

**THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER AND MARITAL DURATION
ON THE PERCEPTION OF MARITAL PROBLEMS OF
PROFESSIONALS IN SABAH**



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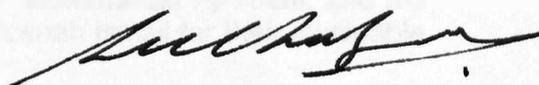
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DECLARATION

The materials in this thesis are original except for quotations, excerpts, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.



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ABSTRAK

PENGARUH GENDER DAN TEMPOH PERKAHWINAN TERHADAP PERSEPSI MASALAH PERKAHWINAN DI KALANGAN AHLI PROFESIONAL DI SABAH

Kajian mengenai pengaruh gender dan tempoh perkahwinan terhadap persepsi masalah perkahwinan telah di jalankan ke atas 359 (279 lelaki dan 80 perempuan) ahli profesional di Sabah. Tujuan kajian adalah untuk meninjau persepsi masalah perkahwinan di kalangan ahli profesional di Sabah dari sudut pengaruh gender dan tempoh perkahwinan; dan mengumpul data tempatan bagi perancangan program pra perkahwinan serta pendidikan lanjutan dalam perkahwinan. Melalui survei pos, persepsi responden terhadap 37 isu yang mungkin menjadi masalah dalam perkahwinan mereka telah diukur dengan satu skala Likert yang mempunyai tujuh mata. Min skor untuk 37 isu ini dianggap sebagai "*index of perception*" untuk masalah perkahwinan. Analisa regresi yang telah mengambil kira bilangan anak, taraf persekolahan yang tertinggi, dan taraf pekerjaan sebagai "*control variables*" tidak dapat menunjukkan perbezaan yang signifikan di antara jantina dalam persepsi masalah perkahwinan ($t=1.746$, $p=.082$). Tempoh perkahwinan didapati mempunyai hubungan korelasi yang negatif dengan indeks persepsi, $F(5,331)=2.446$, $p=-.034$, $R\ square=-.036$, $Standardized\ Beta=-.198$, $t=-3.018$, $p=.003$. Faktor interaksi yang terdiri daripada jantina dan tempoh perkahwinan tiada hubungan saling yang statistik dengan persepsi masalah perkahwinan, $F(4,332)=.981$, $p=.480$. Subjek juga diminta menyenaraikan lima perkara yang amat menggugat perkahwinan mereka. Empat daripada lima perkara ini didapati sama jawapannya bagi responden lelaki dan perempuan. Perkara-perkara tersebut ialah Kecurangan, Tingkah laku bermasalah, Keganasan fizikal, dan Bajet/Kewangan. Manakala isu kelima yang dibangkitkan oleh lelaki ialah Sumbang mahram dan oleh perempuan ialah Komunikasi. Limitasi kajian ini termasuk kaedah persampelan, kadar respons yang rendah, dan alat ukur kajian yang kurang tepat. Adalah dicadangkan kajian masa depan perlu meliputi ukuran "*gender attitude*" dan "*marital quality*" sebagai "*predictor variables*". untuk model analisa regresi. Cara persampelan yang lebih baik, sampel saiz yang lebih besar, dan responden yang lebih '*heterogenous*' dalam kajian masa depan dapat membantu kesahan data.

ABSTRACT

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER AND MARITAL DURATION ON THE PERCEPTION OF MARITAL PROBLEMS OF PROFESSIONALS IN SABAH

The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of gender and marital duration on the perception of marital problems of professionals; and to provide local data for the planning of premarital and marital continuing programs. Employing a convenient sample of 359 married working professionals (279 males and 80 females) in Sabah and through a postal survey; the participants were asked to indicate using a 7-point Likert scale, how likely they will meet 37 issues at the current stage of their marriage as marital problems. The mean score of these 37 issues was used as the index of perception of marital problems. Using multiple regression analysis, with number of children, highest educational achievement and employment status as control variables; no gender difference was found in the perception of marital problems ($t=1.746$, $p=.082$). Marital duration was negatively correlated to the index of perception, $F(5,331)=2.446$, $p=-.034$, R square $=-.036$, Standardized Beta $=-.198$, $t=-3.018$, $p=.003$. The interacting factor of gender and marital duration had no statistical significant correlation with the outcome variable, $F(4,332)=.981$, $p=.480$. The participants were also asked to indicate five most damaging issues to marriage. Four of the five most damaging issues perceived by both male and female participants were the same, namely Infidelity, Problematic behavior, Physical violence, and Budget/ Finances. The fifth issue mentioned by male participants was Incest, and by female participants was Communication. Limitations of this study such as sampling method, low response rate (28%) and the crudeness of the measuring instrument have reduced the usefulness of the data. To improve the explanatory power of the regression models, further investigations need to include measures of gender attitude and marital quality as predictors to better explain the variance in the perception of marital problems. Better sampling method, larger samples and more heterogeneous subjects in future investigations should help to verify or refute the findings of this study.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Most people in matrimony hope that marriage will be a long lasting, fulfilling and satisfying experience. There are many issues to handle in a marriage and in the course of the family career. Spousal perceptual incongruence together with inappropriate problem solving skills may transform benign issues to potentially malignant conflicts. Conflicts not solved amicably and satisfactorily can erode the marriage. Together with expectations unmet and desires not fulfilled, the marital relationship may deteriorate to a stage of helplessness and hopelessness, where one or both players may consider terminating the relationship voluntarily.

Perception is influenced by personal standards, assumptions, needs, goals (Hoffman and Pasley, 1998; Taylor, Peplau, and Sears, 2000); and the emotional state of the perceiver (Fincham and Beach, 1999; Lavin III, 1987; Lopez, 1993). Spouses in dissatisfied relationships may perceived their partners' behaviors more negatively than the actual behaviors really are (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1994). Perception is not static but can change over time (Kayser, 1993).

According to Lindsey (1997), gender is a master status. It is also an essential part of the organization of society (Stevens-Smith, 1995) and an organizing feature of family roles and relationships (Ward and Spitze, 1998). Gender matters because there is no norm for interacting with people who are gender-neutral (Cross and Markus, 1993; Hoffman and Pasley, 1998). Whether gender is inherent or learned, men and women perceive, process and behave differently (Stevens-Smith, 1995). Marriage is a highly gendered institution (Heaton and Blake, 1999) and gender differences play a role in marital stability and quality (Heaton and Blake, 1999;

Hojat *et al.*, 2000; Kaufman, 2000; Stacy and Amato, 2000; Steven-Smith, 1995; White and Tyson-Rawson, 1995).

Marital interactions change with time, and the length of marriage affects the couples' perception of problems (Wolcott and Hughes, 1999). Partners in different phases of marital and family life face different problems arising both within the family and extra-familial institutions. They need to actively acquire skills to tackle developmental tasks which is defined as the sequences of problems and difficulties occurring through life that lead to behavioral change (Aldous, 1996). However, irrespective of how well one is prepared to face the changes, anxiety and uncertainty are always present.

Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) studied 169 college students over a 40-year period and found that the U-curve of marital satisfaction may be an artifact of retrospective and cross-sectional study. Glenn (1998) examined the course of marital success and failure in five American 10-year marriage cohorts and provided no evidence that support the widespread belief that marriages tend to improve at mid-term and long-term marriage. Instead intercohort differences were found.

Although marriage brings benefits to the partners (Coombs, 1991; Horwitz and Raskin, 1996; Marks and Lambert, 1998; Mookherjee, 1997; Stack and Eshleman, 1998), it is the quality of the marriage and not the marital status per se that is important (Ross, 1995; Wickrama *et al.*, 2001; Wu and Hart, 2002). Further more, whether the benefits of marriage are causally related to marital status or due to selection effects is debatable (White, 1992). Distressed marriages bring harmful effects instead of wellbeing to the spouses, offsprings and the society (Amato and Booth, 1991; Amato and Booth, 1996; Carels *et al.*, 2000; Forthofer and Markman, 1996; Furstenberg and Kiernan, 2001; Lauer and Lauer, 1991; Trief *et al.*, 2001; Wolfinger, 2000).

On the one hand, distressed marriages may be terminated voluntarily, but divorce or permanent separation do have detrimental effects on the spouses and other members of the family (Amato, 2000; Kitson and Morgan, 1990; Lillard and Waite, 1995; Mastekaasa, 1994; Wu and Hart, 2002). On the other hand, partners might not disengage from distressed marriage easily because there are barriers to divorce (Heaton and Albrecht, 1991, Knoester and Booth, 2000). Those couples who choose to remain in distressed marriages could be suffering in many ways (Carels *et al.*, 2000; Lauer and Lauer, 1991; Schafer *et al.*, 1998; Trief *et al.*, 2001). When a marriage turns out to be below expectation, the sequelae could be quite unfavorable to self and others. Bearing the unhappiness of an on-going marriage and the resultant unhappy family is a major source of human misery (Glasser and Palmatier, 1996).

To reduce this human misery, it is logical to take proactive interventional efforts to prevent and minimize marital distress and to promote stable, happy and satisfying marriages (Cole and Cole, 1999; Giblin, 1996; Glasser and Palmatier, 1996; Stanley and Markman, 1997). Family scholars acknowledge that there are still plenty to learn about marital conflicts and problems, but hitherto enough is known to justify interventions (Stanley and Markman, 1997).

Logically, knowing and expecting problems in a task to be undertaken should prompt the individual to seek further knowledge and skills for better performance in the endeavor. Entering into a personal, intimate and long lasting relationship like marriage makes appraisal significant and preparation relevant. Glasser and Palmatier (1996) emphasized that there are common mistakes made by couples and it is better to educate them when they still care for each other. Stanley (2001) argued that even the delaying effect of premarital programs is useful for individuals considering matrimony because it makes them take a deeper look at the issue before making the final decision. Preventive programs also put across the message that marriage is a

serious matter and help couples realize where they can look for help when necessary, thus lowering the risk of subsequent marital distress or even divorce.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

According to conflict theory, conflicts are inevitable among social groups. The normal state of society is to be in conflict rather than harmony. Harmony, therefore is achieved rather than exists as a natural state (Klein and White, 1996). When people get married they should expect to be entering an arrangement more prone to conflict than harmony (Klein and White, 1996). Braiker and Kelley (1979 in Canary, Cupach and Serpe, 2001) stressed on the increase potential for conflict as partners gain mutual knowledge, interact more and are more interdependent. Frequent and Intense conflicts could lead to the termination of the marital relationship.

Marital interaction is a special form of human relationships which is intimate, proximate, long term and interdependent. This setting provides a unique, powerful and sensitive milieu for intense personal interaction. People by themselves can be very reasonable and responsible, but linking two of these reasonable people in a serious partnership such as in legal marriage; much of the time fights can break out in many areas (Glasser and Palmatier, 1996).

Social scientists coined the phrase "tremendous trifles" to refer to a wide range of issues that could cause conflicts in marital interaction (Anderson and Sabatelli, 1999). From these trifles, problems could arise when there is perceived conflict of interest, incompatible goals, wishes and expectations, and perceived interference with goal-directed behaviors (Fincham and Beach, 1999). However, not all issues will end up being problems, because successful problem-solving strategies may instead transform potential problem-causing situations into opportunities for cooperation (Fincham and Beach, 1999). Nonetheless, a wide range of problems have been shown to link to marital distress and divorce (Stanley and Markman, 1997). For example, in divorcing and divorced individuals, women complained more

about husbands' personality characteristics and behaviors such as husband's use of authority, his cruelty, drinking habits, immaturity, untrustworthiness, infidelity, poor money management, values and lifestyle. Whereas for men, the often cited reasons being their wife's infidelity, their own drinking habit, drug use, physical violence, and outside causes like family member's death, work commitment and problems with in-laws (Amato and Rogers, 1997; Cleek and Pearson, 1985).

There are gender differences in the perception of marital problems. Amato and Rogers (1997) found that women report more marital problems than men. Although both genders are equally aware of the husbands' contribution to marital problems, husbands surprisingly tend to report more problems caused by themselves than by their wives. They tend not to report or unaware of their wives' contributions to marital problems.

Heaton and Blake (1999) found that the characteristics of husbands and wives such as socioeconomic status, demographic attributes, and attitudes about family life are important determinants of marital disruption. Wives are found to be more sensitive to marital problems and play a greater role in determining marital stability. However the difference in the magnitude of influence diminishes in more egalitarian marriages.

The family career can be divided into many stages and each stage has a qualitatively different behavior pattern. Young married couples have roles to play which are different from those of older married couples. Marker events, role transitions and behavioral change propel the couple from one stage to another. In the role transitional period, members of the family flounder, search out and try out new ways of interaction before the family "settles" into a new behavioral system, which has a new social context and within which the members interact (Aldous, 1996).

Marital quality drops with time. Pinosof (2002) reported that in the United States of America, the divorce median is around seven years. According to Clarke (1995 in Kurdek, 2002), 30% of divorces occurred within the first four years of

marriage. Kurdek (1999, 2002) pointed out that marital quality declines fairly rapidly in the first four years of marriage, stabilizes and declines again around the eighth year. In another study, marital satisfaction is found to drop markedly over the first ten years of marriage and then drop more gradually in the ensuing decades (Glenn, 1998) Gottman and Levenson (2000) provided empirical evidence to show that there are two critical periods for the survival of a marriage, namely the first seven years of marriage and when the first child reaches 14 years old. Data from a 17-year five-wave panel study by VanLaningham, Johnson and Amato (2001) demonstrated decline of marital happiness with marital duration, and give no support for an upturn in the later years. It would not be logical to assume that the decline in marital happiness and the occurrence of divorce or separation are not related to marital problems.

The duration of marriage is an important dimension when ascertaining the course of marital change. Variables that lead to a marriage breakdown after three years are probably different from those that lead to marriage ending after 15 years (Karney and Bradbury, 1995 in Wolcott and Hughes, 1999). Gottman and Levenson (2000) provided empirical evidence that negative affects such as anger, contempt-disgust, sadness, fear, whining during conflict plays a role in predicting early divorce. The mean marital duration of early divorce was 7.4 years. Lack of positive affect, for example the absence of affection-caring, humor, interest-curiosity, joy-enthusiasm in events-of-the-day and conflict discussion is related to later divorce, which has a mean marital duration of 13.9 years.

In summary, because conflict is inevitable, the primary concern therefore, is on how conflict be managed. By knowing more about the factors related to marital problems especially in our local context, it is hoped that preventive measures can be taken, so that conflicts will not escalate to damaging levels or reduce the group to totally separate individuals (Klein and White, 1996). Directed towards the goals of primary and secondary prevention, this study examines the influence of gender and

marital duration on the perception of issues that may be construed as marital problems.

1.3 Objectives of the Research

The general objective of this research is to examine the perception of professionals on several issues that can become problems in the current stage of their marriage, and what problems are deemed to be very damaging to marriage. The specific objectives are:

- i. To identify the difference between males and females in their perceptions about issues that can become problems in marriage.
- ii. To determine how marital duration affects the perception of marital problems.
- iii. To examine how gender and marital duration when considered together, influence the perception of marital problems.

In addition, this survey also collects from the participants, the nature of problems that are deemed to be very damaging to marriage.

1.4 Significance of the Research

Exploratory study on issues of importance in marriage and family from prospective clients is lacking (Boisvert and Ladoucerur, 1995). When evaluating marriage preparation programs among college students, Duncan and Box (1996) take reference from the 4 Ps (product, price, place and promotion) of Katz (1988) to stress the importance of consumer-based data in the development and dissemination of these programs. According to Ibrahim (2000), it is logical to seek the opinion of consumers who are the stakeholders of any program that affects them. She further emphasized that, this consultation is preferably done in the planning stage of the program instead of at the evaluation period; nevertheless this *modus operandi* can be expensive, time-consuming and labor intensive.

This present study is significant because it deals with a common topic in human existence which is potentially devastating, that is problems in marriages. Data are collected from our local population, thus the findings will present a local picture and at the same time allow for cross cultural comparison in the future. This exploratory study may uncover more questions about this complex topic and stimulate further research on a larger scale.

In the planning of preventive and enrichment programs, there are many aspects to be considered, such as the target group, the time of intervention, the venue, the quality of instructors, the mode of presentation and the contents (Williams and Riley, 1999). In deciding what content to include, that is "what to teach?", in these programs; the importance of gender and marital duration on the perception of marital problems merits consideration. Russell and Lyster (1992) in a survey of 196 couples who have participated in a marriage preparation program, found that there was a high level of overall satisfaction. However, there were variability in satisfaction by content area, participants' age, and the timing of participation. The authors commended that uniform or standardized approaches need to be modified to meet the diverse needs of couples at varying life stages. In other words, "custom-made" programs for different target groups are worthy of special attention. In this perspective, data of this present research shall be useful to local family scholars and counselors engaged in designing premarital and continuing marital education programs. Family counselors, religious teachers and family life educators providing premarital education and counseling may also refer to the findings when appraising marital problems.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The Ecological Framework of Marriage (Huston, 2000) provides the theoretical basis for this study. Under this perspective is the three-level model for viewing marriage. Firstly, there is the macro-societal forces (e.g. culture, historical events like economic depression) and ecological niche (e.g. family structure, neighborhood, work-related

stress) within which the couples function. Secondly, the individual spouses with their physical and psycho-social attributes, attitudes and beliefs, and lastly, the marital relationship which is envisioned as an interpersonal behavioral system, embedded within a larger network of close relationships. The dynamism of the whole system which includes the individual, dyadic and the macro-environment; and the marital adjustment as a continuous adaptive process are emphasized. From this perspective, marital interaction is a very complex phenomenon which is influenced by numerous factors from all three levels interpenetrating each other continuously. In this scenario, many issues can become problems due to perceptual incongruence between partners. To one partner an issue "has become a problem" but to the other partner this may not be perceived as such. Couples employing different *modus vivendi* of varying degree of success thus produce marriages of differing closeness, satisfactoriness and stability (Huston, 2000).

The theoretical framework of this study is presented in Figure 1.1. There are three spheres, namely:

- i. The individual's perception of partners' behaviors and surrounding events which proceeds through a series of intrapersonal cognitive processes, leading to interpretation and response behavior (Fiske and Taylor, 1992; Sekuler and Blake, 1994; Taylor, Peplau and Sears, 2000). Gender role attitude and affect are factors influencing these intrapsychic processes.
- ii. Marriage sets the milieu and context for marital adaptation (interpersonal Interaction).
- iii. Societal influences on marital interaction, for example spousal's employment and children's educational endeavor.

Marital duration is added to highlight the temporal dimension of marriage. Not only different marital phases influence marital adjustment (Aldous, 1996) but dyads within a particular stage go through their own transition phases (White, 1991). Marital stage is defined here as a qualitatively distinct period in the life course of the marital

dyad (White, 1991). Marital interaction is influenced by many critical transitions, for instance parenthood, transactions with school, and disengagement of children from parental family. Changing positions and roles, and the need to actively acquire skills for tackling these tasks affects the dyadic relation (Aldous, 1996).

Arrows between the individual and marriage, marriage and societal influences and individual and societal influences denote that the whole system is dynamic, interdependent and mutually influencing.

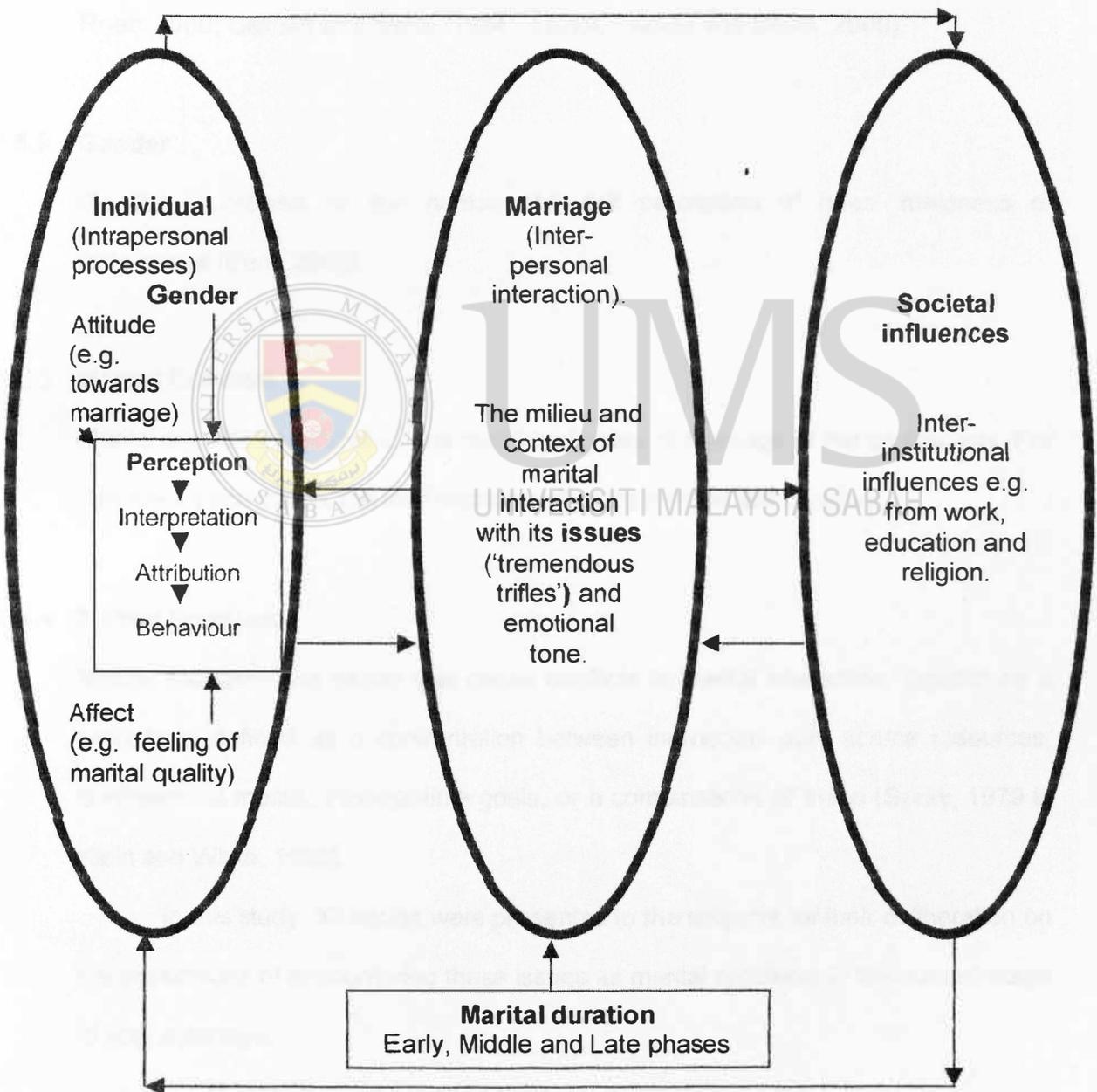


Figure 1.1: Factors influencing the perception of issues in marital interaction