

Guideline To A Happy Marriage: An Instrumental Case Study On The Perspectives of Persons With Visual Disability

Panduan Kepada Keluarga Bahagia: Satu Kajian Kes Instrumental Ke Atas Orang Kurang Upaya Penglihatan

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The purpose of this investigation is to understand the strategies involved to improve or maintain marital happiness among married persons with visual disability. This study has adopted the instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995). A total of 10 married persons with visual disability with varying conditions have participated in this investigation. This study has utilized the qualitative content analysis as a method of data analysis. A total of five themes related to the strategies to improve or maintain marital happiness of married persons with visual disabilities have been constructed namely: 1) assisting the partner, 2) establishing healthy interaction, 3) being modest, 4) seeking divine intervention, and 5) avoid comparison. This study will enable visually disabled persons, families, and the society to understand how to improve or maintain happiness in marriage. Persons with disabilities would like to be independent, to contribute to society, as well as having the same desires as the non-disabled thus, eliminate the stigma towards persons with disabilities.

Keywords: marriage, happiness, case study, persons with visual disability

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk memahami strategi yang digunakan oleh orang kurang upaya penglihatan dalam meningkatkan atau mengekalkan kebahagiaan dalam perkahwinan. Kajian ini telah menggunakan reka bentuk kajian kes instrumental (Stake, 1995). Seramai 10 orang kurang upaya dengan pelbagai kondisi yang telah berkahwin telah diambil sebagai responden kajian. Data yang telah dikumpul dianalisis menggunakan qualitative content analysis. Sebanyak lima tema berkaitan strategi dalam meningkatkan atau mengekalkan kebahagiaan dalam perkahwinan dalam kalangan orang kurang upaya penglihatan telah dibentuk iaitu 1) membantu pasangan, 2) membentuk interaksi sihat, 3) bersederhana, 4) mencari intervensi daripada tuhan, dan 5) elakkan perbandingan. Kajian ini membolehkan orang kurang upaya penglihatan, institusi Keluarga, dan masyarakat memahami bagaimana meningkatkan atau mengekalkan kebahagiaan dalam perkahwinan. Mereka juga mahu berdikari, menyumbang kepada masyarakat, justeru menghapuskan stigma terhadap orang kurang upaya.

Kata kunci: perkahwinan, kebahagiaan, kajian kes, orang kurang upaya penglihatan

Though happiness is a universal term, its meaning is unique for every individual. Various scholars have made a significant effort in understanding the concept of happiness. For instance, Diener (1984) perceived happiness as a condition in which a person possesses high positive affect, lower negative affect, and life satisfaction. As for Seligman (2002), he argued that happiness is comprised of positive emotion, engagement, and meaning which is presented in the authentic happiness theory. Seligman expanded his views on the concept of happiness, in which he introduced the PERMA model. In the PERMA model (Seligman, 2012), happiness is comprised of Positive Emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning and accomplishment.

Although there is an abundant of studies on happiness, the investigation on marital happiness among persons with visual disability is scarce. Several studies that have been conducted regarding the visually disabled thus far are employment (Lee & Park, 2008; Yuh, Wang, Lin, & Shih,

2013), psychological distress (Walker, Anstey, & Lord, 2006), self-concept, adjustment to blindness, and friendship (Lifshitz, Hen, & Weisse, 2007), and mobility in regards to visual disability (Swenor, 2015). When marriage or parenting among visually disabled people is taken into the equation, studies that have been conducted mainly focused on parenting experiences and adaptations (e.g. Conley-Jung, 1996; Gutman, 2005; Rosenblum, Hong, & Harris, 2009; Shackelford, 2004; etc.), none of which have focused on the positive aspect of married persons with visual disability and also how to improve or maintain it. Further compounding the problem is that according to Kirshbaum and Olkin (2002), most investigations regarding parents with disability have only focused on seeking problems in the families. Despite the effort made by Teoh and Ferlis (2018) in understanding marital happiness among persons with visual disability, the investigation was only based on a single case. Due to the deficiency of literatures addressing

the issue of marital happiness of the visually disabled, this paper sought to explore and understand the strategies to improve or maintain marital happiness of married persons with visual disability.

Method

Design

This paper utilized the qualitative research design. According to Flick (2007), qualitative research design is an empirical study utilizing texts as the primary source of data and allows the researcher to understand a wide area in the real life. To be specific, this investigation has applied the instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995). Stake does not provide an exact definition of case study as it might varies across different disciplines. However, according to Stake, a case in general can be conceptualized as a system with boundaries, which directs attention to it as an object rather than a process. In addition, Stake (1995) suggested that the instrumental case study design is applied when the investigator is interested in a phenomena, in which several cases are being studied to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena. Hence, the cases in this investigation are persons with visual disability, and the phenomena of interest is the act of improving or maintaining marital happiness.

Cases

A total of 10 cases were recruited in this investigation using the maximal purposive sampling technique (Creswell, 2007, Merriam, 2009). Criteria for sample selection were: 1) Must be a visually disabled person, 2) registered under Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat Malaysia (the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia), 3) must be married and stays married at the time of investigation. All respondents were labeled Case 1 to Case 10 respectively.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interview sessions with respondent, which mainly focused on respondent's life stories or events or better known as narrative interviews (Flick, 2007). Interview sessions were recorded using a digital audio recorder in order to assist in the transcription process. Follow up interviews were also carried out which were conducted using a mobile phone. In the beginning of the interview, respondent was asked to answer a standard question (i.e. "could you tell me something about yourself?"). Follow-up questions to probe responses were asked as the interview progress.

Data Analysis

Stake (1995, p.71) has stated that analysis of data in a case study research is the process of "giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations" through direct interpretation or aggregation of instances. Since the research gathered data mainly from interviews, the most

appropriate method of analysis is through direct interpretation. Hence, data collected were analyzed using the qualitative content analysis suggested by Schilling (2006):

1. Transferring data from audio recordings into raw data through transcription.
2. Summarizing the raw data by paraphrasing.
3. Breaks down the paraphrased data into simple statements (categorizing).
4. Forming themes from the categories developed.

This study applied the method of analyzing qualitative data suggested by Schilling (2006) mainly because the second stage (paraphrasing) provides clearer and a more organized data set for the purpose of further analysis (i.e. development of categories and themes).

Validity

In order to address the issue of validity, this study has utilize the investigator triangulation approach together with member checking as suggested by Stake (1995). Investigator triangulation suggested by Stake refers to the action of showing our data to other investigators and to confirm whether interpretations by the investigators are the same as the interpretations made by the researcher. As for the process of member checking, the researcher would bring the findings/themes constructed back to the respective respondents (refer appendix I) to enquire the accuracy of our interpretations. Here, respondent themselves will acknowledge the accuracy of our interpretations and if not, suggest relevant modifications.

Results and Discussion

A total of five themes related to the strategies to improve or maintain marital happiness of married persons with visual disabilities have been constructed namely: 1) assisting the partner, 2) establishing healthy interaction, 3) being modest, 4) seeking divine intervention, and 5) avoid comparison. Each theme will be presented and discussed below.

Assisting the partner

The first method applied by visually disabled people in order to obtain or maintain marital happiness is assisting the partner. Some cases have stated that responsibilities in a family are based on gender roles, but there are cases who believed it is more on filling in the gap left by the partner. Whatever the situation, the majority cases argued that it is imperative to give their partner a hand whenever they are able to. This is because if the partner is tired from work, it is considerable that the one staying at home should help with carrying out tasks that are usually done by the partner. For instance, if the wife is tired from work and so happened that the husband got a day off from work, it is great for the husband to help the wife to do the laundry or clean the house. The assistance and kind considerations would make the wife less stressful as the wife could relax herself. The following is the verbatim by Case 1:

“Wash dishes. Vacuum the floor. Sometimes doing laundry also I know how to do. I can assist my wife. Because I know my wife is very busy at school and then sometimes very stressful. So I will always give my hand as much as I could. Cook also sometimes I cook simple dish also.”

Lavner and Bradbury (2012), argued that negative support is one of the factors that led to divorce. Here, the researcher argue that one of the positive support that could be given to the partner is by helping the partner in carrying out daily domestic chores. Helping the partner to do the laundry or clean the house will lead to the feeling of positive support towards the partner as well as to ease the burden shouldered. In addition, one of the impact of visual disability in a marriage is changes in the relational dynamics (Bhagchandani, 2014). For instance, the wife that normally do not need to drive children to school but would need to take up the task due the husband’s inability to drive. The wife not only now has to drive the children to school, but also the husband to work. The increase in responsibilities for the wife certainly would lead to higher stress for the wife. This stresses the importance in lending a hand to the partner whenever we are able to do so. This is because paying attention to the partner’s needs is one of the succeeding factors in marital quality (Allendorf & Ghimire, 2013) and helping the partner is certainly needed. To confirm the researcher’s judgment regarding this matter, Ki and Joanne (2014) have discovered that the amount of sharing of child care responsibilities and time allocation predicted marital satisfaction significantly.

Establishing healthy interaction

Additional strategies applied by the visually disabled to improve or maintain marital happiness is to initiate discussion, being a good listener, controlling ego, prioritizing respect, forgive and forget, do not fight in front of children, and be aware of spouse’s emotion. All of the strategies mentioned possess their own uniqueness in terms of their context, but it all refers to healthy interaction in the family. Initiate discussion refers to the act of talking matters out and come up with solutions whenever conflicts or misunderstandings occur in a family. As for being a good listener, it refers to the act of paying attention to emotional sharing by the partner, although it could be annoying when the partner keeps talking about the same problem. Controlling ego is the act of giving up in an argument so that conflicts are not prolonged. Prioritizing respect is the act of practicing politeness in the family. Forgive and forget is the act of settling and letting go of conflicts that have occurred between partners. Do not fight in front of children is the act of avoiding discussions over conflicts in front of children. Finally, be aware of spouse’s emotion refers to the act of understanding the partner’s moods or conditions to avoid any misunderstandings or conflicts. As apparent in Case 1:

“We have to talk about it. Let’s say the children doesn’t behave well, how do we handle it. Let’s say one of my kids, she likes to play games only. So how do we solve the problem. If I say don’t

let her play. So sometimes my wife not agree. She say uh sometimes we have to allow her to play games also la. How can we stop her from playing games also. That’s why discuss la. Discuss among both of us. We have to agree with each other la sometimes. Have to come to an agreement.... When you discuss means there is a communication there. If there is no communication between husband and wife, it is already a havoc in the family (laughed).”

Carstensen, Levenson, and Gotman (1995) have discovered that wives displayed more negative emotions, husband were more defensive, and unhappy marriages were characterized by greater exchange of negative emotions. This is complimented with the investigation by Lavner and Bradbury (2012) who have indicated that couples that decide to divorce showed more negative interaction, emotion, and social support. Also, Esere, Yeyeodu, and Oladun (2014) have found that some of the obstacles to effective communication in marriage is harsh tone during communication and bringing up issues from the past. Hence, the researcher strongly believe that communication skills such as being patient, empathetic, practicing the value of forgiveness and respect will result in more positive interactions in the family which will lead to happiness. Parents should also serve as a good role model by not fighting in front of the children. As the findings revealed by Esere, Yeyeodu, and Oladun (2014), effective communication in a marriage can be fostered by being grateful towards partner’s contributions, trusting your partner, and consider the partner’s opinions in a discussion.

Avoiding politics in the family

The next strategy will be avoiding politics in the family. By concept, it also refers to healthy interaction in the family. However, I believe this strategy deserves its own highlight as it could serve as an example for those practicing family therapy or family counseling. This strategy is unique to Case 2 alone as he is the one who articulated the context which led to the construction of this theme. Avoiding politics in the family is the act of not taking sides or having a particular person in the family as favorite. For instance, most families will most likely have a child that is loved the most and whenever the child complains, suggests, or do is always right. Even the child have made any mistakes, there is always a parent that will defend the child. This is a harmful phenomenon in family interactions as it could lead to the feelings of incompetence and unfairness among the other members in the family which might result in conflicts such as siblings rivalry or misunderstandings between parents. For instance, Case 2 stated that:

“Um.... Some families are quite political. I mean whenever there is dispute, they tend to look for supporters. But not in my family because in my family, no matter how angry I am towards my partner, if my daughter would say something negative about her mother, I wont take that as an advantage to gain support. I say don’t. Is not

good. So you should not do that to your mother. You shouldn't said that to your mother something like that la."

Somehow, this theme is closely related to a form of family therapy called family structure therapy. According to Vetere (2001), the family structure therapy believes that distress in a family is not caused only by the act of maintaining the relationship but could be the relationships itself that is causing the distress. Vetere argued further that the challenges and the intriguing part of structural family therapy is focusing on the family interactions and communication which influences interpersonal choices and actions in the family. Hence, the main objective of the therapy is to modify the structure of the family, particularly when the pattern of interactions are perceived to be unconstructive and behaviors displayed are abusive or neglectful Vetere (2001). Vetere further explained that the ingredients of the therapist are by challenging behaviors that are symptomatic, the family structure, and the system of beliefs. In the context of this investigation, the act of taking sides, or having a personal favorite member of the family is believed to be a symptomatic behavior which lead to an unfair structure in the family, which might due to the belief of family members that doing so is a not wrong. Hence, I strongly argue that before partners get married, it is wise and applicable to be enlightened by the structural family therapist so that politics in the family does not occur. I also believe that if the phenomena of having a favorite member of the family or taking sides could be avoided, it could lead to more healthy interactions in the family. To make things simple, the situation which a child felt that he or she is the black sheep of the family will not manifest.

Seeking divine intervention

Seeking divine intervention is also a method applied in order to improve or maintain happiness in marriage. The method includes practicing teachings or principles of the religion, as well as engaging in religious behaviors such as praying. As argued by Case 5:

"This is not easy but, we believe that there is a holy spirit which gives you strength to do it. Is not on your own but there is where the divine intervention is needed. We cannot do it on our own but God will give us the strengths to do it."

Since spiritual and religious beliefs are prominent in eastern culture, it is a very helpful tool in facilitating happiness and well-being. This is normally driven by six factors which are 1) it is a form of social support, 2) it facilitates the development of healthy lifestyle, 3) it encourages personality integration, 4) it facilitates generativity, 5) it serves as a unique coping mechanism, and 6) it provides clear meaning and purpose in life (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). Amongst the investigations that has confirmed the role of spiritual and religious beliefs/practices in promoting happiness includes Ferlis (2014), Teoh and Ferlis (2016), Teoh and Muhammad Idris Bullare-bahari (2018), Levin (2013), Lun

and Bond (2013), and Archana and Rohtash (2014). In fact, prayer is often associated with happiness and well-being (Levin, 2013; Lun & Bond, 2013).

Being modest and avoid comparisons

Finally, being modest and avoid comparisons are also crucial elements in order to improve or maintain happiness in marriage. Each and everyone of us possesses our unique expectations. The levels of expectations could be high or low, and the types of expectation could be reasonable or unreasonable. In a marriage, individuals normally carry certain expectations towards their partner, or expectations on what should be achieved on a certain timeline of a marriage. However, expectations that are too high are very challenging to be accomplished and failure to achieve will lead to disappointments. This is what have been articulated by Case 4. Reflecting on her expectations, Case 4 argued that controlling her expectations is important as she will not be disappointed if what she desires are not achieved.

"...I have planned to have at least three children even before I got married. But I only got one. I am very disappointed....I have also dreamed of having several houses and fix deposit accounts once I have reached a certain age. However, some point in my marriage, things took a downturn. Ok. Financial issue. Finance need to be solved with money. I was shocked. Yes. We can plan and hope. But I learn the hard way that I should not have expected too much."

As for Case 7, she strongly believed that she should not compare her husband who possesses a multiple disability to others who are married to a non-disabled spouse, or a spouse that only possesses a single disability. She said that:

"you accept one another. Know your spouse weakness or strengths. Just learn to accept. You have to accept who he is or who she is la ah. You can't compare with your friends' spouse or whatever. You can't say that how come somebody else is not like you. So just accept and you don't compare you see. Because you compare cannot finish one you see (laughed). Just I can't go an tell people aiyo you all good la. See my husband like this. You know double handicap, cannot hear. What to do. I have to accept it la. Whether you like it or not you have to accept it la. The more you compare the more uneasy you are. You feel like how come happen to me ah."

Both situations (i.e. being modest and avoid comparison) are closely related to the concept of mindfulness. Mindfulness is a condition which an individual is focused on the present state, allowing them to be alert to the phenomena occurring in their surroundings, thus making necessary adaptations towards the phenomena (Blanke, Riediger, & Brose, 2018; Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011). More importantly, Blanke et al. (2018) have discovered that individuals that are more mindful of

their present state experienced more positive affect. Hence, I argued that although expectations are important to act as fuels to strive for a better future, couples should also cherish what are available in the present state. In the situation of Case 4, she expected that her husband and her should have a few houses and a few fix deposit accounts once they have reached a certain length of their marriage. However, they were struck with unexpected phenomena which requires the exhaustion of their financial resources. From that, she learned that it is imperative for her to lower her expectations and adapt to their present situations. As for Case 7, rather than dwelling on her husband's limitations, she asserted that it is best for her to accept him for what he is, and cherish what they have in the present situation.

Conclusion

This investigation have applied the instrumental case study design to understand the strategies applied by persons with visual disability to improve or maintain marital happiness. The analysis conducted has yielded five strategies that have been applied by persons with visual disability in their marriage to improve or maintain happiness: 1) assisting the partner, 2) establishing healthy interaction, 3) being modest, 4) seeking divine intervention, and 5) avoid comparison. This has proven that persons with disabilities are not individuals that are constantly surrounded by challenges and they are not able to do anything about it. This should be taken seriously so that persons with disabilities are not alienated in the society and will be treated like normal human beings. To clarify some prejudice surroundings persons with disabilities, persons with disability are not special, and definitely not exceptional. They are normal people, people who wants to contribute to the society the same as the non-disabled. Future research could increase the size of the respondent as it could provide more contextual richness to the themes constructed. Other than that, this study it is unable to confirm any relational dynamics amongst the variables discovered in this investigation. Hence, development of an instrument that is catered specifically in measuring marital happiness is a highly compelling task at hand so that the phenomena of marital happiness could be measured more objectively and accurately.

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