

EXPLORING NEW PATTERNS OF INTERACTION DURING CONFLICT AMONG MARRIED INDIVIDUALS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the patterns of interaction during conflict among married individuals in Malaysia. Sixty married individuals in Malaysia responded to an open-ended questionnaire about how they interact with their spouse during conflict situation. Result showed the existence of constructive, destructive and avoidance patterns of interaction during conflict which reflect similarity with conflict interaction in western society. These three patterns are viewed to be more specific and in accordance to the context of Malaysian society.

Key words: Pattern of interaction, conflict, married individual.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage marks the beginning of a new relationship as husband and wife. A marriage is often grandly celebrated because it is the most auspicious and memorable event that unites two souls with an enduring promise that both will be with each other during times of need, happiness and sorrow. The most vital observation in every wedding ceremony is marked by public pledges of goodwill and unending love between two hearts. Couples attain a sense of security, affection, companionship and chances to establish their own family through marriage (Heslin, 1980; Omari, 1969; Larson & Holman, 1994).

Through marriage couples start to experience a new phase in life. Since the institution of marriage promotes the coming together of two different individuals with different

backgrounds to build a family, it is seen as a source and cause of more conflicts than other social institutions (Alhassan, 1988). According to Cummings (1998), whereby conflict is defined as a difference of opinion that exists in interpersonal interactions. Fink (1968) in his work added the definition of conflict as when there exists a mutual agreement among certain parties, for there to be conflict, others must be opposed to that agreement. In the context of marriage life, when two different individuals have to live together, share everything that they have and exchange opinions, there will be many things to debate and agree on. When both parties do not back down, a clash of opinions is sure to happen.

If conflict has escalated to a chronic level, it may lead to many negative outcomes including divorce. According to Harityati Ariffin (2010), family problems and divorce may indirectly cause an increase in social problems within Malaysia. Victims of domestic violence and those who have experienced a divorce scenario could experience psychological problems or might fall into the trap of vice, drug addiction, prostitution and crime. This is because conflict in family affects children negatively when they watch their parents argue and this further complicates matters. In the long term, society and the country in general will encounter worse social problems with each new generation when conflict continues to fester within society.

In order to overcome crucial aspects that spark conflict in marital relationships, it is hereby stressed that communication is a vital foundation. Communication is vital to relationship building as it is the basic foundation towards maintaining relationships since people commit to relationships as long as they communicate and cease committing to relationships when communication stops (Dindia, 2003). This reflects the importance of communication in marriage.

Inadequate communication, on the other hand, results in scant knowledge of others and may lead to difficulties. These, in turn, contribute to conflict (Pondy, 1967). Conflict only can be managed through communication. Individuals can be hurt, relationships can be damaged and problems cannot be resolved if couples communicate poorly. Unproductive communication patterns while attempting to manage conflict may lead to a preoccupation with self and disregard for others.

In order to resolve conflicts that exist in marriage, couples need to know how to balance their positive and negative interactions when handling the conflict. Every couple has their own pattern in handling conflicts. Patterns of interaction during conflict generate the cycle of conflict and these may differ among individuals. It is important for couples to deal with certain conflicts constructively. Demands, complaints and criticisms, while the partner withdraws and exhibits avoidance of conflict situations will lead to marital dissatisfaction (Fincham, 2003; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006 in Hanzal & Segrin, 2009).

The majority of established research highlighted the patterns of interaction between spouses during conflict including the patterns of interaction and its relationship with levels of relational satisfaction and how couples behave during conflict (Fincham & Beach, 1999; Fincham, 2003). Other research findings include comparison of communication patterns and conflict over psychological distance and the effect of

gender and social structure on the demand/withdraw pattern of marital conflict (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Christensen & Heavey, 1990). However, in Malaysia, studies on conflict among married couples are conducted with emphasis on causes of conflict and the effects of divorce (Samuel Chan Hsin Chlen & Mohamed Sarif. M ,2008), Cai-Lian Tam et. al (2011) & Mohd. Taib D.& Noor Baiduri A H., 2011). Apart from stressing on causes of conflict, research studies focused on communication skills and conflict tactics that can be utilised to avoid conflict and divorce. Indeed, it should be very clear that patterns of interaction is another area that should be explored in depth in order to determine the communication styles of couples.

However in Malaysia, there is still a dearth of such studies. Little is known on how Malaysian couples deal with conflict in their marriage. There were lack of a systematic and empirical research conducted in the areas in Malaysia. With the divorce rate on the rise due to social, economical and psychological factors, deeper understanding on how Malaysia couples interact during various conflict situations would lead to a better designed counselling techniques and skills by the relevant authorities.

STUDY OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study is to identify patterns of interaction that exist among married individuals in Malaysia during conflict. It is hoped that by understanding patterns of interaction among couples, new information could be developed especially in the way couples interact during conflict (as Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural country) where Eastern values and traditions still hold sway. This research can also uncover negative communication patterns that may help towards instilling awareness which may result in a reduction of divorce rates, from which these findings will help formulate tools that marriage counsellors will be able to apply and assist afflicted couples in the best possible way.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Patterns of Interaction

The bulk of research in 1980s and 1990s had concentrated on how couples interact during conflict (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984; Christensen & Shenk ,1991). Christensen and Sullaway (1984) were the very first well-known authors to introduce communication patterns of interaction. In their Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ) they measure how respondents deal with marital conflict and found three types of patterns that exist. Some of them deal with certain conflicts in constructive ways. Some of them relate to demand-withdraw patterns, in which one spouse pressures the other with demands, complaints and criticisms, while the partner withdraws into a defensive stance and passive inaction and some trying to distance themselves by avoiding the situation.

Mutual Constructive

Mutual constructive communication involves partners discussing issues in their marriage, expressing feelings in a positive manner while attempting to resolve the

matter (Caughlin, &Huston, 2002). According to Sadeghi, Hezardastan, Ahmadi, Bahrami, Etemadi, Fatehizadeh (2011), research on couple communication patterns defined the characteristics of mutual constructive couples as being able to talk about their problems with their partners especially during conflict and making attempts to solve them. They also tend to avoid violence and irrational reactions during conversations which serve as a mutual platform where both experience personal growth.

Demand/Withdraw

Demand/withdraw pattern is one of the dysfunctional patterns that develop when one partner demands to talk about an issue while the other person withdraws or refuses to talk about it. (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Christensen and Sullaway, (1984) also stated, this pattern occurs when one partner makes demands for change while the other partner avoids conflict by walking away, disengaging emotionally or by attempting to change the topic. In another study conducted by Christensen and Shenk (1991), demand/withdraw interaction pattern arises because of one party attempting to get closer while the other attempts to maintain a distance. One side seeks greater closeness by demanding more from the other while criticising and complaining that the other does not do enough. Contrastingly the other person attempts to keep a distance through withdrawal, defensive behaviour or passive inaction.

Mutual Avoidance

Caughlin and Huston (2002) and Afifi, McManus, Steuber & Coho (2009), stated that when couples avoid discussions of problems or exhibit the reluctance to engage in topics that spark off conflicts, they are categorised under the mutual avoidance pattern. This dysfunctional pattern include couples that tend to escape from engaging one another as much as possible thereby resulting in minimal contact during the lowest point of their relationship (Sadeghi et.al, 2011). When trying to avoid an argument, individuals might withhold complaints, become unresponsive to complaints by the other party or attempt to minimise the intensity of disagreement. Although it succeeds at preventing a prolonged argument or escalation, avoidance strategies can require considerable resources to enact and might be stressful (Reznik, Roloff, & Miller, 2010). According to Abdullah Hassan and Ainon Mohd. (1999), avoidance from conflict causing situations can contribute to negative effects in marriage.

Although these three patterns (mutual constructive, demand/withdraw and mutual avoidance) are the most well known patterns mentioned among scholars, (Dominigue &Mollen, 2009; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Bodenmann, Kaiser, Hahlweg & Wolfsdorf, 1998; Smith, Ciarrochi & Heaven, 2008) it is certainly not the only way of grouping conflict behaviours but they do subsume to other patterns. There are also some researchers which categorize conflict behaviours as constructive, destructive and

withdrawal (Crohan, 1996; Kurdek, 1995; Oggins, Veroff, & Leber, 1993; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Birditt, Brown, Orbuch & McIlvane ;2010)

Destructive

Destructive communication pattern such as criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and withdrawal have the most impact in influencing a close relationship negatively where such behavioural patterns can also contribute to physiological distress (Gottman, 1994). Gottman (1994) added that the way to distinguish satisfied and dissatisfied couples is through the manner couples handle destructive communication. Dissatisfied couples handle destructive communication such as complaints with counter complaints that lead to negative feelings that spiral further into greater negativity towards their partners during conflict. Destructive patterns lead to negative consequences impacting upon the state of the marriage union that corresponds to the decrease in marital satisfaction. (Gottman, 1994). Conflict inducing behaviours (e.g., criticism, yelling) predicted increased divorce rates (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson 1998; Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002). Findings by the Birditt, Brown, Orbuch & McIlvane (2010) study showed that individual behaviours (e.g., destructive behaviours) and patterns of behaviours between partners (e.g., withdrawal-constructive) in Year 1 predicted a higher probability of negative impact upon the marriage union.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Since this is just a preliminary test, this research only involved 60 respondents who are married individuals. Respondents to this study's questionnaire are volunteers from the state of Penang (comprising 30 males and 30 females) representing all major races in Malaysia.

Questionnaire and coding

Respondents completed a written questionnaire of open-ended questions and relayed their responses to five questions. The questions began with: "Recall any of your recent conflict in marriage and briefly elaborate on the following. Respondents were asked to write down "the issue of the conflict," "when it happened," "where it happened" and "how long it lasted". Then respondents were required to answer the main part of the questionnaire: "By referring to the issue of your conflict that you have mentioned, please state how you interacted with your partner during that conflict situation." Respondents were given plenty of space to write their responses.

The structure of open-ended questionnaire in order to know the pattern of interaction during conflict provided flexibility for the researcher to apply a qualitative method within the thematic analysis methodology. It is a very useful way for capturing the intricacies of meaning in a data set to know the phenomenology with focus on human experiences, subjectivity, participants' perceptions and feelings which in this case concern the way couples interact during conflict. In the study by Braun & Clarke

(2006), there are six phases in analysing thematic analysis. They are familiarisation with data and transcription of data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and report generation/production.

RESULTS

To answer more details about the background of the conflict which happened in the context of marriage, most of the respondents stated that the main issue of conflict with their spouse involved financial matters. Other than that, issues on children, communication and in laws were other issues that trigger conflict. Most of the conflict occurred within the last three years and matters required a maximum of 2 weeks to resolve. Normally, conflict occurred at home. Most of the respondents considered their conflict as a major conflict.

Compared to Christensen and Sullaway (1984), who identified three conflict pattern namely constructive, demand/withdrawal and avoidance, the present study received a mixed findings with three patterns of interaction emerged and these included constructive, destructive and avoidance.

Constructive pattern

The first theme that emerged is labelled as constructive pattern which reflect a positive interaction styles during respondents' conflict situation. Eight positive interactional behaviors namely to discuss with partners, to advise, to explain, to discuss with other people, to convey apologies, to back to normal, to persuade and to express emotion reflect a positive interactional behaviours and these were themed as constructive pattern.

Below are the quotes derived from the respondents:

*“ I always **discuss** the current problem with my spouse so that we can settle it immediately.”*

*“My spouse always **advise** me to cool down and be rational before taking certain action during conflict.”*

*“I will normally **persuade** my spouse after the conflict situation and everything **will be normal again.**”*

*“ I tend to **act as normal again** when my emotions stabilise after two days of conflict.”*

Avoidance pattern

The second theme that was identified from this preliminary study is avoidance pattern, which refers to an act of eluding and escaping from the conflict situation. These include sulking, ignoring and walking away from the conflict situation. Excerpts include the following:

*“ I always **sulk** and am emotional during conflict. I straight away go to sleep without discuss about the matter.”*

*“To make sure that I do not get embroiled in any serious conflict, I choose to **ignore** and avoid discussing about it.”*

*“Sometimes I feel that **ignoring** is the best way to avoid getting a headache.”*

*“My spouse often **walks away** from conflict and would not mention about the matter after it has passed.”*

Destructive pattern

The final theme discovered from this research is destructive pattern which reflects negative, damaging and some even harmful acts of communication during conflict. These include the acts of being silent, nagging, expressing anger, yelling, fighting, assaulting, pressuring, blaming each other, arguing and never giving in. Below are some of the quotes from the respondents:

*“ He started to **yell** at me when I ignored his requests for money to buy cigarettes.”*

*“He pushed me to the corner of the house and threatened me with violence and other negative consequences but I **fought** back.”*

*“ I will always **nag** and **never give in** if we are in a conflict situation.”*

*“Staying **silent** is the best way to express my feelings during conflict. I find tranquility and peace by not fighting back”.*

DISCUSSION

Compared to Communication Pattern Questionnaire (CPQ) by Christensen and Sullaway (1984) and other scales developed from the context of Western culture, the present study generated similar patterns of interaction during conflict commonly used by Malaysian couples namely constructive, destructive and avoidance.

Constructive pattern is the most common pattern mentioned during conflict among married individuals in Malaysia. People will react positively through any conflict if they are satisfied with their relationship. Being constructive during conflict leads to a better outcome and increases marital satisfaction and relationship stability (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kelly, Fincham & Beach, 2003) In a harmonious relationship, spouses are able to clarify their expectations through communication. They can express personal thoughts and feelings, which may lead to greater feelings of intimacy. They will feel free to openly address issues that concern them. They also tend to be more open and collaborative in their conflict management (Christensen & Shenk, 1991).

Besides the constructive pattern mentioned above, avoidance is a negative pattern that exists among married individual in Malaysia. In a country like Malaysia, generally men wield more influence than women. Malaysian women still abide by traditional, cultural

and religious values where the husband is the head of the household and is considered one notch above (Noraini. M. Noor, 1999). Give in or walk away when conflict occur is an example of avoidance patterns and is most probably the best way for wives to defer to their husbands.

Apart from religious obligations, sometimes couples feel the safest way to avoid prolonged conflict is by avoiding any discussion about it. The couple will have a tendency to avoid talking about issues that trigger conflict and at the same time this creates an emotional distance (e.g., Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; Christensen & Shenk, 1991). According to Reznik, Roloff, & Miller, 2010 & Bodenmann et al. (1998) conflict avoidance will affect the relationship and this leads to dissatisfaction because it will be very stressful when they do not express their true feelings or seek clarification concerning matters from their spouses. Such couples may have difficulties in resolving their conflict and live in distress (Christensen and Shenk (1991)

Compared to Communication Pattern Questionnaire (CPQ) by Christensen and Sullaway (1984), the present study generated destructive interaction pattern which include the acts of yelling, assaulting and fighting during conflict situation. This is a worrying indication to Malaysian society, which should be further explored. How rampant is this phenomenon in Malaysia family? The identification of destructive communication pattern in the present study should be a major concern due to its strong and negative relationship with relational satisfaction and divorce as evident in many past literatures. According to Puan Linda Jamaludin a counsellor at the Malaysia Department of Women's Development (personal interview, 6th April 2013) , destructive communication pattern is often evident in a common Malaysian household nowadays. The rising cost of living, greater responsibilities at work and less support from the extended family may have led to a emotional distress amongst couples. As a result, couples sometimes start yelling for attention and this situation may contribute to violence. If dissatisfaction continues to exist in a relationship, it may trigger physical assaults and violence (Personal Communication, 2013)

Another factor that can be taken into consideration is different backgrounds and personalities. The way couples react resulting in a destructive pattern depends on background and personalities (Hanzal and Segrin, 2009). Children raised in a family where the father commits violent acts towards the mother may adopt a similar pattern when dealing with conflicts. Problems become more complicated when there is violence involved.

According to (Burman et.al 1992 and Gottman 1994) in Fincham & Beach, (1999), negative behaviour is more pronounced among couples where physical aggression is found. If couples commit any negative behaviour during conflict, such action will lead to aggression. For example when one party raises his/her voice, the other one will react with violence.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the study discovered three conflict interaction patterns among married individuals in Malaysia namely constructive, destructive and avoidance. The finding thus echoes results derived from other studies conducted in the West. However the

emergence of destructive communication pattern in today's Malaysian society is a major concern to the researchers. Despite being known for politeness, civility and courteousness in communicating with others, Malaysians are shown to exhibit negative communication pattern at home. Results of this study are thus useful for various government agencies in designing effective intervention programs for couples in conflict.

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