

Conflict Strategies, Communication And Stress Among Married Couples

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Declarations

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify the background information, identify the level of conflict strategies, communication levels and stress levels among married couples. This study is a descriptive quantitative study and conducted at the counseling office of the Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Sembilan (MAINS) Port Dickson District. This study involved 60 study subjects among married couples who seek counseling services. This study uses purposive sampling by using three instruments, namely Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS), Marital Communication Inventory (MCI) and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). The findings showed that most of the married couples involved in this study were aged between 31 years and 40 years, had at least one to three children, were self-employed, had a household income of RM1001 to RM3000, a duration of married of six to 10 years and most of the study subjects involved had a Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) level of Education. The findings also showed that the married couple were medium in the sub-scale of compromise, interaction reactivity, separation, dominance and submission, while high in the sub-scale of avoidance. In addition, communication is at a very low and stress is at a high.

Keywords: *Conflict strategies, communication, stress, married couple*

Introduction

In a marriage, there are many responsibilities and challenges. Married couples are certainly faced with misunderstandings, crises, problems, conflicts of various kinds in managing a marriage that can bring stress if not managed properly. But there are also positive implications for the problems that arise and it is not realized by couples as according to Mohamad Pairuz Suhairi Abdullah and Zainab Ismail (2020), conflicts that occur in marriage help couples get to know each other but divorce can occur if the couple does not try to solve it. Therefore, couples need to have an attitude of trying to resolve conflicts that occur. According to Siti Marziah Zakaria et al., (2018) conflict handling skills are part of effective communication that married couples need to master. Conflicts in marriage are common and difficult to avoid. Thus, having the skills to deal with conflict helps married couples better deal with challenges and differences of opinion with minimal negative impact. The inability to deal effectively with conflict can have negative and long-lasting social and psychological effects. Many past studies have been conducted on the importance of conflict coping strategies and their influence on the social and psychological well-being of individuals (Coyne, Thompson, & Palmer, 2002; Yazdani et al., 2016; Abdul Razak et al., 2015). Conflict management is the process of parties involved in conflict to develop conflict strategies and apply them to control conflict to produce better solutions (Wirawan, 2010). Conflict management aims to provide an understanding of the meaning of conflict, identify the causes of conflict, forms of conflict, understand the laws relating to darar or domestic violence and know how to resolve conflicts.

Martin and Nakayama, (2004) states that there are several styles of conflict management, namely; (1) dominating, win-lose oriented, coercion on one side to give in and follow the dominating Party; (2) integrating, win-win oriented, looking for results that can be accepted by both parties; (3) compromise, when it is difficult to find a solution then one party will give in and accept the; (3) obligate, a situation where each party will reduce differences and incompatibilities, and find common ground in differences to save connections; (4) avoidant, avoiding conflict has two meanings from each side of the point of view, avoiding the dominant individual culture, is considered a form of one's own helplessness, while for some people from the dominant culture collectively, avoid by muffling the conflict may be time to think or the conflict is not an important thing to discuss. According to Bell (1987) in Stinnett, et al (1991), marital relationships are indirectly influenced by mutual understanding between spouses. Communication is seen to play an important role in influencing the relationship of married couples and can have an impact on marital relationships. Hans Selye (1974) defines stress as a non-specific reaction by a person caused by the burden that befalls him. Hurnby (2007) defined stress as an insistence, an effort, a demand on physical or mental capacity. While The Times Chambers Combine Dictionary Thesaurus (1995) defines stress as a reaction of a person either physically or emotionally or both that can cause disorders not only psychological but also physical. This means that stress can have a negative impact on a person. This indicates the emotional, cognitive and behavioral stressors of the individual. While Bogoroch (2005) defines stress as mental or psychological trauma caused by painful (tortious) or painless (non-tortious) behavior.

Problem Statement

A happy family is also capable of building a prosperous life consisting of individuals with positive and happy personalities (Pittman & Lloyd, 1988). However, there are certain challenges in building a happy family. Some of these challenges include relationship conflicts, financial problems, career problems, Children problems, Third party intervention and others (McCubbin, Joy, Cauble & Comeau, 1980). All of these challenges become contributing factors to stress in the family. When a family is faced with an issue, that family member will be in a stressful situation. This unhealthy atmosphere of stress affects the emotional, psychological and mental in turn have a negative impact (McLanahan, 1983).

The report by the Syariah Justice Department through the Director-General of the Syariah Justice Department Malaysia (JKSM) found that the highest number of Muslim divorce cases recorded nationwide over the past year involved developed states such as Selangor and Johor. Of the total 45,420 divorce cases registered nationwide in 2021, Selangor recorded 8,811 cases, followed by Johor 5,058 cases, Perak 4,215 cases and Kelantan 4,093 cases. Kedah recorded 3,873 cases of divorce, Pahang recorded 3,409 cases, Terengganu recorded 3,358 cases, Sabah with 3,027, the Federal Territory recorded 2,785 cases, Negeri Sembilan recorded 2,477 cases, Penang showed 1,932 cases, while Malacca with 1,597 cases and finally Perlis recorded 785 cases of divorce. The highest percentage of divorce cases involving Muslim couples were settled in Terengganu with 93.6 per cent, followed by Negeri Sembilan (90.1 per cent), Wilayah Persekutuan (89.4 per cent) and Perak (88.2 per cent).

The Department of Syariah Justice Malaysia reported that among the main causes identified were lack of understanding between spouses, financial factors, failure to fulfill maintenance obligations, cheating spouses and family interference (Department of Syariah Justice Malaysia, 2022). This scenario is also illustrated in a study conducted by Rika Fatimah (2008) which found that married individuals in Malaysia experience problems in marital relationships. This situation creates concerns about the integrity of the institution of marriage in Malaysia, especially for those who have stress in the marriage relationship caused by conflict and communication problems. This needs to be researched to provide common sense about the methods and ways that need to be paid attention to in helping married couples improve quality marital relationships.

Disagreements and planning, namely conflicts between spouses in communicating, will invite stress in the relationship. Conflicts that occur will result in married couples often conflict and cause psychological stress effects on emotions, thoughts and behavior. Stress has been identified as the cause of almost all psychological problems and disorders. A person who regularly faces stress for example will experience depression, sadness, anxiety, and some psychosomatic problems (Khairul Zuhairi, 2004). Ledermann and Macho (2009) assert that communication is partially mediated and has the effect of marital problems on the quality of marriage. Communication behaviors in interpersonal relationships have also been found to be highly sensitive to stress (Cutrona, Russell & Brown, 2005). This means, stress will lead to negative communication behaviors, such as yelling, fighting and so on. Schulz et al. (2004) revealed that work stress can worsen relationships between couples by increasing misunderstandings.

Matthews, Conger and Wickrama (1996) state conflict will increase psychological stress, which in turn will affect the quality of marriage. Thus, conflict management is expected to act as a mediator that can reduce stress levels and preserve the quality of marriage. Conflicts in the family and marriage are an inevitable phenomenon. Therefore, the maturity of the couple in handling conflicts will affect the integrity of the marriage. Both husband and wife have a role to play in managing conflicts proactively and positively.

Study Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. Identify the background of the married couples.
2. Identify the level of conflict strategies (sub-scale of compromise, sub-scale of avoidance, sub-scale of interaction reactivity, sub-scale of separation, sub-scale of dominance, sub-scale of submission) among married couples.
3. Determine the level of communication among married couples.
4. Determine the level of stress among married couples.

Literature Review

Conflict strategy is the way in which a couple manages their conflicts. The study of conflict strategies has been widely discussed. Most studies have focused on how couples deal with conflict positively or negatively. Hidayatul Sakinah, Rafeah and Azhar (2022) revealed that disagreements in the household of couples who practice long-distance marriage arise from various external and internal factors. Internal factors that cause conflict include stress, lack of Communication, Limited affection, minimal support, and lack of trust. While external factors include third party trespassing and financial concerns. Long-distance marital conflicts can be handled using one's role, mediator, and authority. Spirituality, encounter, communication and support systems have been identified as four important conflict management approaches. The Safura and Jamayah study (2022) shows that married couples often use negative conflict resolution techniques when dealing with their household issues.

Suzana, Jamiah and Siti Marziah (2020) found that communication anxiety that occurs with a partner is an important factor and attention should be taken when studying psychological aspects among married individuals. The results also found that there are six main aspects of anxiety communicating with a partner is when individuals are willing to solve their own problems rather than discuss with a partner, hesitant to start a long conversation about what is happening in life, holding back what wants to be said even in a relaxed state, less comfortable starting a deep conversation with a partner, difficult to start a friendly conversation with a partner and finally less likely to start a casual conversation with a partner. These six aspects show the characteristics of communication that is not free and not open and always careful when communicating with his partner.

This finding is in line with previous studies where communication anxiety has a negative association with an individual's psychological well-being, including marital satisfaction. The higher the anxiety of communicating, the lower the satisfaction of marriage. For example, studies that have previously been conducted examined the correlation of communicative anxiety with marital satisfaction (Gottman, 1994), marital quality (Bankole, 2019) and compassion (Salazar, 2016). Siti Marziah Zakaria et al., (2016) found that both communication style (open communication style vs. negative communication style) and life adaptation were significant predictors of marriage quality among young couples (1-10 years of marriage) in Malaysia. Both predictors contribute to a large amount of variance in quality marriages. Effective and positive communication between spouses helps reduce everyday stress in domestic relationships (Ledermann et al., 2010; Suleyman, 2014). Daily moments with the couple such as making jokes and relational interactions contribute towards a positive impact when faced with conflict. The ability of husbands to joke in everyday life indirectly binds the love and comfort of their spouses (Driver & Gottman, 2004). Howard J. Markman et.al., (2010) who have found pre-marriage and divorce communication upheavals for the first five years of marriage indicate that negative communication is often reported to be associated with divorce.

Afu and Nteh (2020) pointed out that marriage conflict is caused by parental upbringing, absence of offspring, lack of financial stability, religious differences etc. the consequences of marital conflict are stress, anxiety, insomnia, suicidal thoughts as well as hatred or fear of the opposite sex. Whereas a study by Elham Vaez and Rumaya Juhari (2017) showed that marriage stress was the strongest stress that negatively affected respondents' marriage satisfaction. Ledermann, Bodenmann and Rudaz (2010) examined the association between stress in and out of relationships and marriage quality. Stress in a relationship refers to the stress that is triggered due to the habits and attitudes of the partner. Therefore, it is important for couples to adapt to stressful situations and support each other. A couple's ability to adapt mediates the relationship between stress and marriage quality. The model of marriage stress by Bodenmann, Ledermann, and Bradbury (2007) suggests that stress affects the husband and wife relationship directly and indirectly through the quality of communication and time spent together.

Study Methodology

This study is a descriptive quantitative study to identify background information, level of conflict strategies, communication and stress among married couples. The study was conducted at the counseling office of the

Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Sembilan (MAINS) Port Dickson District. Justification for the selection of the study is MAINS an agency that offers family and marriage counseling services in addition to other agencies such as Lembaga Penduduk dan Pembangunan Keluarga Negara (LPPKN), Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri (JAIN) and so on. The study involved 60 married couples. The researcher found that non-random sampling is suitable for this study because it focuses on certain criteria and is in accordance with the focus of the research to be carried out. The researchers used purposive sampling in conducting this study. From Leedy and Ormrod (2005), purposive sampling is a sample that focuses on a specific and appropriate group. Therefore, in the context of this study, the researchers selected married couples who want to get marriage counseling services. The study used three instruments, Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS) to measure the level of conflict strategy, Marital Communication Inventory (MCI) to measure the level of communication, and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) to measure the level of stress.

Study Findings

1. Background information of the married couples

This section presents information on the background of the study subjects in general based on age, level of education, occupation, duration of marriage, number of children, and household income. The study subjects consisted of 30 married couples or 60 individuals who were clients at the counseling office of the Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Sembilan, Port Dickson District.

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of background information that includes age, education level, occupation, duration of marriage, number of children and household income. The findings showed that age 18 to 30 years obtained 11.7 percent (7 respondents were 2 husbands and 5 wives), age 31 to 40 years obtained 50 percent (30 respondents were 16 husbands and 14 wives), age 41 to 50 years obtained 28.3 percent (17 respondents were 8 husbands and 9 wives), age 51 to 60 years was 8.3 percent (5 respondents were 3 husbands and 2 wives) and age 61 years and above was 1.7 percent (one husband only).

The educational background also showed the level of SRP or PMR which was 13.3 percent (8 respondents and 5 husbands and 3 wives), SPM was 51.7 percent (31 respondents, namely 14 husbands and 17 wives), STPM, STAM or Diploma was 13 respondents (7 husbands, 6 wives) or 21.7 percent and a total of 8 respondents (4 husbands, 4 wives) or 13.3 percent had a degree in education. Occupation information showed that 12 respondents (husband 10, wife 2) or 20.0 per cent served as government employee 13 respondents (husband 6, wife 7) or 21.7 per cent were employed by the private sector, while 22 respondents (husband 13, wife 9) were self-employed or 36.7 per cent and were unemployed, 13 respondents (husband 1, Wife 12) or 21.7 per cent.

The next descriptive analysis is the duration of marriage showed 1 to 5 years is 10 respondents at 16.7 percent, 6 to 10 years is 16 respondents at 26.7 percent, while the age of marriage 11 to 15 years showed 13 respondents or 21.7 percent, 9 respondents or 15.0 percent represents the age of marriage 16 to 20 years and 21 years and above the marriage period showed 12 respondents or 20.0 percent. The number of children among the study subjects showed that 2 respondents or 3.3 percent had no children, while one to 3 children showed 30 respondents or 50.0 percent, 40.0 percent showed that 24 respondents of the study subjects had 4 to 6 children and 6.7 percent showed that 5 people had 7 children and above. Meanwhile, household income showed that 16 respondents or 26.7 percent had an income below RM 1000, 23 respondents, namely 38.3 percent, had an income of RM 1001 to RM 3000, and 11 respondents or 18.3 percent had a household income of RM 3001 to RM 5000, 5 respondents or 8.3 percent had an income of RM 5001 to RM 7000 and 5 respondents 8.3 percent, had a household income of RM 7001 and above.

Table 1 frequency and percentage of age information among married couples.

Age	Husband	%	Wife	%	Total	%
18 – 30 years old	2	6.7	5	16.7	7	11.7
31 – 40 years old	16	53.3	14	46.7	30	50.0
41 – 50 years old	8	26.7	9	30	17	28.3
51 – 60 years old	3	10	2	6.6	5	8.3
61 years old and above	1	3.3	0	0	1	1.7
Total	30	100	30	100	60	100
Education Level						
SRP / PMR	5	16.7	3	10	8	13.3
SPM	14	46.7	17	56.7	31	51.7
STPM / STAM/ Diploma	7	23.3	6	20	13	21.7
Degree	4	13.3	4	13.3	8	13.3
Total	30	100	30	100	60	100
Occupation						
Government	10	33.3	2	6.7	12	20.0
Private	6	20	7	23.3	13	21.7
Self employment	13	43.3	9	30	22	36.7
Does not work	1	3.3	12	40	13	21.7

Total	30	100	30	100	60	100
Duration of Marriage						
1 – 5 years					10	16.7
6 – 10 years					16	26.7
11 – 15 years					13	21.7
16 – 20 years					9	15.0
21 years and above					12	20.0
Total					60	100
Number of children						
None					2	3.3
1 – 3					30	50.0
4 – 6					24	40.0
7 and above					4	6.7
Total					60	100
Household Income						
Below RM 1000					16	26.7
RM 1001 – RM 3000					23	38.3
RM 3001 – RM 5000					11	18.3
RM 5001 – RM 7000					5	8.3
RM 7001 and above					5	8.3
Total					60	100

N=60

2. Level of conflict strategies (sub scale of compromise, sub scale of avoidance, sub scale of interaction reactivity, sub scale of separation, sub scale of domination, sub scale of submission) among married couples

In this study, the interpretation of scores for conflict strategy variables is based on the interpretation proposed by Azwar (2012) and Julaibib (2019). Sub scale of compromise (low 0 to 13, medium 14 to 41, high 42 to 56), sub scale of avoidance (low 0 to 2, medium 3 to 8, high 9 to 12), sub scale of interaction reactivity (low 0 to 5, medium 6 to 17, high 18 to 24), sub scale of separation (low 0 to 4, medium 5 to 14, high 15 to 20), sub scale of mastery (low 0 to 5, medium 6 to 17, high 18 to 24) 4, medium 5 to 14, high 15 to 20).

Thus, higher scores on each subscale indicate greater support for the couple's conflict coping strategy. The higher the compromise indicates the greater the strategy of dealing with conflict, the higher the avoidance indicates the more active avoidance of conflict, the higher the reactivity of the interaction indicates the more aggressive act to the partner, the higher the separation indicates the higher the couple leaves the conflict interaction. Next the higher the dominance indicates the higher the strategy to control the partner and the higher the submission indicates the higher the agreeing with the partner (Zacchilli et al., 2009).

The results of the analysis showed a sub scale of compromise for the husband (medium 17 people and high 13 people) while the wife (low 3 people, Medium 19 people and high 8 people). Avoidance Sub scale for husband (medium 10 and high 20) and wife (medium 13 and high 17). Interaction reactivity sub scale for husband (low 2 people, Medium 26 people and high 2 people) and wife (low 2 people, Medium 21 people and high 7 people). The next sub scale of separation is for husbands (low 2 people, Medium 26 people and high 2 people) while wives (medium 22 people and high 8 people). While the dominance sub scale shows the husband (low 8 people and medium 22 people) while the wife (low 6 people, Medium 23 people and high one). The next sub submission scale shows the husband (low 21 people and high 9 people) while the wife shows (low one, medium 23 people and high 3 people).

Table 2 shows a summary of the descriptive analysis for the entire study sample involved in the pre-test of 60 people. The analysis showed a sub-scale variable of the conflict strategy, namely compromise (low score of 3.3 percent, medium 60 percent and high 35 percent). Avoidance Sub scale (medium score 38.3 percent, high 61.7 percent); interaction reactivity sub scale (low score 6.7 percent, medium 78.3 percent, high 15 percent); separation sub scale (low score 3.3 percent, medium 80 percent, high 16.7 percent); sub scale of dominance (low score 2.3 percent, medium 75 percent, high 1.7 percent); and sub scale of submission (low score 1.7 percent, medium 78.3 percent, high 20 percent).

Table 2 levels of conflict strategy variables (sub scale of compromise, sub scale of avoidance, sub scale of interaction reactivity, sub scale of separation, sub scale of domination, sub scale of submission) among married couples

Variable/ Subscale	Level	Husband	Wife	f	%
Scale of conflict strategies					
Sub scale compromise	Low	0	3	3	3.3
	Medium	17	19	36	60.0
	High	13	8	21	35.0
	Total	30	30	60	100

Sub scale avoidance	Low	0	0	0	0
	Medium	10	13	23	38.3
	High	20	17	37	61.7
	Total	30	30	60	100
Sub scale of interaction reactivity	Low	2	2	4	6.7
	Medium	26	21	47	78.3
	High	2	7	9	15.0
	Total	30	30	60	100
Sub scale separation	Low	2	0	2	3.3
	Medium	26	22	48	80.0
	High	2	8	10	16.7
	Total	30	30	60	100
Sub scale of dominance	Low	8	6	14	23.3
	Medium	22	23	45	75.0
	High	0	1	1	1.7
	Total	30	30	60	100
Sub scale submission	Low	0	1	1	1.7
	Medium	21	26	47	78.3
	High	9	3	12	20.0
	Total	30	30	60	100

N=60

3. The level of communication among married couples

In this study, the interpretation of scores for communication variables is based on the interpretation of the mean score presented by Mohd Asri Harun et al., (2016). Interpretation scores 1.00 to 1.50 (very low), 1.51 to 2.50 (low), 2.51 to 3.50 (medium) and 3.51 to 4.00 (high). The mean score of these four levels is more appropriate and easier to see the level difference (Pallant 2013). Table 3 shows a summary of the descriptive analysis for the entire study sample involved in the pre-test of 30 married couples or 60 individuals. The analysis showed communication scales (very low scores of 56.7 percent and low 43.3 percent). Thus, for the interpretation of communication variables, a low score indicates poor marital communication and a high score indicates good marital communication. The higher the cumulative score, the more successful a person is considered to be in marital communication (Bienvenu, 1978).

Table 3 levels of communication among married couples

Variable/ Subscale	Level	Husband	Wife	<i>f</i>	%
Communication Scale	Very low	15	19	34	56.7
	Low	15	11	26	43.3
	Medium	0	0	0	0
	High	0	0	0	0
	Total	30	30	60	100

N=60

4. The level of stress among married couples

In this study, the interpretation of scores for stress variables is from Cohen and Williamson (1988) that scores around 13 are considered normal while high pressures usually have stress scores around 20 points or even higher. Therefore, a low score interprets that the respondent's stress is low, and a high score indicates a high rate of interpretation. So the higher the score, the higher the pressure level. Table 4 shows a summary of the descriptive analysis for the entire study sample involved in the pre-test of 60 people. The analysis showed stress variables (high 88.3 percent, Medium 11.7 percent). While the stress level for the husband (medium 4 people and high 26 people) while the wife (Medium 3 people and high 27 people).

Table 4 levels of pressure variables

Variable/ Subscale	Level	Husband	Wife	<i>f</i>	%
Stress Scale	Low	0	0	0	0
	Medium	4	3	7	11.7
	High	26	27	53	88.3
	Total	30	30	60	100

N=60

DISCUSSION

1. Background information of the married couples

This section discusses information on the background of the study subjects based on occupation, age, gender, marriage period, number of children, household income and educational standard. Park, Tai Young Moon and Jung Hwa (2013) factors that influence marital conflict include differences in background in a couple's family of origin, dissimilarity from the family of origin, and experimental methods that do not work in conflict resolution. Many previous research findings, gender, age at first marriage, number of children, level of education, employment, income, duration of marriage, type of marriage (interracial or not, and interfaith. or not, arranged or in love does not predict marital satisfaction. For example, variables such as duration of marriage, education, employment status, number of marriages (Jose & Alfons, 2007), gender (Jose & Alfons, 2007; Renaud, Byers, & Pan, 1997; Sprecher, 2002) absence/ number of children (Jose & Alfons, 2007; White, & Edwards, 1990) was reported by earlier researchers as a major sociodemographic variable among predictors of marital satisfaction.

Most of the women involved in the study were between the ages of 31 and 40. This shows that most of the middle-aged clients who attend counseling services at the Port Dickson district MAINS counseling office have weaknesses in relationship conflict strategies with couples. In 2021, the Department of Statistics Malaysia revealed that the highest number of divorces by age group was between 30 and 34 years old. This shows that most couples aged 31 years to 40 years do not apply good ways and methods of managing conflicts and leave it until they need counseling services from counselors. According to Canary, Cupach, and Messman (Zacchilli, 2007), the way individuals deal with conflict in their romantic relationships has more influence on aspects of the relationship (such as satisfaction) than the frequency with which conflict itself often occurs.

The findings are also parallel with Hasri Haruni et al., (2021) found that the majority of respondents who sought family counseling services were aged 31 to 40 years. The findings are supported by the study of Hamid Mohamad@Asanar et al., (2021) which found that respondents aged less than 40 years often had marital conflicts. This study can also be attributed to a study by Mariam Abd. Majid and Mohammad Syafirul Zarif (2017) who found the age of a husband or wife in the range of 31 to 35 years is the highest age range recorded problematic. A study by Davis (2015) also found that most of the respondents were married couples aged 31 to 35 years involved in marriage programs to help them manage their marriage well.

Furthermore, most of the study subjects involved in this study have a level of Education Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). The low level of Education also contributed to the quality of marital relations among the clients involved as study subjects. This finding is in line with a study by Zarinah Arsat et al., (2018) which found that most respondents with family stressors had education levels up to SPM. These findings are in line with the study of Rosfariza Mohamed Ghani et al., (2007) found that respondents married couples have an educational background up to SPM level. A study by Rumaya, Irese and Siti Nor (2007) showed that low levels of education contribute to the quality of marriage. Equality of educational standards between spouses plays an important role in household harmony (Tzeng, 1992). Low educational standards (Othner & Neenan, 1996; Rak & Patterson, 1996) is a risk factor in the family environment.

Based on the analysis of employment information, most of the husband's clients involved in this study are self-employed. This shows that most of the husband's clients are looking for their own income and do not have a fixed monthly income to support the family. Therefore they have to find income through their own alternatives. And most of them are not married. Asila Nur Adlynd and Siti Marziah Zakaria (2019) married couples not having a permanent job is a risk factor in the family environment (Larson, 1984; Liem & Liem, 1988; Thomas et al., 1984). Muhammad and Jasmi (2004) found that many of those who do not have a fixed monthly income are involved in household problems and want to get counseling services. According to Siti Marziah Zakaria et al., (2018) a wife may be more dependent on her husband, have no source of income of her own and spend more time at home. The lack of emotional and practical support from family and friends also worsens their situation. Firdaus Abdul Gani (2020) explained that there are also cases of neglect of responsibility and maintenance because they think that the wife has her own source of income. The husband is obliged to provide for his wife when she has intercourse and the wife lives in a place provided by the husband except that the place is not suitable for living from the Shariah point of view'. Economic uncertainty poses a high risk to mental health not only in individuals or couples but also to family members or close relatives as well (Godinic, Obrenovic & Khudaykulov, 2020). According to Wan Murni Wan Mokhtar and Anwar Fakhri Omar (2018) stable economic status causes husbands and wives to value their partners more. However, the unstable economic position puts the pair under pressure.

The number of children indicates that most clients have at least one to three children. This explains that most of the study subjects involved in the study had a small number of children. It also shows that families with children who do not have many children also get family counseling services. It is not always the case that

families with many children are the only ones with problems. The number of children in a family also has a relationship with the amount of time allotted in the marital relationship (Greenblatt, 1983 in Rosfariza Mohamed Ghani et al., 2015). This finding is in line with a study by Siti Marziah Zakaria et al., (2018) found the majority of married couples in his study having one to two children had marital problems. The transition from a childless married couple to becoming parents will change the quality of the marriage to some extent.

Furthermore, the study found that the household income of most married clients showed between RM1001 to RM3000. Zarinah Arshat et al., (2018) low-income families or known as B40 families are families with a household income of RM3855 per month and below. This group is very susceptible to high risks when there is economic stress in a country and the study showed that most respondents with family stress had a monthly household income in the range of RM 1200 to RM 3000 per month. A recent study by Mohamad Yusof et al., (2020) found that financial problems are among the factors that contribute to couples' self-pressure to the onset of domestic violence. This is because individuals with low incomes have limited financial resources and have low education which results in the opportunity to get a better job is low. This situation is easy to trigger conflict in marriage when income decreases, commitment increases, spending exceeds income and debt burden increases (Hamid Mohamad et al., 2021). Uncontrolled changes such as decreased income can affect an individual's emotional control. Individuals with low emotional control tend to unleash their anger on their partners in the form of verbal and physical violence. This condition can cause stress for children and couples (Safitri, 2020).

While the duration of marriage showed that most of the couples involved in this study were married within six to 10 years. Most of them are in the early stages of marriage. Asila Nur Adlynd and Siti Marziah Zakaria (2019) the initial phase of marriage is a critical period and most divorces occur in the first phase of a year to 10 years of marriage age. A year to 10 years of marriage is categorized as the first phase of marriage, which involves a process of introduction, adjustment and change of life. A study by Mariam Abd. Majid and Mohammad Syafirul Zarif (2017) found that the marriage age of six to 10 years old couples was the second highest marriage age faced with divorce problems, namely 8,2124 cases (24.64 percent) from the total number of divorce cases from 2011 to 2015. Similarly, past studies have also found that most couples experience problems in marriage within five to seven years (Zawanah 1998; Zainab 2001; Satih & Very 2016). In the middle of the marriage period, individuals are faced with matters such as child care matters at various ages, personal issues, the need to care for aged parents, responsibilities towards the family of origin and others. In fact, in Malaysia, it is also generally shown that household breakdown is more prevalent among young people who are married for less than five years.

2. Discussion of the level of conflict strategies among married couples

In a study by Nur Faezah Musthapar and Bahiyah Ahmad (2022), it was concluded that the main thing to manage conflicts is that husbands and wives must always learn to recognize and understand the partner's personality, be patient to serve the partner's attitude and easily forgive him. Conflict needs to be managed to avoid the short and long term effects of conflict such as stress, depression, domestic violence, anxiety and hopelessness in marriage (Meaza, 2014; Pathan, 2015; Tasew & Getahun, 2021). Conflicts in marriage are common and difficult to avoid. Thus, having the skills to deal with conflict helps married couples better deal with challenges and differences of opinion with minimal negative impact. The inability to deal effectively with conflict can have negative and long-lasting social and psychological effects. Many past studies have been conducted on the importance of conflict coping strategies and their influence on the social and psychological well-being of individuals (Coyne, Thompson & Palmer, 2002; Yazdani et al., 2016; Abdul Razak et al., 2015). In this study, conflict strategies according to Zachilli et al., (2009) covers six sub scales namely compromise sub scale, avoidance sub scale, interaction reactivity sub scale, separation sub scale, dominance sub scale and submission sub scale.

a. Sub scale compromise

Based on the findings of this study, most married couples have a moderate level of sub-scale of compromise. This explains the husband and wife in this study is simple in getting cooperation and agreement in finding agreement and understanding between the two parties. In this study the husband showed 56.7 percent at medium level while the wife 63.3 percent at medium level. This percentage shows that both husband and wife have Agreement and cooperation with each other but at a moderate level. The study also found that women are more likely to use conflict-compromise strategies with their partners. According to a study by Adegboyega et al. (2022) who found that women more often reported using compromise strategies during domestic conflicts which can be likened to conflict engagement styles in this study. However, the findings of a study by Tasew and Getahun (2021) reported that respondents couples often practice compromise techniques in managing marital conflicts.

b. Sub scale avoidance

The findings showed that most of the married couples obtained avoidance sub-scale at a high level. This explains that most couples take the step of avoiding and avoiding problems experienced by staying away from their partner as a strategy. This evasive attitude makes conflict resolution impossible. A study by Lynn et al., (2016) found respondents who scored high on the avoidance sub-scale had a difficult time dealing with conflict, so they physically separated themselves from their partners and avoided discussing their disagreements. In this study the husband showed 66.7 percent at high levels while the wife 56.7 percent at high levels. This shows that more husbands adopt avoidance as one of their conflict strategies than wives. This finding is in line with the Sumalata, Byadgi and Yadav (2013) study on the evasive status of couples which showed that more husbands, 42 percent, had high evasive behavior compared to wives, 34.7 percent. The results clearly show that more husbands have used avoidance strategies in their conflict resolution process when compared to wives. Similarly, a study by Fincham, Beach, and Davila (2004) found that avoidance styles in conflict resolution among husbands led to poor conflict resolution.

c. Sub scale of interaction reactivity

The interaction reactivity Sub-scale also showed that most of the married couples had moderate scores. This explains that most of the spousal clients involved in the study were modest in trusting each other. Most of them lack trust in a partner, sometimes they often contradict, argue loudly, and even condemn a partner. This explains the simplicity of couples in showing reactions when interacting with each other. In this study the husband showed 86.7 percent at a moderate level while the wife was 70 percent at a moderate level. This shows that more men have aggressive behavior than women. A study by Johnson, Nguyen, Anderson, Liu and Vennum (2015) found dysfunctional families have direct relationships that result from negative and low interaction from partners. Campbell et al. (2010) found that in conflict with a partner, a person who trusts a partner will exhibit constructive behavior e.g. listening to a partner's ideas, as opposed to destructive behavior e.g. blaming a partner. Mistrust of a partner regarding personality and communication creates disagreements that can lead to divorce because intimacy cannot be formed (Aini & Afdal, 2020). A study by Hannah-Rose, Becca and Joan (2015) found husbands were more likely to describe a partner's suffering as interpersonal. Qualitative results suggest joint stress and distress associated with bereavement as potential mechanisms for increasing reactivity to interpersonal suffering.

d. Sub scale separation

The separation Sub-scale also reported most married couples had a moderate score indicating a moderate level of couples in leaving conflict interactions after making arrangements or planning to discuss the issue in the future. This explains that the study subjects also practiced this separation strategy in their relationships. The findings also showed that husbands earned 86.7 percent while wives earned 73.3 percent. This explains why more and more husbands adopt separation strategies in marital relationships. This approach is also taken when the situation has already become too tense and the couple needs space and distance to calm down and reassess the relationship. However, most couples leave the genital home for too long and return to the parental home. This situation then often invites other problems, namely family intervention. Liana Mat Nayan et al., (2016) found that distancing attitudes that lead to self-isolation from a conflict or a person and may involve attitudes of leaving the situation or remaining silent are attitudes often practiced by couples. The majority of respondents chose not to spoil and instead adopted a distance attitude to protect their own and their partner's disgrace. A study by Lynn et al., (2016) found that respondents who scored high on the separation dimension had a difficult time dealing with conflict, so they physically separated themselves from their partners and avoided discussing their disagreements.

e. Sub scale of dominance

While the sub-scale of dominance indicates a moderate level among married couples. This explains that most of them use the strategy of domination over their partner as one of the conflict strategies. The findings also showed that 76.7 percent of husbands and 73.3 percent of wives were at a moderate level in mastery strategies. This shows that both show almost the same amount of dominance over their respective partners. In situations where the husband is not in charge and the wife is in a position of having less power than the husband tends to use coercive tactics to exert influence, achieve desired change and correct power imbalances (Overall et al., 2016). In a desperate situation, the wife often becomes more aggressive when discussing problems with her husband. They Press, bring up mistakes, point fingers, criticize the weaknesses of the husband repeatedly to cause the husband to lose patience and violence against the wife (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). When the wife no longer wants to obey her husband it shows that there is a conflict where the couple no longer has an agreement in direction, planning and action (Cederroth & Hassan, 2012). Excessive domineering attitudes between couples also lead to conflicts that end in domestic violence (Mubasyaroh, 2016).

f. Sub scale submission

The sub-scale of submission also showed that most of the study subjects were at a moderate level. It can be said that most married couples do not agree with their partner. The study also found that the husband's submission

strategy was 70 percent while the wife's was 86.7 percent. This explains that most wives are less likely to agree with their partners. There is no such thing as the study of Hafizah et al. al. (2017), found that the collaborative strategy was the most popular strategy practiced by Malay married couples in managing domestic conflicts, while the strategy of exchanging thoughts and feelings to the point of sacrificing their own needs and interests to meet the needs of their partners due to fear of losing their relationship and they do not want to hurt the partner. Hamid Mohamad et al., (2021) found that lack of cooperation from spouses is also a cause of marital problems.

3. Discussion of the level of communication among spouses

This study found that the level of communication between spouses is very low. This indicates poor marital communication and is considered the lower a person is in marital communication. Poor communication skills and techniques will also exacerbate disagreements in the household. For example, failing to listen well, being quick to judge and draw conclusions, practicing one-way communication, not being frank and transparent and avoiding discussion. According to Nuraini and Siti Marziah (2021), each couple must have different methods in solving household problems. But the key is through effective communication. Communication will lead to agreement in discussions, the formation of ideas or opinions and subsequently understanding will be obtained. A study by Hamid Mohamad et al., (2021) found that most respondents agreed that communication problems are often the cause of conflict in marriage. Poor communication skills and techniques will also exacerbate disagreements in the household. For example, failing to listen well, being quick to judge and draw conclusions, practicing one-way communication, not being frank and transparent and avoiding discussion.

A study by Hidayatul Sakinah et al., (2022) pointed out the main factor contributing to household disharmony is communication problems. Similarly, according to Suzana et al., (2020) in his study found that the anxiety aspect of communicating with a partner is important because it is related to the satisfaction of an individual's marriage. It has been found that the more an individual is concerned about communicating with his or her partner, the less marital satisfaction the individual has. Addis by Girma and Zewdu (2019) found that marital communication was observed to have a statistically significant effect on marital satisfaction, it was also supported that marital conflict resolution had a positive role in predicting marital satisfaction of married individuals. This is why; many researchers and say that the important thing to succeed in marriage is how couples deal with their conflicts and differences. Prominent variables for men in discriminating insecure styles were negative communication, and evasive and offensive strategies. Again, the results are congruent, as negative communication involves blaming, exaggeration, distancing, among other destructive strategies (Delatorre & Wagner, 2015; Scheeren et al., 2015; 2014; Costa & Mosmann, 2020).

4. Discussion of stress levels among spouses

This study found that stress levels showed that the married couples stress scores were high. The findings also showed that husbands were 86.7 percent while wives were 90 percent. This explains why both husband and wife have high and almost equal levels of stress. This finding is in line with previous findings also showing that troubled marriages have a more severe impact on the wife than the husband (Umberson & Williams, 2006). Hamid Mohamad et al., (2020) studies show that depression, anxiety, stress, eating disorders and trauma can be triggered due to marital conflict. These conflicts, if left untreated, can worsen the quality of the marriage and lead to divorce. According to Nor Hikmah and Othman (2021) individuals who have high levels of stress are they unable to deal with their stress anymore due to different factors such as fatigue, burdensome issues, or any external cause. Meanwhile, a study by Elham and Rumaya (2017) showed that marital stress was the strongest stress that negatively affected respondents' marital satisfaction.

A previous study by Kandauda, Catherine and Eric (2020) showed that the psychological stress of husband and wife is significantly influenced by the couple-level stress process. The findings have implications for intervention and prevention programs that focus on the well-being of married couples later in life. Stress faced by a husband or wife if it cannot be controlled can be one of the causes that can cause cracks in the household (Mariam & Syafirul, 2017). While Kevin Lau et al., (2019) found that when one partner conveyed stress, the other partner responded with the use of language that indicated different types of responsiveness.

Conclusion

Overall, the background information of the married couples involved in this study showed that most of them were between the ages of 31 to 40 years, most of the study subjects had a number of children ranging from one to three people. In addition, most of the subjects studied have a Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) education level. Most of the study subjects are self-employed while the wife is a housewife. In addition, the study subjects mostly had a household income of between RM1001 to RM3000 and a marriage period of between six years and 10 years. The findings of the background information in this study are among the latest findings related to married clients who seek counseling services at the Port Dickson district MAINS counseling office in particular.

While conflict strategies were discussed, the avoidance sub-scale reported high levels while the other sub-scales reported moderate levels. The findings of this study as a whole explain that the married couples involved in this study want to improve their marital relationship and try to resolve conflicts that occur so that their marriage can continue. Their attendance at the counseling office of Majlis Agama Islam negeri Sembilan (MAINS) demonstrates their ability to treat and seek help from counselors so that each can listen to problems, understand conflicts better, know the wishes of the couple and choose appropriate actions so that negative conflict strategies can be overcome and enhance positive conflict strategies. The findings of this study are in line with the Safura and Jamayah study (2022) which found that married couples use many negative conflict resolution techniques when dealing with their household issues. The findings also showed that the married couples involved in the study recorded very low levels of communication and high levels of stress.

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