

Understanding the Strengths of Long Term Marriages among the Malaysian Chinese: Discussion on Preliminary Proposed Ethodology

Teoh Gaik Kin¹
Haslee Sharil Abdullah²
Lau Poh Li³

Abstract

As awareness and sensitivity of multiculturalism is steering its way into the center stage of psychology, more cultural specific studies are needed to expand the understanding of human beings from the universal perspectives. This paper aims to discuss the preliminary research methodology utilized by researcher to understand the strengths of Malaysian Chinese long term marriages. Some of the marital theoretical frameworks and research methodology learned from the textbooks and studies from the Western are not relevant to the fieldwork. Pilot testing allowed the researcher to evaluate the proposed methodology. It also opened the eyes of researcher to be aware of cultural practices which the researcher could have been taken for granted. A few localized marital strengths, which were rarely discussed in Western literature, emerged in pilot testing.

Keywords - Long term marriage, Malaysian Chinese Marriage, Chinese Marriage, strengths of marriage.

Introduction

Application of textbooks, psychological studies and journals from America to understand human beings is called into question as the American psychology researches are based on the 5% of the world population (300 million of Americans out of 6.5 billion world population). A human science based human diversity and is representative of the whole humanity is urged (Arnett, 2008). With the emerging themes of Asian epistemologies and Asian forms of Psychology, the cultural discrepancy between the Americans and the Asians is evident (Yang, 2000).

In Malaysia, studies on marital determinants are not only scarce, the studies of marital variables tended to overlook cultural relevant factors (Ng et al., 2009; Tam et al., 2011; Zainah et al., 2012). Understanding the cultural specific in marriage for each ethnic group is needed to implement inclusive marriage and family policies (Cheung, 2012). Particularly, Markman and Halford (2005) are calling attention to the inappropriate application of the Western concept of love to other cultures.

¹ PhD. Candidate, Faculty of Education, Department of Education Psychology and Counselling, University of Malaya

² PhD., Professor, Faculty of Leadership and Management, Islamic Science University of Malaysia

³ PhD., Associate Professor, Department of Education Psychology and Counselling, University of Malaya

The Malaysian Chinese and the Their Family Values

Among the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia, the Chinese had the lowest divorce rate (Tey, 2011). The Chinese women married later than the Malays and the Indians (Tey, 2007). The Malaysian Chinese, though a minority, have a significant control in Malaysia's economy (Ng, Loy, Gudmunson, & Cheong, 2009). They show perseverance in maintaining their cultural values and identity (Ng, 1998). The Chinese in Malaysia were the third largest group of global Chinese overseas population (Ng et al., 2009), who reside outside of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In the 19th century, the Taiping rebellion caused large flock of Chinese immigrants to Malaysia from south China. Another flow of Chinese migration to Malaysia was during the 1920s and 1930s, when wars occurred in many parts of China (Tan, 2005). The Chinese had brought with them a set of values and customs. Although they were living in different lands, they tried to hold on to their values (Abdullah & Pedersen, 2006).

How Modernization shaped Malaysian Chinese Families

The ties between family members are indispensable (Hsu, 1985). Parents used to have parental control in choosing mate for their children. However, with modernization, instead of parental control, parental support prevails. Parents become the child care support for working couples (Tan, 2005). For instance, choosing parents as the choice for child care is the still the most favourable option among the Chinese (Lembaga Penduduk dan Pembangunan Keluarga Malaysia, 2004, p. 301). Even so for the single mothers, they returned to their natal support when their relationships failed (Hew, 2003; Hirschman & Teerawichitchainan, 2003). In other words, the roles of parents are changing due to modernization.

Another form of parental support is young people still value their parents' support and blessing in their marriages. For instance, when young couples were to be asked about the number of tables to be booked for their wedding dinner, the answer would be that most of the wedding tables would be reserved for their parents' friends and relatives. (communications with participants, through SMARTSTART Premarital Education Seminar from 2012 to 2013, circle of friends, relatives, pre-marital counselling couples). The bride and bridegroom in Chinese families play little role in the wedding ceremony (Burgess & Locke, 1960). Before getting married, couples will bring their boyfriend or girlfriend to meet their parents (Tan & Jones, 1990). Family support in Chinese families is still preserved, though its shape has changed (Chang, 2013; Clammer, 1996, p. 27-28; Hew, 2003; Hirschman & Teerawichitchainan, 2003).

The process of modernization shaped family formation and the family dynamics of Chinese families; distinguishing the impact of industrialization and the influence of cultural values is impossible and the intertwining of both is inevitable (Goode, 1963). However, Quah (1990) and Clammer (1996) shared a convergent view that cultural values are rooted in development and they are the foundation for development. Failure to incorporate how values are constructed into family policies would suffer

two consequences: 1) the imported values would supersede the indigenous values as one is more superior than the other (Clammer, 1996, p. 34); 2) in light of the wide spectrum of attitudes toward love among different cultures, adopting the Western teaching directly without understanding the local cultures and values, family policies could become “a consequence of a composite patchwork of unrelated program” (as cited in Quah, 1990, p. 50).

Therefore, understanding marriage from the local perspectives would shed light on how marital values are upheld in non-Western contexts. While the field of psychology is moving towards a truly international stage by integrating cross-cultural psychology into the mainstream psychology (Cheung, 2012), this study adds to the understanding of the Chinese Malaysian marriage from the epic perspective so that the combination of mainstream and indigenous psychology could demarcate the universal and culturally specifics of marital constructs (Cheung, 2012) among Malaysian Chinese married couples. This kind of cultural sensitivity would allow practice of relevant and inclusive family policies, rather than formulating family policies based on generalization of multi-ethnic cultures (Talib, 2010).

In order to conduct contextualized marital studies, appropriateness in use of research design is crucial. Thus, this paper will discuss the preliminary proposed methodology for studying long term marriage among the Malaysian Chinese.

Methodology

Qualitative research will be employed for this study. Marriages are diversely bounded by cultural norms and practices (Quah, 2008). Husserl (1976) emphasized that consciousness and experience are phenomenon by themselves, thus it is crucial to understand them in their own terms. Hence, in order to understand the marital strengths from local perspective, it is essential to study the meaning of the long term married couples from natural setting. The process of telling stories in a non-confined laboratory like environment could help to unfold some important themes for long term marriage.

Creswell (2012) also stated that qualitative research is “best suited to address a research problem in which you do not know the variables and need to explore” (p. 16). As stated earlier, in Malaysia, study based on local marital phenomenon is very needed for each ethnic group. Although a few marital studies have been done locally, the marital constructs used to examine the local marriage are based on Western models (etic approach). Capturing the marital strengths of long term married couples is what this research pursues. Through qualitative research the local perspectives and cultural specific marital variables could be surfaced.

Qualitative research would also help the researcher to see how the participants fit in the cultural context where the couples live. By interviewing the couples and making home visits, the researcher is able to understand the contextual background of the couples. The rich data of qualitative research will also convey how the cultural norms and values have influenced marital relationships. According to

Husserl (1927), all knowledge is founded through human experience. As mentioned before, almost all local marital studies are employing the etic approach. By using qualitative approach, this study seeks to understand the cultural specific variables as well as universal variables which contribute to the experience of long term marital commitment in different cultures. Thus, using multiple sources, such as in-depth interviews, observation and relevant documents (field notes, pictures, love letters etc.), the experience, cultural norms and patterns of local culture should be triangulated and captured from different sources. This will contribute to the trustworthiness of the study.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The researcher is the fundamental instrument for this study. Richardson stated that “the ethnographic life is not separable from the Self” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 965). The integration of the identity of researcher and experience has recently gained extensive theoretical and philosophical support (Patton, 2002). In fact, Maxwell (1998) believed that researcher’s experience could become a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks.

Meanwhile, biases of researcher’s cannot be overlooked. Stating the background of the researcher, biases can be brought to awareness and dealt with. In terms of educational background, the researcher acquired six years of under-graduate and post-graduate studies in the United States, before starting a counselling career at a Christian based non-profit organization called The Bridge Communication in 2001. At that time, the establishment of counselling practice was still in the very infant stage. Local marital study was quite lagging behind (Hull, 2011). The researcher further studied in Master in Counselling at University of Malaya after working for five years. Most of the training and theories learned in counselling courses were Western based.

At the initial stage of practice, it never occurred to the researcher that there were difficulties in applying the Western marital concepts to the local couples in counselling sessions. Western knowledge was like an absolute truth of marriage for the researcher at that time. Though the researcher was aware of sensitivity toward cultural issues, there were not many local resources for reference regarding the cross-cultural counselling experience. Even during supervision and case studies, cross-cultural issues were rarely surfaced for discussion.

It was through years of experience in trial and error, through truancy of couple sessions, feedback from genuine and sincere participants of the researcher’s seminars and workshops, comments from professional peers and career mentors from Taiwanese Professors, the researcher began to realize how much sensitivity was needed to identify the cultural specific factors before “implementing” the Western concepts into their lives. In fact, without recognizing the discrepancies between the Western models and local cultural values, intervention would seem like cutting off

from cultural values, which could be assessed as symptoms of disorders (Clammer, 1996). This will eventually affect the quality of counselling intervention. Immersing in both Western teaching and my own cultural values, it is difficult to distinguish both. These frameworks could desensitize researcher's experience, which might hinder the researcher's ability to capture the local values for marriages.

The researcher of this study is a married woman, who has two boys, aged 7 and 9. As a person, the researcher has gone through ten years of married life. Throughout these ten years of marriage, the process of deepening the marital relationship is like the process of peeling onion layer by layer. Each layer is peeled off, not out of bitterness, but for the good of the family, the children and the well-being of each individual who builds the marital relationship together. Nevertheless, juggling between personal needs and the needs of family required courage and sincerity to come to terms with what one desires might not be the best. As a Western trained counsellor as well as a Chinese wife, the Western thoughts and local beliefs sometimes mingle, but sometime clash. In the professional terms, the researcher's marital life has given her opportunity to walk through the process of differentiation and integration of self. This process of experiencing the West and the East, the researcher hopes, will come to truly honour human dignity by accepting the diversity.

Other than experiences and backgrounds, the researcher also brings in biases into this research. It is impossible to eliminate the biases of the researcher, but it is crucial to identify them and to monitor how the biases would have influenced data collection and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). As mentioned earlier, as a Chinese acquired Western Education, the Western frameworks are very precious knowledge for me. Having the opportunity to be exposed to Western education, there are some Western values and teachings which the researcher personally favour. For example, in conflict resolution, the researcher prefers the way Westerners deal with conflicts. Conflicts could be opened up for discussion and to recognize differences and working through them. If the researcher is not conscious and cautious about this, the researcher will tend to find answers to fit into the theoretical frameworks. This is described by Denzin (1988) as "the researcher may be imposing schemes of interpretation on the social world that simply do not fit that world as it is constructed and lived by interacting individuals" (p. 432).

Being a counsellor, seeing couples and working with them have become part of the researcher's life. Another potential bias is the researcher might be tempted to do intervention, rather than collecting data from the participants. Particularly, when the participants know the researcher's study area is in marriage, they might look up to the researcher as an "expert." They might expect the researcher to give them suggestions or solutions for their marriage. Particularly, some authors cautioned that the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee could fall into a form of hierarchical relationship (Brinkmann, 2007; Bryman, 2004; Kvale, 2006).

To cross check the researcher's biases, the researcher would be transparent in the research procedures (Yin, 2011). It is impossible that the researcher could discard theories, values and assumptions during data collection. The researcher will document all data and make it available for scrutiny by others. Transparency is not to prove the researcher is clear from biases, but to understand how the researcher's values affect the research process and the outcome of the study (Maxwell, 1998). The researcher will keep a journal log for personal reflection and observations.

Practice of Research Ethics

Ethical practice demands much sensitivity from the researcher. This study will be grounded on the three moral principles, particularly, its relevancy to the context of this study. Firstly, respect for persons. The researchers will not use the participants as "a means to an end" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Researchers respect their privacy, their anonymity and their right to participate or not. For this study, the researcher is wondering what the participants' experience is like. Are they genuinely comfortable with signing the form? Or are they obliging to the researcher?

In order to counter the issue mentioned above, the researcher will meet the potential participants first before the interview begins and explain to them the purpose of study, what would be expected from the interview (like tape recording, photo taking and reading their letters, if they permit), how the data will be kept and the participants' rights. The researcher will have them sign the informed consent form during the next meeting when the interview takes place. The rationale for signing the informed consent form during the next meeting is to allow a cooling off period for the participants to think over their participation. They will not be rushed to sign the informed consent form on the spot. That would reduce the possibility that the participants feel obligated to sign the informed consent form.

Another concern with the participants' privacy is this research is best suited if the interviews are carried out in the participants' home. Patton (2002) pointed out that observing the context could provide a holistic perspective on the participants. Also observing the physical context of the participants would allow the researcher to see routine behaviours that the participants might not be aware of. Thus, to respect their privacy, during the initial meeting, the researcher will seek their permission to have the interviews at their homes.

If the researcher is completely transparent that the researcher intends to visit the homes for holistic view of their relationship, the participants will be set up to behave in certain ways that represent "holistic." It might weaken the purpose of qualitative purposes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Thus, the researcher will choose to adopt Taylor and Bogdan's (1984) advice to be "truthful but vague" (p. 25) while explaining the research objective. For instance, while explaining the purpose of study, the researcher will say, "the objective of this study is to understand individuals as well as the couples' relationships. I am not sure would it be more convenient to you if the interview is carried out in your home?" If they refuse, the researcher will not coax them into the study to meet the researcher's end need.

Secondly, beneficence – the researcher will try the best to ensure the participants are not harmed by taking part in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In order to ensure the participants are free from harm by participating in this research, the researcher will keep confidentiality by keeping anonymity of the participants. A marker will be assigned to them to represent them. Their real names will be kept anonymous. They will be told how the data will be kept. The researcher will inform the participants that the researcher keeps the data and it is only accessed by the researcher and the supervisors.

Also, the researcher will not make any interpretations or value judgments on their homes and the couples' interactions when carrying out the interviews. The researcher will respect their home settings as well as their interactions. The researcher will not also take any pictures without their consent.

Thirdly, justice – paying attentions of who benefit and who does not benefit from the study (Marshall et al., 2011). The researcher will not try to do anything that would cause discomfort or disruption to the participants. The participants' welfare will be prioritized above the researcher's need. The researcher will choose time when it is suitable for them. The researcher will also prepare a small gift as a token of appreciation for their participation. The gift will be given to them after the researcher is over. If the participants withdraw or they refuse to say anything that they feel uncomfortable, the researcher will respect them.

Sample

For this study, purposive sampling and snowball sampling will be adopted. Recruitment of sample will be done through word of mouth among friends and relatives, emails, WhatsApp, SMS and social media networking. The recruited couples could provide a link to their friends through snowballing. The sample for this research exhibits the following features:

- a) Chinese Malaysian – Chinese who are born in Malaysia.
- b) Couples who went through mid-life. According to Levinson (1986), “the process of change begins in the Midlife Transition [roughly age 40-45] and continues throughout the era [age 45-60]” (p. 5). At this stage, the costs of living usually surpass the benefits. The major developmental task at this stage is individuation. When this took place successfully, the selves will be more reflective, compassionate, sensible and more loving of selves and others, less tormented by inner conflicts and external pulls. By understanding how the couples go through mid-life, it will allow the researcher to understand how the couples display marital strengths through transition of life.
- c) Couples who have a child or children. Since the 1960s, there have been a handful of studies recognizing that transition to parenthood took a toll on marriages (Hicks & Platt, 1970; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Spanier & Lewis, 1980). In contrast, Schindler & Coley (2012) in their study reflected that marital

relationship could be fortified through parent-child bonding. Children could also reduce the likeliness of unhappy married couples to divorce (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003). Though there are studies drawing the link between youth delinquency and marital satisfaction (Baharudin, Krauss, & Pei, 2003; Lai, 2008), there is no study on how the children impact on marriage and vice versa in Malaysia. Thus, the researcher would like to understand how long term married couples thrive through parenthood.

- d) Couples who have in-laws. In-laws are considered an important factor that could influence of the quality or even the success of marriage (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Chang, 2013). Exploring how the long term couples deal with their in-laws and the level of in-law's involvement in the marriage. This would shed light on the beliefs and values which strengthen those couples.
- e) Longevity of Marriage – minimum 35 years. Ideally, to witness the long term married couple to walk through different cycles of their lives, the ideal duration of marriage is more than 50 years. Although years of marriage do not directly reflect the quality of marriage, couples who have been married for a long time would provide the breadth of time span for the researcher to look into how the couples go through “transition points” of their marriage (Spanier & Lewis, 1980). By going beyond 50 years of marriage, it will provide an angle to understand how the arrival of grandchildren impact on the marriage. In fact, having grandchildren has significant meaning for long term married couples in this cultural context. However, capturing couples who could articulate (most Chinese in that generation had either low education or no education), married more than 50 years of marriage, both husband and wife are still alive, could be a challenge. As a result, with consideration of the rise in the age of first marriage, marital duration for the couples chosen would not fall below 35 years. This would increase the number of long term couples who could articulate better (most people around these ages received higher education than the couples who have more than 50 years of marriage), both couple still alive and willing to participate in this study.

In terms of sample size, Yin (2011) suggested that instead of finding a standard answer for how many participants to interview, the depth of data and the complication involved in this study should be considered. Merriam (2009) also stated that besides the research question, the availability of the resources to support the study is one of the considerations. Thus, in considering the depth of study and the resources available, for the study the sample size is 8 couples.

In-depth Interviews

To find out the marital strengths of those couples, it is not feasible for the researcher to observe the live experience of those couples in their home settings on a daily basis. Thus, in-depth interviews would be more appropriate for people to talk about themselves, their marriages and their experiences. The researcher will use life stories method to capture the data. Using life stories will reduce the chances that

the participants have to answer from the researcher's theoretical frameworks. General question such as how they get to know each other will be used to start out the interview sessions. Family pictures are another avenue to elicit the couples' marital experiences and rapport building. Talking about the family pictures would sound more relevant and natural to their experiences.

After considering the pros and cons of interviewing the couple together and separately, the potential pitfalls for doing separate individual interview, and considering the research objective, the researcher would opt for interviewing the couple together. The rationale for meeting the couple together is that it might open a window to explore the dynamics of the relationship. It may also help to elicit the "collective memory of events and feeling" (Hertz, 1995, p. 436) of the couples. This would serve as verification to ensure the quality of data. For instance, it might be possible that the husband feels satisfied with their marital relationship, but the wife might not be. Thus, the researcher cannot assume both husband and wife have the same marital satisfaction level (Hicks & Platt, 1970). With the relational dynamics, interviewing the couple together can validate the sample chosen.

Observation

The stance of observation for the research is participant observation (Creswell, 2013). For this study, it is impossible to adopt the observational stances as complete participant, observer participant and complete observer. As the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of the married couples, by adopting participant observation stance, the researcher is able to immerse in the setting, though not completely, to feel the couples' home settings while participating in interviewing sessions. Observing the home setting gives a holistic view of the couples (Patton, 2002).

Plan for Entry

Fontana and Frey (2005) stated that the success of the study relies on how the interviewer presents himself or herself. For this study, the researcher will present herself as learner. The researcher will also inform the participants that there is no right or wrong answer. The researcher's role is to understand the couples. The researcher is trying to minimize the hierarchical position in interview. According to Fontana and Frey (2005), when the researcher is able to show the human side and freely express feelings and concerns, methodologically, it invites wider dimensions of response and more insights into the lives of the participants.

To gain access to the participants of this study, other than the researcher's personal contact is used, referral by friends, relatives or others will be used. Using the researcher's network and referral are effective ways to get to the participants in this cultural context because people in general tend to trust someone they know (Jankowiak, 2009). Silverman (2013) also proposed the advantage of using personal network due to the existing trust between the researcher and the researched.

After getting their permission to have their contacts, the researcher will make initial contact by calling the participants (both husband and wife) before meeting them in person. After the brief introduction, the researcher's personal interest in studying marriage and the purpose of the study will be disclosed. In fact, the enthusiasm of the researcher's personal interest in the marriage could become a valuable channel to get access to the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The researcher will seek their permission to visit their homes for initial meeting before the interview takes place. Merriam (2009) pointed out that setting up a preliminary meeting could also be used to screen whether the participants are appropriate for the study. Thus, by making initial meeting, the researcher could determine whether the couples are appropriate for this study. At the same time, the participants are giving the opportunity to meet the researcher in person before they decided to take part in this study (Silverman, 2013).

This initial meeting will be useful also to elaborate on the research and my background; especially they have known me and the study through their friends. The researcher cannot assume that the participants are clear on what the researcher is going to do (Silverman, 2013). Thus, the initial meeting will help to elaborate, clarify, and create a cooling off period for them to reconsider whether to participate or not. It can also be useful to screen whether the participants are suitable for this study.

During the initial meeting, the researcher will explain the researcher's role (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The researcher will prepare the participants what will be the likely activities involved in the interview and how the participants can take part in the research, the researcher's role is also to respect the participants for not to participate without questioning. The researcher will also play the role to answer their questions which pertain to the involvement of this research. Meanwhile, as truthful responses from the participants are crucial to this research, the researcher will prepare the participants to give truthful answers. The researcher would reduce the social desirable effects by telling the participants that "Thank you for willing to take part in this research. In fact, during the interview, you do not have to feel you need to give me a standard answer or the right answer. Especially there is nothing right and wrong about how one experiences the marriage. It would be very helpful if you could just tell things as it is."

During the actual interview meetings with the participants, the researcher will respect their perspective even if it is against the researcher's values or frame of reference. The researcher will also try to refrain from using jargon or professional terms during the meeting and interviews because it would create a kind of "academic armour" (Marshall et al., 2011, p. 118) that would impede the needed "intimate emotional engagement" in qualitative research (as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Getting rid of the academic armour would facilitate participants' acceptance of the researchers.

The researcher will be patient and take the pacing of the participants accordingly during the meetings with them. The researcher will not rush into interview if they are not fully settled yet. For example, if the visitation time is just after the dinner time and the participants are still not ready. Instead of sitting there and waiting to

tape record the interview session, the researcher will help in little way, as a returning of the favour they did to the researcher, Marshall and Rossman (2011) called it “reciprocity” (p. 121). This may involve allocating time to help, providing informal feedback, help in making drinks, being a good listener and so forth. For example, in relating to this research, the researcher will extend help in cleaning the table or help with making drinks.

These are some tentative plans for making entry to the couples who are willing to take part in this research. Once entering the participants’ lives, how the data is collected will be addressed in the next section.

Plans for Exit

After spending hours listening to the sharing of the couples, the emotional bond between the researcher and the participants is fostered in some ways. Thus, a proper plan to say goodbye without making the participants feel abandoned, the debrief session for the researcher is needed (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

For this research, during the initial meeting, the researcher will prepare the participants that the research relationship will end when the project is finishing. Being sensitive to the feelings of the participants, the researcher will exit gradually by talking about the completion of the research and giving a gift as an expression of appreciation when it comes to the end (Marshall et al., 2011). The researcher will also find time to debrief the feelings towards the participants with peers. These feelings will also be jotted down in the memo.

Exiting is not just getting something from the participants and leaving the fields. Reflecting on the relationship between the researcher and the researched is worthwhile to reflect upon how the researcher and the participants have made up the “reality” out there. This reflection will provide a perspective for the researcher to view how the researcher impacts on the relationships with the participants and the findings of this study. Silverman (2013) suggested that “whatever your theoretical model, it is good practice to address how your relationship with the people in your study might affect your findings” (p. 283).

Pilot Testing

Five couples participated in the pilot testing. Three couples came from the same rural area and two couples came from an urban setting. The backgrounds of the rural setting couples are rendered before the urban setting couples. The husbands’ occupations for the rural couples before they retired were food hawker, fish wholesaler in the wet market and a small wood factory owner. The wives of the food hawker and the factory owner were the main business assistants. The wife of the fish wholesaler was a full time housewife. The years of marriage for these couples were 63 years, 50 years and 44 years. One couple lives with their adult child (who suffers from cancer). Another couple lives with their adult child family in the same house. Last couple lives with their adult child family, who live in the house next to theirs. One couple spoke

Mandarin and two other spoke Chinese dialects during the interviews. These couples were introduced through friends and relatives of the researcher.

The years of marriage for the urban couples were 53 and 39. The husbands' occupations for the urban setting were government servant and bank officer. The wives were full time housewives. The urban couples stay by themselves. The language used for urban couples were Mandarin. They were introduced to the researcher through friends.

All the interviews were conducted in their home settings. The interview session for each couple lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Observations

Setting appointments with the rural couples were easier than the urban couples. The researcher can visit the rural couples on that day when phone calls were made. For urban couples, the researcher had to slot appointments between doctors' appointments and working hours (one urban couple still works as a babysitter). The support networks for the rural couples come mainly from their children. For the urban couples, the support systems come from neighbours, their siblings and church.

Hobbies of urban couples are more diverse, like listening to music, reading, writing, baking, cooking, finding tasting food, watching television and community works. For rural couples, the hobbies are watching television, taking care of house chores, and hanging out with grandchildren.

The expressions of rural couples were simple. It reflects their behaviours in daily lives. For example, when the researcher asked the rural couples, "How do you deal with conflict between you and your spouse?" The common answer they gave was, "I walked away. Then, we came back like nothing happened." For the urban couples, when the same question was asked, they replied, "It is very common to have conflicts. Every couple sure has conflicts." The researcher asked further what they do, they answered, "We would let things cool off. Then, life would be like usual. We did not hold grudge."

In the home setting, the grandchildren and the children of the rural couples sat nearby listening to the sharing. This did not happen in the urban settings.

Discussion

Real life experience often differs from scholarly theories (Karney, 2007). Pilot testing helped to fine tune and bend the methodology to fit the context of research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Setting up initial meeting to screen the appropriateness of participation was not possible. Once the couple knew the researcher was referred by their friends, they expressed willingness to take part. The selection process would have to be carried through having more couples interviewed than estimated.

The researcher was quite amazed at how receptive the participants were when informed consent was rendered to them. The researcher was expecting they might feel uneasy or unfamiliar with this kind of protocol. Surprisingly, they just signed after the researcher explained to them. That could mainly be because they know the persons who referred to the researcher. They trust someone they know.

Another surprise from the field was the urban couples sent the researcher off with food to bring along. The rural couples did not exhibit this kind of behaviours. Reciprocity in gift exchange is a way of politeness among the Chinese. The researcher was caught off guard as no preparation was made beforehand. Giving gifts to the participants has been a controversial issue in the field. In order not to set up the participants, the researcher did not prepare gifts during the interview visit. This was a big lesson learned. To prevent awkwardness in the gifts exchange, the researcher is prepared to exchange gift as a show of courtesy in future happening.

The researcher also learned saying “no” was not a common practice. The ways of expressing “no” were very subtle. When the researcher was being assertive by giving alternatives, some participants might perceive that researcher’s insistent. They tended to accommodate to the researcher’s requests. The researcher needs to be very sensitive to their first response or their first reaction. That first reaction or first response could say what they truly mean.

Through pilot testing, the researcher noticed questions with conceptual frameworks were difficult to grasp for most participants. Some participants even showed signs of anxiousness when they were uncertain of the answers. Also, in terms of articulation, it was easier for the Chinese speaking couples to talk about day to day things, incidents and stories. This observation shifted the research method. Life stories were used to capture the data, which could also reduce contamination of the researcher’s presupposed theoretical frameworks.

The meaning of marriage for the urban and the rural couples was very different from the West. In the West, love is the center of marriage. Also, presence of children had been identified to lower the marital satisfaction in the West (Amato et al., 2003). However, the buttress of marriage for the couples here is children. From the couples’ point of view, marital relationship and family relationship are all mingled as one. They did not see marital relationship as one relationship which needs special care. For them, if the children are good, then everything is good.

Tolerance was one identified marital variable which is common to both rural and urban couples. In Taiwanese studies, tolerance has been extensively studied as an important predictor of marital satisfaction. However, tolerance was absent from Western literature in marriage.

Conclusion

Pilot testing allowed the researcher to have pre-entry field experience before carrying out the data collection. This experience helped in fine tuning the research methodology. It also opened the researcher's eyes to see how couples differed regionally. Marital strengths emerged from preliminary fieldwork showed divergence from Western literature in marital studies. The process in the pilot testing has also allowed the researcher to experience what it meant to be the researcher is the instrument for the research. In order to be instrument for the research, the researcher is willing to trust in own experience, cross check with theoretical framework, acknowledging and articulate the divergence and convergence.

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