

Effects of Communication Barriers in Marriage

Uma Devi Krishnan¹ and S. Annie Margaret²

Communication within the family is extremely important because it enables members to express their needs, wants, and concerns to each other. Open and honest communication creates an atmosphere that allows family members to express their differences as well as love and admiration for one another. It is through communication that family members are able to resolve the unavoidable problems that arise in all families. Problem or conflict in marriage is part of the process that helps couples to be more mature in their marital life. However, it tends to be the source of marital breakdown if not dealt with wisely. This paper will analyze the types of communication barriers in marital conflict which are faced by multiracial couples in Kuala Selangor. A qualitative research was carried out to analyze the experience of ten married couples about what they identify as communication barriers in their marriage. Researcher conducts semi-structured interviews as a primary data-gathering instrument. The scope study involves clients from Legal Aid Kuala Selangor who has filed in for divorce and seeking for advice or counseling session with the assign lawyers and counselors. These will help researcher to analyses the clients conflict in detail and to see variation among them and the factor which caused conflict in marriage are.

Keywords: communication barriers, marriage, marital conflict

¹ Postgraduate, Faculty of Arts & Social Science, UniversitiTunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

² Lecturer at Faculty of Arts & Social Science, UniversitiTunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

Introduction

*How I wish sometimes if only my husband understand
what I am saying and what I am about to say.
But yet most of the time, it is so hard as I myself don't know
how to say to him when it comes to addressing a problem. Even after I tried
my very best to tell to him yet I failed to
understand is he understanding or pretending not to understand what I say.
(Client 7)*

Henri René Albert Guy de Maupassant a popular 19th-century French writer said “Conversation. What is it? A Mystery! It's the art of never seeming bored, of touching everything with interest, of pleasing with trifles, of being fascinating with nothing at all ”.On the other end, we always assume that we know how to communicate well and understand a message given but the truth is that what we say, think and meant can and sometimes be interpreted wrongly. It is immense challenge to be always understandable and yet bigger challenge to understand each other. This communication phenomenology is credited by scholarly review of H. Norman Wright, who stated that “I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.” On the other hand, Terengganu government sees it differently as they feel that a several holiday packages together with counseling sessions, would be enough to reduce the increasing number of divorces in the north-eastern state of Terengganu. Furthermore, the state's community development committee chairman Ashaari Idris said that all-expense-paid trips would only be offered to couples who are going to file for divorce or separation (The China Post, 2009) .Meanwhile ,Jeffrey Cottrill reports that each of the packages cost the equivalent of \$440 (U.S.) Can the couple fulfill all entire requirement to solve a relationship problems with these packages,? As, a good relationship not only need a good honeymoon but a constant communication. Couples need a skill that will somehow get them to reach the full potential of these entire requirements. One of the skills that needed to gain a happy marriage is through effective communication skill. Meanwhile, Birchler (1979) defined communication skills of married couples as the observable, changeable, verbal, and nonverbal behaviors regarding the way how these messages were delivered and how these messages been received between these couple. However, communication is

only successful if the message is sent by the sender is understood with same implication by the receiver. If there is a block at any step of the flow of communication then the message will be ruined ("Communication barriers - Reasons for communication breakdown", n.d.). Yet, Barnett and Rivers (1996) claimed that communication skill is the key factor in determining the quality of marital relationship. It is the fundamental tool for understanding or emotional communicating with each other and it cannot be eliminated as it is the essential key element in a happy marriage. The most common reason people seek professional help is relationship problem (Veroff, Kulka & Douvan, 1981) and poor communication is the most frequent problem identified by couples (Broderick, 1981).

Definition of Communication Barriers.

"A barrier to communication is something that keeps meanings from meeting. Meaning barriers exist between all people, making communication much more difficult than most people seem to realize. It is false to assume that if one can talk he can communicate. Because so much of our education misleads people into thinking that communication is easier than it is, they become discouraged and give up when they run into difficulty. Because they do not understand the nature of the problem, they do not know what to do. The wonder is not that communicating is as difficult as it is, but that it occurs as much as it does" (Drakeford,1976).

Definition of Marriage

"Marriage is a relationship established between a woman and one or more other persons, which provides that a child born to the woman under circumstances not prohibited by the rules of the relationship, is accorded full birth-status rights common to normal members of his society or social stratum."(Kathleen Gough, 1968).

Definition of marital conflict

Buehler et al.(1998) defines marital conflict as the existence of high levels of disagreement, stressful and hostile interactions between spouses, disrespect, and verbal abuse while Cummings (1998) interprets it as "any major or minor interpersonal interaction that involved a difference of opinion, whether it was mostly negative or even mostly positive." Cummings further elaborates that everyday marital conflict refers to daily interactions, whether major or minor, in which couples have a difference of

opinion. Thus, everyday marital conflict includes a range of tactical and emotional expressions, both positive and negative. Marital aggression is on the negative extreme of a continuum of marital conflict which includes varying degrees of violent behaviors, including both verbal and physical acts.

The main reason of this study is to analyze how couples are affected by poor communication skill and the consequences that leads to marital conflict. Most of the couples do admit that limited knowledge in communication is the core reason of their unhappy relationship. Couples have to register the importance of communication to lead a happy and healthy life. How to avoid all these unnecessary turbulence in life? Couples should first identify their communication barriers. William Shakespeare once said “Mend your speech a little, Lest you may mar your fortunes.” Thus, a good communication skills is needed in any relationship.

Methodology

This research will focus on a qualitative research methodology. An in depth interview session was conducted with clients from Legal Aid Kuala Selangor who has filed in for divorce and seeking for advice or counseling session with the assign lawyers and counselors. Total of ten respondents has been interviewed and their answers have been recorded for the research purposes. Multi ethnic respondents were selected for this study to avoid bias and which will contribute to why communication plays an important part in conflict between married couples. In addition, more directed questions based on their reports during the interview were asked to obtain an in-depth understanding of their experiences. Interviews typically lasted for about 40- 1 hour. The interviews were recorded using portable digital recorders to recheck the notes taken by the researcher.

Effects of Communication Barriers

Communication process is easy to be misunderstood and the main factor contributes to marital conflict. If someone is not aware that they have a misinterpretation, they won't even try to amend or improve their communication skills. The other person may be neglected, irritated, angry and feeling hopeless. This will lead to shorter discussions and more intervals. They eventually must make a decision to either find someone else they are able to communicate with, seek help to find out what is wrong or

live in continued loneliness and sadness. Recently a Chinese woman was found hanged in the porch of her house due to a misunderstanding with her husband. A day before the incident the couple had a quarrel and she was missing since then. Her husband tried to find and call her mobile but all his attempt meet a dead end. The next day, his neighbors alerted him of the incident (The Star, Friday 12 July). A misunderstanding can cause one's life and a shattered family. This is not necessary as good communication skills can be learned and lacking to this lead many problem in the marriage ("Building skills: Communication the communication barriers leading to divorce, n.d.).

According to Gottman and Silver (1999), 96 percent of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the first three minutes of the fifteen minutes interaction. A negative interaction leads to fatal relationship. Language and words are thrown to each other without undertaking the feeling and emotions of the partner. As this wordy war continues, it leads to violence in marriage. Anger and frustration makes a person out of control and they behave out of norms. Sheila Stanley (2013) reports on a mother who abuses her own baby girl in a bedroom of their house. Ira who is a divorcee had abused her baby girl because she always fights with her new partner. Later, Ira was arrested by Malaysian Police Force on 13th May 2012 after a concerned neighbor filed in a complaint. Ira confessed that she and her partner always have misunderstanding and they end up arguing. Sadly all her frustration and anger is shown to her child (The star online, 2013). This is a typical scenario of communication barrier where effective communication has been denied and it is taken for granted. Most of the time couple's problem can be solved if communication is handled in a right way.

Parallel to this, James V. Cordova (2011) noted that 'unhealthy communication between couples has been proven by research to predict mental distress, divorce, domestic violence and physical ill health'. For example in the case of former well known Malaysian Muslim actor, Badrul Muhayat Ahmad Jailani, (42 years old) guilty to a charge with abusing his wife Julia (29 years old) by punching her face, kicking and hitting her with a broom stick at their house. He was fined RM1,000 and apologized to his wife. ("Wife-beating actor released after paying RM1,000", n.d.). What leads to such an act? No one can actually tell what went wrong? Yet the core of the problem could be just a communication barrier.

Most communication is nonverbal (60%) which leads to people making assumptions as to meaning of these nonverbal clues. The communication barriers of assuming a meaning can lead to a lot of misunderstanding and hurt feeling ("Building skills: Communication the communication barriers leading to divorce, n.d.). The pioneer of nonverbal communication study is done by Ray L. Birdwistell (1970), he estimated that the average person actually speaks words for a total of about ten to eleven minutes a day and that the arrange sentences takes only 2.5 seconds but in this period of time a person can make and recognize around 250,000 facial expression.

In conjunction with this nonverbal communication includes 8 element of kinesics such as body language and posture, facial expression, gestures, eye movement, proxemics (distance), paralinguistic (tone of voice), appearance and haptic (touch) (Larry & Deborah, 1993). All this elements are important in building a strong relationship. Knowing or unknowingly we use most of this cues in our daily interaction.

Nonverbal communication and marital satisfaction is often correlated. This correlation, heralded in basic textbooks (Verderber & Verderber, 1998) as well as the popular press and is also supported by a sizeable number of empirical studies that consistently find a positive correlation between nonverbal understanding and marital satisfaction and adjustment (Tannen, 1990).

According to a research which has been conducted by Hamidah (2008), 693 respondents from eight district of Johor, Malaysia concluded that the second major cause of a family breakdown is due to communication. One of the major elements which were noticed with the respondent is nonverbal communication. Couples fail to show eye contact when they converse to each other, and thus conversation without an eye contact makes one feel neglected and taken for granted.

Besides that, eliminating eye contact in speech shows someone maybe not truthful or trying to avoid the conversation. It also stops from responding to other nonverbal signals and this could lead to a communication breakdown. MCA Public Services and Complaints Department head Datuk Seri Michael Chong said he had received reports of many cases of marriages hitting the rocks because of over usage of smartphones.

This anecdote shows that nonverbal communication plays a central role in human behavior and vital in marriages. It is important to

recognize that nonverbal communication frequently involves more than a verbal message. In fact according to Australia Institution of Family Studies (2000) reported that 70% of people surveyed whose marriage had fallen apart nominated lack of communication and the resultant lack of companionship, love and affection as the major cause of their relationship failure. Recent studies by Relationships Australia have shown that five years after the breakup of their marriage, 40 per cent of individuals said they wished their divorce had never happened. They believed it could have been avoided had they only recognized the warning signs. This clearly shows that a strain in conversation that had not been modified could be the cause of most problems in marriage. Poor communication can lead to many social problems such as; divorce, domestic violence and suicidal and homicide

Divorce

Poor communication is also associated with an increased risk of divorce and marital separation (Novella, 2009). Divorce rate in Malaysia is at whopping high as the number of registered Muslim marriages is 140,535 and number of divorce is 27,355 (Department of Islamic Development, Malaysia, 2011). Likewise the number of registered Non-Muslim marriages is 68,691 and the divorce filed is 7,759 (National Registration Department, 2011). This figure shows that about 16.8% of marriage in Malaysia ends up in divorce. Divorce has been filed by couples as young as 12 days of marriage. National badminton player Roslin Hashim has filed in for divorce with his ex-wife, Faizah on the ground of 'not compatible' after 12 days of marriage (Borneo Post,2013). Is 12 days of marriage sufficient to make a drastic decision? Lack of communication could be a reason behind this story.

This anecdote clearly proves that marriages need a proper communication tools to avoid barriers. This was clearly seen in Mr Thiruselvan (38 years old) with Ms Umah Devi (31 years old) marriage. The marriage could have been saved if they are exposed to effective communication skills. His twenty years old marriage has left him with bigger wound and mental stress even after the divorce. He and his wife seldom communicate with each other that make his wife felt lonely. She could not cope with the frustration and emotion breakdown. As the last resort she filed in for a divorce although they both feel their marriages could not been ruined if a little effort has been put in (Umah Devi, Personal communication, July 1, 2013)

Does divorced couple find happiness that they are seeking for, after getting divorced? Is there ultimate freedom and peace achieve after couples go thru painstaking divorce proceeding in the court for months or sometime years. If the reason of couple is studied in detail we will find that the key to happiness is not in getting divorce but to identify the root cause of this marital problem. Couples that are divorce gets married after some time to other partner, thinking and hoping this time they will meet their soul mate or 'prince charming'. But the scenario is just as bad as their first marriage. Second marriage couples are also filing for divorce after sometime. So what is the main cause of this marital problem?

The conventional wisdom on divorce is most likely to happen if the communication breakdown is not been altered. Divorce, the end of an unhappy marriage eliminates certain stress and frustration but may create a new one. Scholarly review shows that divorce couples are not as happy as they earlier predicted but they are more stressful after the divorce. Divorce, on average, failed to improve the psychological and emotional wellbeing of unhappily married people (Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallenger, Luo, & Standley, 2002).

Domestic Violence

Statistics from Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) on violence towards women the figure decreased a bit in year 2009 to 3,643 cases and in 2010 1,871 cases. But in year 2011 shows as many as 3,277 cases which later increased to 3,488 in year 2012. Women Development Department (JPW) has provided counseling sessions to 3,598 women which include those who experienced domestic violence and abuse cases as of June 2010. JPW has also recorded an increase in women who attended counseling sessions with 32 cases in 2008, improved to 48 individuals in 2009 and as of July 2010, JPW has received 62 cases of women facing domestic violence where almost 60 percent from the reported amount of cases is involving the victims' close family members, especially the victims' husbands.

The influence in lack of communication in marriages sometimes leads to domestic violence. Verbal abuse of some couple sparks the anger and emotion turbulent on their partner. As a result violence is been picked up upon to show the disagreement or disapproval. The death of P. Karuna Nithi is vast speculated in the media but the reason he was detained is because he assaulted his wife, who had been verbally abusing him (The Star, 2013).

Verbal abuse can be lethal. According to an interview done with Ms S. Santhi, who is a Vice President of Womens Organisation Malaysia, feels that most of the domestic violence can be avoided if proper sentences is been structured. Wrong choice of word and incorrect body language are the common signs in domestic violence cases.(Shanti, Personal Communication, June 15, 2013).

Suicidal and homicide

A 67 year old woman is claiming that she and her son were beaten bloody by her daughter in law with a metal spatula. And Lim Kae Poy says it was all over joss paper (The Star, 2013. An argument between can lead to serious injuries or even a death. A fight in the family ends in bloodshed. Furthermore, in another case the victim's husband had stepped and stabbed his wife because his wife requested for a divorce. Nur Hidayah A. Ghani died in her house is a mother to four children has been abused by her husband for the past eleven years (The News Straits Times, 2013)

Both of this case suggests that simple issues that are taken for granted in a family or between couple results in great loss and regrets. Issues that can be negotiated or communicated were not given much attention at the end creates a bigger and more serious problem in their marriage. It has been argued that individuals who engage in spouse abuse increase their violence toward their partners, which can culminate in the death of either the assaulter or the victim (Bossarte, Simon, & Baker, 2006). Many researches show that unhappy marriages cultivate this shameful act.

In contrast, suicide in marriage has been ongoing since time in memorial. Spousal suicide have been attempted and successfully achieved. Committing suicide due to stress in marriage has been the study focus of many scholars. Although suicide can be linked to lack of communication between couples, lack of attention and power of listening can also be a main contributor. Thus many suicidal victims regrets their action but it is too late for them to withdraw, as such a victim called En. Azahari.

En Azahari was married to Pn Rahimah for just two years, when their marriage met a dead end. Both of them could not meet eye to eye in any issues in their marriage. According to Pn Normah, at one fatal night, their heated argument has prompted Azahari to drink poison. He was rushed to the nearby hospital but after a long treatment, doctors announced that Azahari will only lead a vegetable like life. Pn Normah, his mother took care of her son for the past 5 years when he at last passed away on October, 2011. According to Pn Normah although his son could not talk anymore but

his tears clearly shows that he regretted his (Normah, Personal Communication, June 28,2013)

Parallel to above, Khan & Reza (1998) found the main cause of spousal suicide is because of marital conflict. Thus, lack of communication and the broken network will result in silence and increased tension in a relationship (World Health Organization, 2000). Marital problems perceived by couples include poor communication skills as one of the subject to trigger divorce or spousal abuse.

Conclusion

The reports of couples who participated in the topic discussed in this paper are clearly signifying the power of verbal and nonverbal behavior, particularly in conflict situations, to shape the involvements of couple in marriage. Lacking of verbal and nonverbal communication demonstrate how a marriage can move towards dissolution and violence. There are many barriers in spousal communication but as the respondent who participated in this studies shows that most of them are been provoked by the main two common barriers that is verbal and nonverbal communication. This study also ascertains that communication element in marriage should be dealt with wisely as the outcome is often undesirable. Although respondents in this studies are few but the secrecy of marriage is often a taboo. Some of the respondents do not wish their painful experience to be reviled although they are suffering in silence. Only in the extreme marital breakdown cases that caught the media attention the couples nature is been exposed. Thus, communication is vital for a happy marriage and couple should be exposed to its importance before their marriage. Pre-marital program me for all the races in Malaysia might be the solution to most of the phenomenon so that their speech will be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that they may know how they ought to answer to every man (The Bible,Colossians 4:6)

- The Bible, Colossians 4:6

Reference

- Australian Institute of Family Studies(July 2000) 26p ISBN 0 642 39498 9.
ISSN 1446-9863 (Print); ISSN 1446-9871 (Online) Download
printable version (PDF 125 KB)
- Barnett, R. C. and Rivers, C. (1996). *She works/he works: How two-income families are happier, healthier, and better-off*. New York: HarperCollins publishers, Inc.
- Birchler, G. R. (1979). *Communication skills in married couples*. In A. S. Bellack, and M. Hersen (Eds). *Research and Practice in Social Skills Training* (273-307). NY: Plenum Press.
- Birdwhistell, R.L. (1970). *Kinesics and Context. Essay on Body Motion Communication*. Trustee of the University of Pennsylvania. United States of America.
- Broderick, J.E. (1981). *A method for derivation of areas of assessment in marital relationship*. *The American Journal of Family*, 9, 25-34.
- Buehler, C., Krishnakumar, A., Stone, G., Anthony, C., Pemberton, S., Gerard, J., & Barber, K. (1998). *Interparental conflict styles and youth problem behavior: A two-sample replication study*. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*
- Building skills: Communication the communication barriers leading to divorce* (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://imarketingbiz.net/building-skills-communication-the-communication-barriers-leading-to-divorce/>
- Communication barriers - Reasons for communication breakdown* (n.d.). Retrieved from http://managementstudyguide.com/communication_barriers.htm
- Cummings, E.M. (1998). *Children exposed to marital conflict and violence: Conceptual and theoretical directions*. In G.W.Holden, R.Geffner, & E.N.Jouriles (Eds.), *Children exposed to marital violence*, Washington, DC:
- Drakeford, John W. (1976). *Do You Hear Me, Honey? The Distortions of Family Communication*. New York:
- Bossarte, R.M., Simon, T.R., & Baker, L. (2006) *Characteristics of homicide followed by suicide incidents in multiple states*. Centers for Disease Control and prevention, National.

- Gottman, J. & Silver, N. (1999). How I predict divorce. The seven principle for making marriage work. Three Rivers Press Hall, New York, pp. 25-26
- Hamidah A.R. (2008). Isu dan Faktor Keluarga Bermasalah Di Kalangan Orang Melayu: Kajian Kes di Negeri Johor Darul Takzim. Fakulti Pengurusan dan Pembangunan Sumber Manusia. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Skudai. Johor. Univision Press.
- Norman, H.W.(2012). Communication: Key to your marriage (2nd ed.). California.Regal Form Gospel Light, Ventura.
- Cops recommend inquest into Tampin lock-up death.(2013, July 12).The star online. Retrieved from:<http://www.thestaronline.com.my/News/Nation/2013/07/12/Cops-recommend-inquest-into-Tampin-lockup-death.aspx>
- Cordova, J.V., (2011). Living intimately. Healthy Miscommunication. (Unpublished PhD thesis).Clark University of Worcester. Massachusetts.
- Court orders trial for Roslin Hashim's claim for lossess from former wife.(2013, January 26)Borneo Post Online. Retrieved from:<http://www.theborneopost.com/2010/01/26/court-orders-trial-for-roslin-hashim's-claim-for-losses-from-former-wife/>
- China woman hangs in porch after figth with husband.(2013, July 12).The star online database. Retrieved from <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2013/07/12/China-woman-hangs-herself-inporch-after-tiff-husband.aspx>
- Malaysian state to pay for second honeymoon for feuding couples (2009, October 13) Retrieved from the China post <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/asia/malaysia/2009/10/13/228431/Malaysian-state.htm>
- Jeffrey Cottrill (2009, October 13) Divorce Magazines.Com, Retrieved from http://www.divorcemag.com/articles/World_Divorce_News/marriage-relationship_honeymoon.shtml
- Kumar, M.(2013, July 3). Survey: Malaysian smartphone users not security savvy. The Star. Retrieved from the star online <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2013/07/03/survey-malaysian-smartphone-users-not-security-savvy.aspx>
- Larry, L.B., & Deborah, A.B. (1993). Communication (6th ed.). Englewood Cliff, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

- Muzlina.M(2013, May 20).Husband friend held over housewife’s death. New Straits Times Online.Retrieved from:<http://www.nst.com.my/nation/general/husband-s-friend-hald-over-housewife—s-death-1.282436>.
- Nicholas C. (2013, July 12). Cops recommend inquest into tampin lock up death.The Star, pp, 25.
- Novella, R. (2009). Family first – keys to successful family functioning: Communication. Virginia State University Communications and Marketing, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.
- Personal Communication.(interviews).
- Personal Communication.(telephone conversation).
- Personal Communication.(interviews).
- Rahman.A.H(2012,December)State/District Data 2012 Malaysia.Department of Statistic Malaysia. Malaysia.
- Royal Malaysia Police and Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development - See more at: <http://www.wao.org.my/Police+Statistics+on+Violence+Against+Women+>
- Stanley, S. (2013, May 3). Different spin. The Star. Retrieved from: <http://www.thestar.com.my/story>
- Tannen, D. (1990).You just don’t understand: Women and men in conversation. New York: Morrow.
- Teh E.G.(2013, July 12). Bloody feud in family. The Star, p. 1&3.
- Verderber, K. S., Verderber, R. F., & Berryman-Fink, C. (2007). Inter-act: Interpersonal communication concepts, skills, and contexts (11th ed.). New York: Oxford. University Press.
- Veroff, J, Kulka, R.A., & Douvan, E. (1981). Mental health in American patterns of seeking help from 1951-1976.The University of California. New York. Basic Book,1981.
- Waite, L.J., Browning, D., Doherty, W.J., Gallenger, M., Luo, Y., & Standley, S.M.(2002). Does divorce make people happy? Findings from a study of unhappy marriages. New York: Institute for American Values.
- Wife-beating actor released after paying RM1,000 (n.d.). Retrieve from <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/wife-beating-actor-released-after-paying-rm1000/>

The 10th International Postgraduate Research Colloquium

- World Health Organization.(2000) , Preventing Suicide a Resource For Teachers and Other School Staff. Mental and Behavioural Disorders Department of Mental Health. Geneva.
- Kathleen Gough, (1968). The Nayars and the definition of marriage. In Paul Bohannan and John Middleton, eds.,Marriage, Family and Residence. New York:
- Khan, M.M., & Reza, H. (1998) Attempted suicide in Karachi, Pakistan. Suicide and Life Threatening Behaviour, 28, 54–60.