

**AN EVALUATION OF MARITAL RELATIONSHIP
AMONG KADAZANDUSUN COUPLES AND SINO-
KADAZAN COUPLES: IMPLICATIONS FOR CROSS-
CULTURAL COUNSELLING**

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a common phenomenon in Malaysia. Only about 5 percent of the population will remain single by the age of 40 (Malaysian Family Life Survey II, MFLS, 1988, 1994/95). With the increased life expectancy- men 69 years and women 74 years (Statistics Department, 1996), marriage is now likely to last between 40 and 50 years - a very long time indeed for two people to expect to be able to meet each other's needs without major upheavels.

Recent transformations in family structure (increases in divorce, remarriage, ethnic and religious intermarriage, and pressure toward more androgenous views about the division of household labor and child care) and in factors that affect family structure (increase in female labor force participation, decreases in family income, and the move away from self-denial and toward individualism) would suggest that marital quality in today's marriages may be quite unstable (National Population and Family Development Board, Malaysia, 1987/88, 1993/94; Razi,

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1993; Kagitcibasi, 1996; Matsuoka & Benson, 1996; Meyer & Petersen, 1996; Stacy & Richman, 1997). Poor marital quality has great potential for marital dissolution (White, 1990) and may have implications for declining marriage rates and nonmarital child bearing (Matthews, Wickrama, Conger, 1996; Hendrix, 1997). Therefore, it is important to evaluate the marital relationships, particularly among ethnic KadazanDusun and Sino-Kadazan group in Sabah because

almost nothing is known about them in terms of stability and change in marital quality. There is little discussion of ethnic differences in marital well-being, reflecting the small amount of research that has been done in this area (William, 1965). Sabah is a multiracial society, but so far there has been no large volume of research either on interethnic marriage or on marriage within the various ethnic minority groups. There is literature on the family, but this relates more to kinship and intergenerational relations than to marriage (Staal, 1923; Ranjit Singh, 1963; William, 1965; Zaini Mohd. Isa, 1969).

From the viewpoint of marital counselling/therapy as well as others there is a need for research on ethnicity and marriage, and it is important that this should respond to the true diversity of ethnic groups rather than to gross categories such as 'Asian' or 'Sino-Kadazan'.

Since this study involved 2 ethnic groups in Sabah that is KadazanDusuns and Sino-Kadazans, and in order for counsellor/author to properly service the unique needs of this population, she will need to acquire some knowledge of KadazanDusun and Sino-Kadazan culture, psychosocial characteristics, cultural needs, and the unique challenges associated with counselling persons from such diverse background.

Sabah is located at the north-eastern tip of the island of Borneo. It covers a land area of 73,711 sq. km and has a population of 2.5 million (Department of Statistics, 1997). There are about 39

different indigenous ethnic groups and subgroups listed under the Sabah Monograph 1984 and speak more than 50 languages (Banker & Banker, 1984). The Bajau, Kadazan, Dusun, Murut and Paitanic groups are the largest of all the ethnic groups. Other ethnic groups are the Brunei Malays, Bisaya, Lun Dayeh, Chinese, Eurasians and Indians. In addition, more recent migrants from Philippines and Indonesia, estimated between a half to one million are making an impact on the population structure of Sabah.

KadazanDusuns are native and the largest ethnic group in Sabah. Historically, KadazanDusuns originated from Chinese ancestry (William, 1965). Even though no studies have confirmed this (Zaini Mohd Isa, 1969), but by looking at the skin color, the shape of the eyes and their culture, there are similarities between these 2 ethnic groups. The past decade of the 20th century has seen a lot of cultural beliefs and values change with the influx of immigrants to Sabah including the Chinese. Inter marriages between the Chinese and KadazanDusuns are formed. Even though the statistics on intermarriage are unknown, it is increasing. The generation formed by the intermarriage between KadazanDusun and Chinese is called Sino-Kadazan. Sino-Kadazan and the native KadazanDusun look alike and so having an Asian face must indicate close ties to one's ancestral culture (Staal, 1923). Inter marriage between KadazanDusun and Chinese is more common than any other ethnics because it is believed that they have the same religions (Christian), same skin color and shape of the eyes. They are bound up with culture preservation, adaptation and change.

Traditionally, KadazanDusun had close marital ties and family relationships (Staal, 1923; William, 1965; Dayang Suria, 1990). Chinese, traditionally value harmony, togetherness, and unity (Tan, 1995). Modern Chinese values still retain some traditional aspects. According to Sue and Sue (1991), these values include: filial piety, stress on family bonds and unity, importance of roles and status, somatization of mental problems, control over strong

emotions, stress on academic achievement, and low assertiveness. There are similarities in terms of marital relationships and family ties among KadazanDusuns and the Chinese.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the findings from an exploratory study on marital relationship among KadazanDusun couples and Sino-Kadazan couples in Sabah which focusses on reasons for marrying, common marital problems and expectation for counseling. Issues regarding cross-cultural counselling in giving service to these couples will also be discussed.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 20 KadazanDusun couples and 20 Sino-Kadazan couples. All participants resided in the Kota Kinabalu area and volunteered to take part in this study. A majority of the participants fell between the ages of 30 and 40. This group was totally represented by couples who were of the Christian faith. All couples had been married between 0 to 5 years. The number of children for these couples ranged from 0 to 4 years. Most of the participants had received higher education at the college or university level. Their average income fell in the range of RM12,000 to 23,000 per year.

Instrument

The Marital Evaluation Checklist (MEC) (Navran, 1984) was used in this study. The checklist surveys the fundamental characteristics and problem areas in a marital relationship. It is organized into three main sections - Reasons for Marrying, Current Problems, and Motivation for Counselling. The questionnaire consists of 162 items survey on material/economic, interpersonal /emotional, social, personal, money and work, sex, personal characteristics and marital relationship. For section 1 - reasons for marrying, the participants were asked to place a check (✓) next to three

reasons that that they feel the most important in their decision to marry. For section 2 - current problems, the participants were asked to place a check (✓) in the space next to the three most important problems in their marriage. For section 3 - motivation for counselling, the participants were asked to place a check (✓) next to the statements to state their reasons for seeking counselling and their expectations.

Procedure

KadazanDusun couples and Sino-Kadazan couples residing in Kota Kinabalu who came for a marital counselling session in the Family Planning Clinic were asked to volunteer for this study. A packet of materials was given to each couple and included one copy of a cover letter delineating the purpose of the research and procedures to be followed with regard to completing the research materials. Spouses were instructed to complete their inventories anonymously and without collaboration. After 20-30 minutes, they were asked to place their inventories in the appropriately marked envelopes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure was performed to examine differences among the two sets of couples. The results of this study indicate that significant differences exist between KadazanDusun couples and Sino-Kadazan couples in the areas of current problems in marriage; that is conflict over child-rearing methods, $F(1,36) = 6.82, p < .05$, time together, $F(1,36) = 7.25, p < .05$ and selfishness and lack of cooperation, $F(1,32) = 5.37, p < .05$. No significant differences between the couples were exhibited on reasons for marrying and motivation for counselling. Means and standard deviation for each subject for the 3 sections of the MEC are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Mean and Standard Deviation Results on MEC Scales

Scale	<i>KadazanDusun Couples</i>		<i>Sino-Kadazan Couples</i>	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1. Reasons for marrying	52.41	53.16	50.45	52.16
a) love	(7.20)	(8.13)	(8.02)	(8.45)
b) to have someone to share problems & decisions	48.69	47.00	52.15	50.02
	(9.53)	(8.10)	(9.62)	(8.48)
c) to have someone care of to take	57.68	55.74	54.95	52.85
	(5.54)	(6.63)	(6.40)	(7.03)
2. Current problems				
a) Conflict over methods child-rearing	47.48	46.58	51.74	50.63
	(8.65)	(5.91)	(8.15)	(9.27)
b) Time-together	55.21	52.47	47.63	48.32
	(9.47)	(11.13)	(7.04)	(7.31)
c) Selfishness & lack of cooperation	48.76	47.78	56.46	53.02
	(11.85)	(7.89)	(10.82)	(10.58)
3. Motivation for counselling				
a) Spouse and I decided to seek help	49.85	48.63	51.42	50.11
	(8.38)	(8.55)	(8.82)	(8.48)
b) I want a counsellor to teach us how to overcome our problems	48.19	48.11	49.26	48.79
	(9.45)	(7.55)	(9.53)	(10.01)
c) I want help to correct my own faults	57.68	55.74	54.95	53.85
	(5.55)	(6.63)	(6.40)	(6.98)
d) Our marriage is in trouble but that it can and should be maintained	50.64	56.15	55.88	51.47
	(10.41)	(7.25)	(10.91)	(9.65)

NOTE: Standard Deviations in parentheses.

$p < .05$

No significant differences between the couples on reasons for marrying. Most of them married on the basis of mutual love, security and to have someone to share problems and decisions with. With regard to current problems in marriage, the Sino-Kadazan couples experienced greater marital problem in inability or lack of desire to spend time together. Gaw (1982) described Chinese Americans as intelligent and hardworking. These stereotypes are found to be similar to Malaysian Chinese (Tan, 1995). Both husband and wife who are working are independent to each other and the traditional roles of the past are gradually disappearing. The wife's economic independence gives her a greater status vis-a-vis her husband, and her contact with the outside world offers the possibility of friendship, stimulation and a growth in self-esteem. An intermarried Sino-Kadazan husband may view his wife's behaviour as a rejection of his family. These will complicate the problem of husband-wife relationship and less time will be spent together.

With regard to conflict over child rearing and problem on spouse's selfish behaviour and lack of cooperation, the study indicated that the KadazanDusun couples experienced greater problems than the Sino-Kadazan couples. This is because KadazanDusun society tends to have a highly traditional and familial system. The male adheres to strictly defined sex roles and maintains a weighted position in the culture. Staal, 1923 stated that the father is the natural head and protector of the family, and conscious of his dignity and not feeling any responsibility; feels free to do what he likes. He does not worry about household affairs. The father is responsible for his children's attainment of positive morals, values, and attitudes (William, 1965). In many respect, this might be contrary to the wife's method of child rearing and discipline which have been influenced by modernisation, independence and the nuclear family and create conflict among KadazanDusun couples. Clearly then, the manner in which children should be raised is likely to present problems. The problem arises when the "authority and power balance" of the parents is played out through the children.

With regard to motivation for counselling, the results of this study indicate that no significant differences exist among KadazanDusun and Sino-Kadazan couples. More than 50% of them felt that their marriage is in trouble, but that it can and should be maintained. About 10% of Sino-Kadazan couples face problems due to the marriage disapproval of the extended family on both sides. These couples lose a support system. But in any case, it was found that there was very minimal percentage or rate of divorce probably because of religious compatibility in the marriage. They need help to correct their mistakes in marriage and prefer a counselor to give advice on how to overcome their problems.

CROSS-CULTURAL COUNSELLING

Cross-cultural counselling by general definition is counselling that takes place between a counsellor from one cultural background and a client from another cultural background (British Association for Counselling, BAC, 1979, 1980). Most counsellors, at one time or another, are involved with clients from cultures different from their own. In this case, the Malay counsellor and a KadazanDusun or Sino-Kadazan couple are involved in a counsellor-client relationship. Therefore, a counsellor performs a cross-cultural counselling in handling marital problems for these couples.

It is important to note the KadazanDusun and Sino-Kadazan are two different ethnic groups in Sabah and the results of this study indicate that significant differences exist in current problems in their marriage. However, based on the literature review, their cultures, belief and value are much the same. Therefore, in this context, a cross-cultural counselling approach was applied. Below is an explanations and guidelines on how the counsellor performed a cross-cultural counselling for KadazanDusun couples and Sino-Kadazan couples.

To have a genuine interest in and some knowledge of the client's culture. When the counsellor and client come from different cultures, misunderstanding, rejection, distrust, and negative transference are more likely to occur as a result of perceived cultural differences (Pedersen, 1988). This happened in this case at the beginning of the counselling session. Therefore, it seems necessary for counselor to be familiar with her client's culture, cultural sensitivity and culturally relevant counselling skills in order to minimize miscommunication and assist an effective client-counsellor relationship. If the counsellor does not have some understanding of the client's values, beliefs, frame of reference, and cultural characteristics, a substantial gap between counsellor and client exists before counselling even begin. In this case, it is important for counsellor to have some knowledge about many facets of the KadazanDusun and Sino-Kadazan experience, including some sense of their history and specific historical information. However, to have knowledge of a certain culture does not mean that all the behaviours of a client of that culture can be explained within those cultural limitations. A dynamic interplay also occurs between the cultural identity and the personality of the client. Further, a noteworthy characteristic that is central to the KadazanDusun and Sino-Kadazan worldview is that the family is much more important than the individual. Cooperation, interdependence, collective responsibility of the individual to the family are highly stressed in the KadazanDusun worldview. But how this strong marital and family relationship can cause problems to the KadazanDusun and Sino-Kadazan couples particularly in the area of conflict over child rearing, time-together, selfishness and lack of cooperation as indicated from this study? The counsellor asked the client to explain in some detail what he/she sees as the expectations of their marriage and the family. Once information is available, there is still a need to ascertain where the clients stand in relation to the acceptance of cultural norms. He/she may have rejected them completely, or may be in a state of transition, change or even rebellion, with all the conflict which this involves. With regard to Sino-Kadazan couples whose marriage was disapproved by the extended

family on both sides, the counsellor is sensitive to both their family cultural differences and rejection and not to put much empathy and immediate interpretations. The heterogeneity among Sino-Kadazan couples with respect to socioeconomic circumstances, lifestyle, social/psychological support system, educational attainments, degree of acculturation and psychological strength is a paramount consideration in their treatment/counselling. Cultural biases and some stereotypes that the counsellor may hold about them such as the belief that they are disorganized and have negative self-concepts should be eliminated.

To provide a warm, caring, non-judgemental atmosphere within which the client's can feel safe. It was difficult at first for the KadazanDusun and Sino-Kadazan couples who are expecting a directive or advice-giving approach and whose culture may have led to the expectation that a counsellor is a powerful authority figure. Between people from widely different ethnic backgrounds there may be a basic mistrust, or expectation of power-relationships, and the movement towards a facilitative relationship may be tentative and subject to stereotyping. In this case, it took much time and patience on both sides to reach a position where the counselor can convey her own intention of "how best can I be with this other person?" Patterson hypothesis that Carl Rogers 'core conditions' of warmth, empathy and genuineness are universal meeting points between the client and counsellor (Patterson, 1978). In the process of counselling the KadazanDusun and Sino-Kadazan couples, the counsellor accepted the client's explanation from his/her cultural reference point without assumption of right or wrong. The counsellor also expressed genuine concern for the client's discrepancies and conflicts by asking for explanations and listening carefully without judging, intervening, interrupting and holding back immediate reactions in these situations. Factors may be occurring which are much more related to cultural differences than are recognized at the time. For example, this was demonstrated while counselling a totally silent KadazanDusun and Sino-Kadazan couple who looks down at her/his hands and

the glances quickly up at the counsellor. The responses of counsellor who comes from a different background herself, has varied widely in her opinions of the client's emotional state. The counsellor saw her as depressed, secretive, teasing, excited, sad, "unlikely to happen", "normal behaviour". To develop an approach which is congruent to the client may mean an openness to monitoring her own reactions and being willing to question these and check them out.

Another aspect of counselling that is most highly valued is self-disclosure; that is a client's willingness to let the counsellor know what he/she thinks or feels. Many professionals argue that self-disclosure is a necessary condition for effective counselling. Pedersen (1985) suggests that people are more likely to disclose themselves to others who will react as they do, implying that cultural similarity is an important factor in self-disclosure. Culturally, Sino-Kadazan couples, who are taught at an early age to restrain from emotional expression, find the direct and subtle demands of the counsellor to self-disclosure very threatening. In this situation and in order to encourage self-disclosure, the counsellor listens empathetically and responds only to encourage the client to continue talking.

To gain knowledge of the moral values of the other culture. Since this case is pertaining to marital problems of the Kadazan-Dusun and Sino-Kadazan couples, the counsellor must have knowledge in relation to sexuality, relations between men and women, the role of the family and the community elders and religious values - and the effect these may have upon marriage life styles and life decisions. Such knowledge may help to avoid situations which may be misinterpreted and potentially damaging. For example, talking to a counsellor or people outside the family about marriage problems is taboo and to be interpreted negatively by the family and the community at large. The counsellor found out that it was very difficult for a man to be counselled by a woman counsellor.

To be aware of our own cultural norms about non-verbal communication and not to readily make assumptions based on the clients behavior. In this case, there are couples who hesitate to touch the counsellor or have sustained eye contact because they know that it may be offensive to the counsellor's Malay-Muslim culture. In another situation, a client revealed a horrific set of marital experiences with the spouse, yet all the time he smiled; otherwise he would have lost face. Even though smiling is sometimes used as a defense against crying in Malaysian society, this may be confusing behavior for the European counsellor.

Decoding and interpreting verbal communication. It may take time and awareness to be able to "tune in" to the ways of decoding and interpreting the verbal communications of the client. Expressions of gratitude or courteous greeting may seem false, when in fact they are the norm in the Kadazan-Dusun and Sino-Kadazan culture. Even to become aware of the potential for misunderstanding, involves looking at a number of aspects of language usage. Sue & Sue (1977) have pointed out that the use of standard English with a lower-class or bilingual client may result in misperceptions of the client's strengths and weaknesses. Certainly the counsellor who is unfamiliar with a client's dialect or language system will be unlikely to succeed in establishing rapport (Atkinson, 1993). Even if both counsellor-client speak the same language, for example Bahasa Melayu, the words the counsellor says may not have the same meaning for the client. e.g. word *kopi* in Bahasa Malaysia means coffee (drink), but in KadazanDusun language it means fin. In another example, word *angau* in Bahasa Malaysia means seriously in love, but in KadazanDusun language means span or distance between thumb and middle finger and word *sikap* in Bahasa Malaysia means behaviour, but in KadazanDusun language means quick, fast. If counsellor and client can confuse such simple words in their communication, they might do with abstract emotional terms like guilt, shame, love etc. Some words used in counselling e.g. "depression" do not exist in KadazanDusun cultures. Clearly then, it has been demonstrated

that even the usage of the same language between two people of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds can lead to serious misunderstandings very quickly. It is likely to be helpful to explore these misunderstandings with the client so that both will learn more about ways of avoiding potential problems in communication in the future.

The offering of empathy may have profound effects on the counsellor, effects that can be both distressing or can facilitate learning. It can be a disturbing experience as the counsellor attempt to enter the world of a person whose values and experiences are completely alien to her own and maybe incompatible with her deeply held values. For example, the counsellor concept of love and marriage choice is in direct confrontation with the KadazanDusun concept of marriage arranged by the family - a woman may have a husband chosen for her whom she has never met. To empathise with a client in this situation, challenges and questions one's own inherited values.

The counsellor needs to consider carefully many ethical concepts including confidentiality, her role in the situation, her underlying philosophy, all of which may have very different connotations for the client. With regard to counselling the above couples, the counsellor and client met in some privacy and the sessions were not conducted with the clients sitting round a large table like almost a community activity. There may be the need and expectation for the counsellor to work with the family rather than the individual client or couples and this may challenge her notion of confidentiality and raise such questions as "who is my client?" For example, in the case of counselling KadazanDusun and Sino-Kadazan couples, direct involvement by the counsellor with the family may sometimes be the only way to enable the couples to work through a situation. At this point a crisis of confidence may develop. A couple who came to the counsellor was in the belief that their position will be understood and received sympathetically. The family however, felt that a counsellor, however skilled, cannot fully understand

or accepted their position, simply because they do not share the same cultural background. To resolve this impending crisis, the involvement of the Sabahan/KadazanDusun worker with counselling skills to work with the counsellor can create a mutually acceptable situation for a couple and their parents; each then feeling understood and supported. This dual input into the family has much to offer in terms of back-up listening and shared leadership.

It would seem to be important to make a clear contract between counsellor and client concerning counselling interviews, so that both have a similar understanding about the roles and expectations involved.

CONCLUSION

Several implications for future research seem apparent as a result of this study. Because the study was conducted with a small sample of intermarried and homogenous couples who were from a Kota Kinabalu area, a replication of this study with a large and more socioeconomically diverse sample would allow greater generalization of the results.

The lack of ethnically and culturally relevant marital evaluation checklists presents a dilemma. The MEC is an instrument based on the values, beliefs, and behaviours of persons of one culture. Further research would warrant the modification of the instrument to include culturally relevant items or to exclude culturally irrelevant items. In addition, researchers might also wish to develop their own culturally sensitive instruments.

In conclusion, this study creates a greater awareness and understanding of couples of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It is suggested that persons planning to work in the area of cross-cultural counselling should take into considerations within-group differences, dissenting factors among homogenous and heterogenous couples, and sociopolitical literature as it

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pertains to KadazanDusun couples and Sino-Kadazan couples. However, the most important aspect in counselling is that if the counsellor can provide an atmosphere in which he/she can demonstrate to the client an unconditional acceptance, a wish to understand them and genuine in the process, this will constitute a starting point from which understanding can develop.

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