Marital Adjustment and Duration of Marriage among Postgraduate Iranian Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

The current study aimed to examine the relationship between marriage duration and marital adjustment of married Iranian students at postgraduate level in Malaysian universities. To this end, 220 randomly selected married participants completed an online questionnaire via email. The respondents were questioned about their demographic information and completed Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959). Data analysis provided information about mean scores, frequencies, percentages, and Pearson's correlation. The results disclosed that there was no correlation between length of marriage and marital adjustment and marital adjustment remained fairly stable over time. This study also discusses the popularity of studying in Malaysia among Iranian students at postgraduate levels.

Keywords: marriage duration, marital adjustment, married, Iranian, students

1. Introduction

1.1 Marital Adjustment among Iranian

There is no doubt about the importance of family and marriage and their influences on society. It has also been emphasized that family and marital relationships are still among the most talked-about topics in the world today (Ritvo & Glick, 2002, p. 171).Marital adjustment as Martin (2007) asserts, it means the quality of the marital relationship itself. Nevertheless, divorce can be the most unpleasant experience in adults' lives, and an unprecedented increase in divorce rate and number has been recently reported in Iran.

According to a report by National Organization for Iranian Civil Registration (2012), the number of divorces was 1 in every 6.5 marriages, while this rate increased to 1 in 5.2 marriages the following year. This trend of raising divorce rate has become a concern for many researchers in the field (for review, see Aghajanian & Thompson, 2013; Akhavan, 2014; Barikani, Ebrahim, & Navid, 2012). Akhavan (2014) believes that increasing divorce rates as well as late marriages and higher numbers of women compared to men in universities are indicators of big changes in the position of women and the family in today's society in Iran. A review to the literature shows that duration of marriage has been identified as a potential influence on marital adjustment (H. Goldenberg & I, Goldenberg, 2002; Jalovaara, 2002; Jansen, Troost, Molenberghs, Vermulst, & Gerris, 2006; Peleg, 2008). Other factor influencing marital satisfaction can be external stressors while studying abroad (for review, see Ghoroghi, Hassan, & Baba, 2012; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Horn, 2002). Therefore, in the quest for well-being and happiness it is important to determine the factors that influence marital satisfaction of Iranian married students in Malaysia.

1.2 Marriage in Iranian Culture

Marriage is defined as "the term commonly used to refer to a formally-written, verbal, or tradition long-term agreement between a man and a woman for the production of children, food and other commodities in a domestic context" (Becker, 1981, p. 27). Marriage in Iran has been regulated always by religious and cultural codes (Tashakkori & Thompson, 1988). While Iranian culture has historically been heavily influenced by collectivism, conflicts between duty to one's family of origin and prioritization of the marital relationship exists (Asadinik, 2010). Patriarchy is the main characteristic of the Iranian family structure as well as the importance of

having children (Azad-armaki, 2007; Friedl, 1994). Difficulties in relationships with in-laws is common in Iranian families and contributes to marital conflicts and lowered marital satisfaction overall (Asadinik, 2010).

There have been a lot of changes in Iranian families over the past two centuries that are reflected in daily life and psychologists, counselors, historians, and educational professionals as well as sociologists have focused on these changes (Azad-armaki, 2007). Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg (2010) believe that during the post-World-War-II period, marriages in western society have changed from virtually nothing-negotiable relationships into almost everything-negotiable ones. This fashion has been more salient during the 2000s while there has been a drop in marriage rate and a rise in the expectations for love-based, happy marriages (Markman, et al., 2010). Iranian society is not excluded from these changes. In Iran, socio- demographic changes, such as the delayed first marriage, lower fertility rates, demanding for higher education level, as well as rising divorce rates, all indicate changes in the nature of the social fabric and the status of women within the family (Moghadam, 2002).

Similarly, Azad-armaki (2007) believes that the most important changes within the Iranian family are decrease of the marriage rate, increased age of marriage, and more participation of women in society. He further states that the increasing level of education, multimedia influences, importance of love-based relations and changes in model of mate selection from traditional and family arranged marriages to marriages of choice are the other changes in families (Azad-armaki, 2007). Additionally, a research by Bahari et al. (2010) showed that main reasons for divorce are married couples' communication problems, addiction, family members' interference, and mental disorder of one or both members of the marriage.

1.3 Iranians in Malaysia

Migration happens when an individual or a group of people move across political boundaries of a geographic unit to another for temporary or permanent settlement out of their hometown (Kothari, 2002). This phenomenon has increased during recent decades because of globalization, and Iran is not an exception in this phenomenon (Alaedini & Emami, 2005).

After Islamic revolution in Iran, during the years 1978 to 1981, following political and social changes, cultural reform and closing universities, a lot of critical people, experts, scientists and students left the country (Shahabadi & Puran, 2009). During the past two decades, migration from Iran to other countries has unprecedentedly been considered by many Iranians (Shalileh, 2010).

Iranian Ministry of Culture and Higher Education reports that currently there are approximately 50,000 Iranian students studying abroad ("Education System", 2011). Recently Malaysia has become more popular among Iranian students at postgraduate level (Mehrnews, 2011). Higher education is provided by either public or private universities in Malaysia supervised by the Ministry of Education (Arokiasamy, 2011). The country is striving to turn into an "Education Hub", so it employs strategies and policies to attract more and more international students to study in a Malaysian university with international standards (Arokiasamy, 2011).

There has been an increase in the number of international students at postgraduate level from 27,872 in 2002 to 90,501 in 2008 in Malaysian universities (Horany & Hassan, 2011). Thenumber of Iranian students appear to be higher than other nationalities in different universities in Malaysia (Akhtari-Zavare & Ghanbari-baghestan, 2010). Nevertheless, most research has focused on the academic performance and supervision issues among postgraduate students so far (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2011; Krauss & Ismail, 2010). The number of studies that have investigated marital issues among postgraduate students is very limited (Ghoroghi, Hassan, & Baba, 2012; Kalantarkousheh & Hassan, 2010).

1.4 Importance of Students' Marital Lives

The damaging effects of divorce conflict which can persist throughout one's life, from childhood to adult years are well documented (Benjamin, Gollan, & Ally, 2007). In line with this view, Gardner, Busby, and Brimhall (2007) report that marital conflict is a commonly presented problem to marriage and family therapists. This type of problem can lead to stress, anxiety, and marriage and family dissolution (Peleg, 2008).

According to a 2009 report by National Organization for Iranian Civil Registration, one divorce was recorded every four minutes in Iran ("Divorce", 2010). According to the same organization, one in five marriages ended up in divorce in 2012, and the divorce ratio in the capital Tehran reached approximately 1 in 3 marriages in the same year ("Divorce", 2012).

Thus, determining the influencing factors in marital satisfaction among Iranian postgraduate students is essential in their happiness and wellbeing. In addition, as argued by Al Horany and Hassan (2012), postgraduate studies, as an important life event can cause marital discordance. Also, additional challenges would be posed by the new

academic environment to the marital lives of students abroad (Ghoroghi, Hassan, & Baba, 2012).Other factor influencing marital satisfaction can be external stressors while studying abroad. As opposed to domestic students with more social support, Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002) believe that international students suffer from additional stress, loneliness, homesickness and finally anxiety. A body of research in this area shows that adapting to a new academic and social environment is extremely challenging for many international students (Dao, Donghyuck, & Chang, 2007; Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2011) Lack of means to do so, according to Andrade (2006), can negatively affect international students' psychological well-being in terms of loneliness, stress and homesickness. Since a great number of Iranian students who are willing to pursue their higher education are heading to Malaysia for further study, their needs and emotions especially for married students should be taken into consideration.

1.5 Influential Factors in Marital Adjustment

Marriage shapes the lives of most adults, regardless of whether the agreement to be together is formal or informal or do not marry by choice or circumstance (Bailey, 2003). Locke and Wallace (1959) defined marital satisfaction as the degree of satisfaction or happiness resulting from the union. The survival of a marriage is determined by the satisfaction level and since the 1990s, studies have investigated the influencing factors on marital satisfaction (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Snyder and Lopez (2005) believe that satisfaction in marriage enhances one's well-being and happily married couples experience less anxiety, stress, or depression. Thus, the high amount of focus placed on studying the affecting factors in happy marriage is understandable.

Obviously, one of the most crucial decisions an individual makes in his/her life is choosing a marital partner. It has been studied for several decades. One of the most frequently studied variables in marriage and family relationships is marital adjustment and it should be considered as a developmental process and not just a statistic life event (Martin, 2007).

Patrick, Sells, Giordano, and Tollerud (2007) state that several studies have claimed to find a U-shaped pattern for marital quality over the marital life. Adjustment tends to be high during the initial stages of marriage and then declines approximately during lifespan and rises in the later years. The marital relationship does not exist in a vacuum but is directly affected by the emotional, physical, and psychological issues.

1.6 Duration of Marriage and Adjustment

Marital duration is time elapsed since the day of marriage, used as the life course measure (Jalovaara, 2002). Marriage length, sometimes referred to as marital longevity, has been identified in literature as a potential influence on marital satisfaction. Peleg (2008) argued that marriage longevity is very important since family duration is showed to be one of the most significant variables pertaining to family satisfaction.

Some research shows that the length of marriage is positively associated with marital satisfaction (Bookwala, Sobin, & Zdaniuk, 2005; Hatch & Bulcroft, 2004; Kulik, 2004). Research has shown that marital satisfaction is lower in long-term marriages than in those of short duration (Jansen et al., 2006). Hinchliff and Gott (2004) showed that long marriage duration improved sexual intimacy among some older couples since they were able to know each other better, knew about each other's likes and dislikes more and had a closer relationship as a couple. In contrast, Sandberg, Miller, and Harper, (2002) believe that depression has been found to negatively affect older marriages. Some researches consider marital adjustment as a fluctuated phenomenon during life time. For example, Umberson et al. (2005) approached marital quality from a life course perspective, presenting it as a developmental trajectory that over time has ups and downs. They concluded that marital quality tends to decline over time, and is impacted more by age than marital duration.

The findings of several cross-sectional studies show that marital happiness is high in the early pre-parental years, decreases during middle parental period, and increases again during later post-parental period of married life (Peleg, 2008). Jalovaara (2002) believes that for some theoretical reasons we can expect divorces to decline naturally as partners get older and their married lives last longer. He also argues that divorce should have a higher cost for couples who have lived together for a long period of time since the tangible and intangible marriage-related investments made by couples during these years can act as barriers to separation (Jalovaara, 2002). There are also studies that addressed the obstacle to marital dissolution such as older age, longer marital duration, the belief that marriage is a life-time commitment, and presence of children (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991; R. Lauer, J. Lauer, & Kerr, 1990). H, Goldenberg and I. Goldenberg (2002) report that married couples are divorcing earlier than ever before with 38 % of couples divorcing within four years and 50 % within seven years.

Clarifying the relationship between marital characteristics and marital processes with marital satisfaction in a sample of 201 respondents in a study conducted by Rosen-Grandon, Myers, and Hattie (2004), it was found that

gender and length of marriage contributed significantly to marital satisfaction. Conclusions drawn from the study of Ebenuwa-Okoh (2008) in Nigeria about examining the effective factors of predicting marital adjustment among married persons, showed that gender, duration of marriage, and personality types were neither correlates nor predicators of marital adjustment.

In a research on 201 married students in Alzahra University in Iran by Darvizeh and Kahaki (2008), the result showed that there are significant positive relationships between well-being and marital adjustment. In a recent study in Iran by Ghiasi, Moeini, and Rousta, (2010) on 353 randomly-sampled female divorce seekers in family courts, they concluded that the tendency to divorce has negative relationship with number of children and duration of marriage. The authors did not explain the random sampling procedure in detail, therefore the general is ability of the results of the study is in question. A similar study by Bahari et al. (2010) indicates most of the divorce cases referred to the family crisis intervention centers in Iran was in the early years of marriage. The highest rate of divorce appeals was by women between the ages of 28 and 31 and for men it was from 24 to 27 years.

1.7 Education and Marital Dissolution

It has been shown that there is a positive relationship between marital maladjustment, divorce rate and studying in higher education. The normative climate or social imitation seems to be possible sources of divorce risk regarding a community's total education. In line with this reasoning, a great number of a community's individuals with higher education might indicate a more liberal normative climate compared to a community with less people with higher education (Lyngstad, 2011). According to Gerstein & Russell (1990), studying at the graduate level can take a great deal of personal effort, particularly for married students who have to make a balance of work demands, financial resources, commitment, parenting, and their marital relationship. With regard to these, Sanderson, Dugoni, Hoffer, and Myers (2000) stated that the relatively high divorce rate among graduate students is not surprising.

Harkonen and Dronkers (2006) studied the relationship between educational achievement of women and divorce risk among marriage partners in 17, mostly European, countries. Results showed that females with higher formal education had a higher marital maladjustment risk and consequently divorce in countries with high social and economic costs of divorce; in the case of low divorce costs, no relationship or a negative relationship was found (Harkonen & Dronkers, 2006). Chen (2012), in a study on education and divorce patterns among Taiwanese women, showed that divorce was noticeably more likely to happen among women who had higher formal education.

Despite the above-mentioned findings, other researchers argue for the positive role of education in stabilizing marriage. Brown and Lin (2012) reported a negative relationship between education and divorce among middle-aged adults. They also revealed that the highest divorce rate was among people who had the shortest marriages. The probability of divorce among middle-aged adults was shown to be higher than older adults (Brown & Lin, 2012). In a study aimed to examine the relationship of marital conflict, divorce and socioeconomic progress in Iran, Mahmoudian and Khodamoradi (2006), showed that women's education positively affected the divorce rate. In a more recent study in Iran by Barikani, Sarichlow, and Mohammadi (2012), on 572 divorce cases, they explored that the prevalence of marital maladjustment and divorce was less in high educated people compared to low educated couples. They interpreted the result as the ability of high educated married individuals to control interference of spouse family, being independent, handling spousal cultural difference and sexual problems compared with lower educational level couples (Barikani, Sarichlow, & Mohammadi, 2012).

Al Horany and Hassan (2012) examined the impact of nationality, gender, and university on the marital adjustment in Malaysian context, using Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test and demographic variables. They found significant differences in marital adjustment between gender, three nationalities (African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian), and two universities. The results also showed that Middle Eastern students had a better perception of marital adjustment compared to African and South Asian ones. They concluded that the Middle Eastern families tend to have higher stability and adaptability (Al Horany & Hassan, 2012).

2. Methodology

2.1 Respondents and Procedure

The participants of the study were randomly selected from married postgraduate Iranian students in Universiti Putra Malaysia. The random selection was based on the respondents' email addresses. All married Iranian Master and PhD students enrolled in public universities were the target population of the study. Universiti Putra

Malaysia (UPM), categorized as a public university by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE, 2011), was the target university in the present study. The Univerisiti Putra Malaysia has the most Iranian students (1760), enrolled in Master and PhD programs compared to other Malaysian universities (ISAM, 2011). G*Power calculations showed the minimum sample size to be 172 for the current study and it is 100 for Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgin (2001). Hence, 220 respondents were used in this study to ensure reliability. The list of eligible Iranian students was provided by the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) of the university.

The total population of married postgraduate Iranian students consisted of 600 students. Simple random sampling was conducted for the selection of 300 random digits considering the probability of non-responding and non-completing participants. The data collection was carried out by sending the questionnaires to the participants online. 220 students comprised the total number of participants in the study. The raw data from the questionnaires provided by the online survey were then analyzed using a computer spreadsheet. There were 117 female and 107 male married students between the ages of 25 and 61 in the selected sample of 220 postgraduate students.

2.2 Instrumentation

The data were gathered using a demographic questionnaire and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT). The Persian translated version of the LWMAT, which has been utilized in some studies in Iranian context (e.g. Bahari, Fatehizade, Ahmadi, Moulavi, & Bharami, 2010), was employed to make it feasible to administer among Iranian participants.

2.2.1 The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959)

The LWMAT was developed by Locke and Wallace (1959) in order to measure the marital satisfaction among married couples. In this marital adjustment scale, they used 15items from various previous measures with high item discrimination. The LWMAT is a benchmark standard usedto measure the level of marriage adjustment since it has a widespread use (Sperry, 2004). The questionnaire includes 15 questions with different ranking scales. A 6-point scale of Likert-type with a minimum score of 1 (Always Disagree), and a maximum score of 6, (Always Agree), is the main scale of the LWMAT. The other items of LWMAT consist of multiple choice questions. Example of multiple choice items are, "Did you ever wish you had not married? (a) frequently (b) occasionally (c) rarely (d) never, " and "Did you ever confide in your mate: (a) almost never (b) rarely (c) in most things (d) in everything".

The validity of LWMAT was determined by Krokoff (1989) which was shown to have the predictive validation. The result of validation showed significant correlations between the scores of husbands and wives. The internal consistency of the LWMAT was determined using Cronbach's alpha. High reliability and construct and concurrent validity have been shown for the test (Fischer & Corcoran 2007; Gubbins, Perosa, & Bartle-Haring, 2010). The Persian translation of LWMAT, done by Sanai and his colleagues in 2009, was used in order to make it suitable for the respondents. The Persian version of LWMAT has been used by different reserchers in Iran (Bahari et al., 2010; Isanezhad et al., 2012).The reliability of $\alpha = .819$ was obtained for LWMAT in the present study.

3. Data Analysis

Using descriptive statistics, the gathered data were summed up and the percentages and frequencies were reported. Moreover, in order to determine the relationship between independent variable, i.e. duration of marriage, and dependent variable, i.e. marital adjustment, Pearson's correlation was used.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

As can be seen in Table 1, 54.1% of the respondents belonged to 25-35 age group and40.9% of them were between the ages of 36 and 45. PhD students comprised the majority of the respondents (58.2%), whereas 41.8 % were master students. With regard to duration of marriage, 86.8% of the respondents had lived 1-17 years with their partners, while only 13.2% of them were within 17-34 years of their marital lives. Of all the respondents, 42.3% of them reported having no children, 34.5% had one child, and 18.7% had two children, whereas 4.5 % had three children.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for demographics variables, for the total sample and by gender

		Percent for All (n=220)	Percent for Males (n=107)	Percent for Females (n=113)
Age	25-35	54.1	52.3	55.8
	36-45	40.9	42.1	39.8
	46-60	4.5	5.6	3.5
	61 and more	.5	0	.9
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Level of Education	Master	41.8	28.0	54.9
	Doctoral	58.2	72.0	45.1
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Duration of Marriage	1-17	86.8	87.9	85.8
	17-34	13.2	12.1	14.2
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of Children	1	34.5	29.9	38.9
	2	18.7	25.2	12.4
	3	4.5	4.7	4.4
	None	42.3	40.2	44.2
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note. n=220.

4.2 Inferential Analysis

Pearson's correlation coefficient, symbolized by r, is the most widely-used descriptive statistics of correlation (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Razavieh, 2010), used to determine the possible statistically significant relationship between two continuous variables. The correlation coefficient value ranges from -1 to +1, while the former indicates a strong negative relationship between the two variables. This would mean that as one variable increases the other variable decreases. On the other hand, if a positive value of +1.00 is observed, this would indicate that there is a strong positive association between the variables. This shows that one variable increases with the decrease of the other variable. The observed value of 0 indicates that there is no relationship between two variables and that an increase or decrease of one variable does not affect the other variable.

4.2.1 Correlation

Pearson correlation was applied to examine the relationship of duration of marriage with marital adjustment. According to Pearson r, there is not a significant correlation between duration of marriage and marital adjustment ($r = 0.096$, $n = 220$, $p > .05$). Results did not show any significant relationship between duration of marriage and marital adjustment.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

The quality of a marriage is affected by multiple factors, both internal and external to the family. The impact of duration of on a marriage is one such prominent factor. The results of the study were in line with few findings from the previous studies, at the same time contradicted some others. This finding was in tune with that of Ebenuwa-Okoh (2008) who examined the effective factors of prediction marital adjustment among married persons. The results showed that duration of marriage was not correlated to marital adjustment. Finding of the study disagrees with the earlier finding of comparable research that indicated that duration of marriage is positively associated with marital satisfaction (e.g., Bali et al., 2010; Bookwala et al., 2005; Brown & Lin, 2012; Darvizeh & Kahaki, 2008).

In order to investigate possible sources of the different result of the present study, there is no obvious evidence in the literature; however, a possible reason might be the influence of other factors such as challenges for adapting to a new academic and social environment (Dao, Donnghyuck, & Chang, 2007; Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2011).

Finally, regarding the hypothesized U-shaped time pattern of Patrick, Sells, Giordano, and Tollerud (2007) for marital quality, it seems that marriage duration gap of respondents is too wide (1-34 years) that can affect the association between duration of marriage and marital adjustment. The above-mentioned elements can affect the results or neutralize the relationship between duration of marriage and marital adjustment of married postgraduate Iranian students in Malaysia.

The results of this survey have several implications for counselors working with populations of Iranian married students living abroad. The emphasis is to consider factors influencing marital satisfaction such as external stressors in the new environment. In future studies, rather than studying partners individually, there is a need to focus on both married partners for possible interaction patterns, so that the results can be generalized with more certainty.

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