, the findings on relationship between FLC and MS show that there is a significant negative relationship between the two variables,  $r(351) = -.340, (p = .000)$  indicating that as the couple advances in FLC stages, their MS decreases. Higher MS scores correlated with the initial FLC stages while later FLC stages correlated with low level of MS. This finding differs from what a majority of previous researchers established. For example, Blood and Wolf (1960) found that the first four stages are stable and statistically declined significantly at stage five and six ( $p < .01$ ). Further, Rollin and Cannon (1974) discovered a statistically significant decline from stage 1 to 2 and from stage 4 to 5, ( $p < .01$ ) before stabilising in the last four stages. However, the findings of Vanlaningham, Johnson and Amato (2001) indicate that FLC stages did not account for the general pattern of change in MS. They argue that it is the marital duration that has effect on MS ( $p < .01, p < .05$ ).

The findings indicate that MS of couples had an inverted V shape, implying that their satisfaction is greater in the earlier FLC stages (I to IV) and declines between V to VIII (Family with adolescent stage to retirement stage). This is contrary to the findings of the previous researchers. For example, the results of Blood and Wolfe (1960) proposed that the MS of couples is “L” shaped, implying that satisfaction is high in the initial stage but there is a continual decline. However, the results from Rollins and Feldman (1970) resemble U shaped curve indicating that couples’ satisfaction is high in the earlier stages, declines after the first child is born, but is high again after the children start adulthood because of more free time together to nurture their relationship. Contrary, the findings of Vanlaningham, Johnson and Amato (2001) suggest that MS does not increase in the later years of marriage; after an initial decline, MS either continues to decline or remains flat. In their study, marital duration is from 5- 50 years of marriage. They do not support the belief that MS resembles the U-shaped curve.

The findings of the present study has brought forth a new expression of MS and added new knowledge to the existing literature. The findings on the relationship between the FLC and MS confirm the appropriateness of the theory used. The theory argues that the family is a system and each unit within it impacts the whole, differently, and at different stages. The use of different study methodologies, different population, dissimilar socio-cultural aspects and varied theories, could have contributed to the variation of findings between different studies.

#### **V. Conclusion**

The study concluded that there is a statistically significant negative relationship between FLC and MS. The shape of the couple’s MS is an inverted V. The changes that occur in one part of the family affect other parts positively or negatively. Couples should therefore be equipped with skills and knowledge to pass successfully through FLC stages to attain MS. It is hoped that this article will enable counsellors and researchers to analyse the challenges of each FLC stage in assessing couple’s level of MS.

#### **VI. Recommendations**

The study recommends that pre-marriage counsellors should guide couples through all FLC stages to ensure they are psychologically equipped to face each stage. There is a need for future researchers to investigate whether counselling helps couples navigate each FLC stage and its relations to MS. On-going comparative studies should be conducted to determine whether there are significant differences in MS at different FLC stages.

## VII. Limitation

Cluster Sampling might have worked better than Simple Random Sampling in this study. Using single data collection tool was also limiting. The inclusion of another tool such as interviews or Focused Group Discussion could have given the author an added advantage in terms of triangulating the findings.

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Elizabeth R. KanHwai, et. al. “Relationship between Family Life Cycle and Marital Satisfaction among Married Individuals in Guadelupe Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya.” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 27(09), 2022, pp. 71-80.