



# Marital Quality, Communication and Conflict Resolution among Malaysian Married Muslim

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## ABSTRACT

Marriage nowadays faces a various issues especially when divorce becomes trend among Malaysian. It is believed that success in marriage by maintaining quality of relationship may influence the other aspect of life. However, it is important to know the roles of marital communication and conflict resolution in order to maintain quality of relationship. This study examines the role of communication and conflict resolution on Muslim newlywed couples' marital quality. The Family Stress Theory (FST) and Marital Communication Theory (MCT) of marital communication and conflict resolution were used to explain influence between communication dimension, conflict resolution, and marital quality. Participants were 571 married Muslim individually selected from area Selangor. Self-administered questionnaire was used for data collection. Results indicate that there are significant differences in conflict resolution between the genders. However, people who are older and more educated reported higher marital quality. It also noted high levels on communication and conflict resolution ensure better quality marriage among respondents. Meanwhile, increasing on total household among them tend to have lower marital quality. Future studies need to consider using longitudinal data Marriage nowadays faces a various issues especially when divorce becomes trend among Malaysian. It is believed that success in marriage by maintaining quality of relationship may influence the other aspect of life. However, it is important to know the roles of marital communication and conflict resolution in order to maintain quality of relationship. This study examines the role of communication and conflict resolution on Muslim newlywed couples' marital quality. The Family Stress Theory (FST) and Marital Communication Theory (MCT) of marital communication and conflict resolution were used to explain influence between communication dimension, conflict resolution, and marital quality. Participants were 571 married Muslim individually selected from area Selangor. Self-administered questionnaire was used for data collection. Results indicate that there are significant differences in conflict resolution between the genders. However, people who are older and more educated reported higher marital quality. It also noted high levels on communication and conflict resolution ensure better quality marriage among respondents. Meanwhile, increasing on total household among them tend to have lower marital quality. Future studies need to consider using longitudinal data to fully understand the impact of communication and conflict resolution towards marital quality.

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## Introduction

In family life, marital quality is an important aspect that can lead on developed individual well-being. However, lack on quality of marriage will threat the family system into big issues of life such as depression and other psychological aspect (Ross *et al.*, 1990; Wickrama, *et al.*, 1997; Williams, 2003; Umberson *et al.*, 2006). The term of marital quality (MQ) is a global measurement on satisfaction, happiness and stability in order to establish the quality on relationship. Some researcher defined marital quality is a form of global evaluation on marriage which include satisfaction, happiness, integration and commitment between couples (Bradbury & Fincham, 1987; Lewis & Spanier, 1979). However, to maintain this quality of marriage, some factors may be defined and need to explore. Since the 60s to now, longitudinal studies on the problems that occur in marriage often involve a lack of satisfaction, happiness and stability among household that may reduce a quality of marriage among couples (Fincham, Bradbury & Scott, 1990;

Carrèret. *al.*, 2000; Neff & Broady, 2009; Waite, Luo & Lewin, 2009).

In relationship, marital communication seems important in order to maintain quality of relationship. It seems marital communication may influences on spousal relationship (LBlanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin & Fawcett 2009). It suggest that marriage with poor communication among them cause many issues on marriage such as conflict, life stress and even hostile that definitely will lead to divorce as an outcome. Previous studies proved that individual who has good communication with their partner will contribute to the quality of marriage (Jensen-Campbell & Granziano, 2001). It shows that the important on communication among partner to maintain a marital quality. Furthermore, Holman (2001) suggest couple communication was found one of the best predictor that may influence marital satisfaction. Moreover, the conflict also may affect a couples' marital quality. Good conflict resolution among couple tends to have good quality of marriage, but somehow conflicts which

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difficult to manage will invited couple to a lot of trouble in the household which mainly affect satisfaction, stability and quality of marriage (Gottman, 1994; Mitchell & Boster, 1999; Greef & Bruyne, 2000; Fincham, 2004; Hanzal & Segrin, 2008).

However, various studies have shown patterns of instability will occur at the pre-wedding and the beginning of the relationship (Carrere, 2000) and since then, some of the results showed that there is reason in the early stages of marriage may be very different from other couples who have been married or who have become parents (Markman, 1981; Markman, Floyd, Stanley & Storaasli, 1988). On the other hand, newlywed couples may experience a change in the means of communication than before marriage (Noller & Feeney, 1988). Besides that, previous research on marital quality stages across marriage life shares a U-shaped curve model which identified the trend on marriage stages. This model shows that the degradation of marriage took place in early marriage and picked up in mid-marriage (then occur on the appearance of a child) and rises again in the later years (Van Laningham et al., 2001). This show that older the person, the more responsibility that they take on marriage life. Current study was explained by Family Stress Theory (Hill, 1958) and Marital Communication (Fizpatrick, 1988). Family Stress Theory provides individual who facing some stressor tend to have higher stress in relationship. For some couples, it leads to crises, or marital distress.

Issues on divorce and marital quality seem related to each other. According to many research, low marital quality among married couple is likely to be associated with the increase to divorce rate. On the other hand, marital quality was predicted as the factor that will affect the relationship between couple that could lead to divorce (White & Booth, 1991). Statistics on married couples especially for Muslims has increased over the years, namely from 2002 to 2009 with an increase of 21%. Data showed that Selangor state is one of the highest marriage cases recorded among Muslim couples during the particular years, from 13,481 couple in 2008 to 17,299 couple in the following year. However, while the number of couples registered for marriage reported increased every year, unfortunately, the rate of divorce among Muslims also reported to be increased. Divorce cases were reported to be high in three states (Selangor, Putrajaya and Kuala Lumpur). Selangor has 3558 cases in 2008, in which was increased to 4614 cases in the following year, compared to Kuala Lumpur (second highest cases reported) with 1444 cases in 2008 to 1637 cases in the following years. Literature has documented various factors that lead to marital disruptions and poor marital quality is one of the factors acknowledged to have a vital role.

## Method

### Participants

The respondents for the current study comprised five hundred and seventy one ( $n=571$ ) married Muslim who were currently married below one year at the time of the data collection.

### Procedure

The respondents were recruited from around Selangor. By location, 23.4% of the respondents were from Petaling Jaya, 27.2% from Putrajaya, 23.8% from Hulu Langat and the rest is in Shah Alam district. Then, for each district, the selection of the respondent continues by dividing into suburbs and urban area which is most of the respondent was from the urban area. Each respondent who agreed to participate in the study was given a self-administrated questionnaire. To reduce the risk of bias on answering the questions, each respondent was requested to

complete the questionnaire independently and the questionnaire was collected upon completion.

## Measures

**Marital Quality.** Marital quality is measured using a Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) by Spanier (1976) contains 32 items which is complete instrument to use for individuals and couples in a relationship. Every item in the DAS has specific rates for each answer. DAS is used for the purpose of measuring the quality of a relationship based on dyadic relationship. Consist four subscale or dimension which is dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, and affection expression. Each subscale has different likert scale of measurement. The reliability for this instrument is  $\alpha=0.827$ .

**Communication and Conflict resolution.** Enriching and Nurturing Relationship: The Three Couple Scale for Marital Satisfaction, Communication and Conflict Resolution created by Olson et al. Al (2008) was used that has been revised from the original PREPARED/ENRICH create by the same author on 1989 which include new questions. This instrument includes three measurements which is to measure marital satisfaction, communication and marital conflict. However, current study was focusing on communication and conflict resolution subscale. This instrument is designed for couples as well as individuals. It is also used to identify the strength of relationships and the ability to mate. ENRICH instruments also implemented to promote dialogue and help couples to improve communication among them (Olson, Faurner & Druckman, 1986). Each subscale has 10 items and 5 likert scale from "1 = strongly disagree" to "5 = strongly agree". For communication, higher score meaning good communication among couple's meanwhile higher score on conflict resolution indicate high conflict happened among couples. The reliability for subscale communication is  $\alpha = 0.89$  meanwhile for conflict resolution is  $\alpha = 0.82$ .

## Statistical Analysis

In the current study, analyses were carried out using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Descriptive statistics of variable distribution were run to analyze the variable for age years of education, individually income, total household, communication, conflict resolution and marital quality. Lastly, frequency analysis of total score of communication, conflict resolution and marital quality also stated. For the analysis of correlation, spearman correlation analysis was conducted to get the  $r$  value with  $p$  value that is required. Meanwhile, to compare the gender differences on communication, conflict resolution,  $t$ -test analysis was used. Lastly, the regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictor of marital quality

## Result

### Descriptive result

Descriptive analysis of respondents' demographic factors, marital communication, conflict resolution and marital quality total score

Based on Table 1.1, the total number of respondents was  $n=571$  which consist with 52.4 % are women and 47.6 % are men respondents. Based on this selection of sample, criteria is clear which are individual men and women who married in the early years of marriage. Meanwhile on average, the age of respondents in this study is in the range of 26.85 years ( $SD = 2.6$ ) which is normal range for early marriage. The youngest age of the respondents in this study is 19 years old and the oldest is 38 years old. Results indicate that the majority of them are aged 26 years and below which is 47.6 % of the total respondents while only 20.3 % of respondents aged above 29 years old. This shows that there are more respondents that marriage during

older age. However, the rest percent's is on the range age of 27 and 28 years old.

For a monthly income of the respondents, 80 % of respondents have a career or job while the rest were housewife (especially female respondents). Among them, 80 % are working at public, private and personal sector. On average, the monthly income of the respondents was RM 2400.83 (SD = RM 1073.36) with a minimum income of RM 600 and maximum RM 9800. Most respondents which are 29.6% reported they having a monthly income below RM 1900 while 29.2 % of the respondents reported have a monthly income RM 1901 - RM 2600 per month. Other than that, the rest of the percent reported having a monthly income RM2601 and above per month.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for respondents' demographic background, Communication, Conflict resolution and Marital Quality**

Variables	M	SD	Min	Max
Respondent background				
Age	26.85	2.6	19	38
Years of education	16.15	3.50	0	25
Individual Income	2400.83	1073.36	600	9800
Total household	3.13	1.74	1	15
Total score				
Communication	36.43	6.91	15	50
Conflict resolution	29.73	6.43	12	44
Marital quality	50	10	34.93	67.90

\*\*Note : M=mean; SD = standard deviation; Min = minimum; Max=maximum

In this study, education is also included in the demographic characteristics of respondents. Based on the research, education levels were initially categorized into several levels according to the type which includes no formal education, primary school, secondary school (PMR), Secondary (SPM), Form 6 (STPM), Certificate, Diploma, Bachelor's Degree (Degree), Master (Master) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). However, for analysis purposes, this level has varied by year of study in education. Based on the findings, the majority of the 273 people or 47.8 % of the respondents are having educational level of Bachelor of Science (Degree) and a minority of them has no education and a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), respectively of the total respondents. Other stages include the Diploma of 111 people (19.4%), followed by Secondary (SPM) , 100 persons (17.5%) , Certificate of 43 people (7.5%) , Master (Master) of 25 persons (4.4%) , Form 6 of 13 people (2.3%) and lastly School (LCE) of 4 (0.7%) . This indicates that most respondents have a high background and good.

**Bivariate result**

**Different level of marital communication, conflict resolution and marital quality with gender differences**

In Table 2, result indicate that there was a significant gender differences stages of marriage on conflict resolution at the  $p < .05$  level for the three conditions [F(2, 569) = 1.32,  $p = 0.03$ ] meanwhile for marital communication and marital quality was not showing any significant gender differences which is [F(2, 568) = 3.3,  $p = 0.094$ ] for marital communication and [F(2, 528) = 0.25,  $p = 0.063$ ]. This result reveal that gender have a significantly differences between the groups when it compare with conflict resolution

**Relationships between respondents' demographic factors, marital communication, conflict resolution towards marital quality**

Table 3 shows that the independent variable which is marital communication has positive significant relationship ( $r=0.0392$ ) meanwhile conflict resolution has negative

significant relationship ( $r=-0.086$ ) with marital quality. This result indicates that individual with lower marital communication with his or her spouse will show decrease in their level of marital quality. However, individual with high conflict resolution with his or her spouse tend to have lower marital quality.

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**Table 2. t-test Analysis with Marital Communication, Conflict Resolution and Marital Quality**

Variable	Marital Communication				Conflict resolution				Marital Quality			
	M	S	F	Si g.	M	S	F	Si g.	M	S	F	Si g.
Gender	36	6.	3.	0.	30	6.	1.	0.	52	6.	0.	0.
Male	.4	7			.3	2			.2	1		
Female	36	7.			29	6.			51	6.		
	.5	1			.2	6			.9	3		

**Table 3. Intercorrelation among variables**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Age	-						
Years of education	.145*	-					
Individual Income	.293*	.418*	-				
Total household	.120*	.158*	.238*	-			
Communication	.012*	.106*	.142*	.079 <sup>NS</sup>	-		
Conflict resolution	.012*	.106*	.142*	.087*	.108 <sup>NS</sup>	-	
Marital quality	.073 <sup>NS</sup>	.109*	.024 <sup>NS</sup>	.143*	.0392*	.086*	-
	.131*						

Note : \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ , NS = Not significant

Meanwhile, the relationship between age of respondent and years of education show positively significant relationship with ( $r=0.131$ ) for age and ( $r=0.109$ ) for years of education. The result indicate individual who are older and educated tend to have higher marital quality. However, larger number of total household will decrease a level of marital quality where relationship between total household and marital quality has negative significant relationship ( $r=-0.143$ ).

**Multivariate result**

**Predictor of Marital Quality**

The results of Multiple Regression Analyses are shown in Table 4 which indicate the adjusted  $R^2 = .208$  revealed that a combination of age, years of education, total household, communication and conflict resolution explained 20.8% of the variance in individual's marital quality. However, three variable total household ( $\beta=-2.89$ ), communication ( $\beta=10.24$ ) and conflict resolution ( $\beta=-4.76$ ) serves as a significant predictor of marital quality. The communication appears strongest predictor of marital quality followed by conflict resolution and total household.

**Table 4. Model Regression analysis for Marital Quality**

Marital Quality Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	t	Sig.
Age	.016	.101	.063	1.58	.114
Years of education	.070	.071	.040	0.99	.325
Total household	-.404	.140	-.114	-2.89	.004
Communication	.398	.039	.415	10.24	.000
Conflict resolution	-.187	.039	-.192	-4.76	.000
R <sup>2</sup> =0.208					
F=27.510***					
df= (5, 523)					

NOTE: B = Unstandardized beta, SE =Standard Error &  $\beta$ =Standardized beta

### Discussion & Conclusion

In this study, we have examined the role of communication and conflict resolution on Muslim newlywed couples' marital quality. Based on the results of the analyses, we found that several personal and interpersonal factors have significant relationship towards marital quality. Results indicate that age on marriage and years of education show a positive significant meaning increase number on age and years of education may lead to increase the marital quality. Both findings support previous research. Previous research about age and marital quality claims maturity that comes with greater age may have different perspective on marital quality. Finding on this result was support western studies that state that young ages would lack the emotional and psychological maturity that lead to decrease in ability to adapt to changes and demands of marital adjustment and marital quality. These perhaps because of Malaysian culture context on how they adapt to environment family system.

Although, in this study, years of education also show a positive significant with marital quality meaning more educated the person will increase the marital quality. In western studies, they suggest that education is the determinant variable that associated with greater marital quality it is believed to related with less stress, depression and also high with personality and communication skill (Amato, et al., 2003). On current study, the result proves that individual with high education have high marital quality. Some previous studies on marital quality also support that education was significantly associated with greater expressions of problems by discussion, and love compare less of doing harm to spouse or hostile with partner (Hoelter, et al., 2004). However, as we expect that individual who has bigger total household tend to have lower marital quality.

A second finding of this study is on marital communication. The findings suggest that marital communication as an important, significantly correlate and also become the main predictor to explain marital quality. Result indicates higher marital communication lead to higher marital quality. Prior study suggested that marital communication shows mixed findings when examined against marital quality. Apparently in this study, the findings support previous studies that show that are particularly marital communication which includes skills and interact was become strong predictors of the quality and stability of a couple's relationship especially when some conflict happened in relationship (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Filsinger & Thoma, 1988; Bradbury, 1998)

A third finding of this study is the roles of conflict resolution among partners in influencing marital quality. We find conflict resolution is highly related to level of marital quality. Interestingly, conflict resolutions also become one of uniquely predictor of marital quality among the respondents. The result indicates higher conflict may lead to low marital quality. This was support by some previous research that suggested the central determinant of marital quality was comes from

behavioral interaction pattern in the way of how couple interact and handle their conflict. However, in this previous research, distress couple tend to have more lead to negative outcome especially on quality of marriage and also increase divorce (Karney & Bradbury, 1995a, Fincham & Beach, 1999, Bradbury et al, 2000; Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002). We suggest that by having a distress situation, conflict that happened on them tends to disrupt they marriage happiness, harmony and may lead to some harmful and also psychological health problem. Similarly, some research suggests conflict may lead to low relationship harmony and several physical, mental and family problem (Fincham & Beach, 1999). It also may lead to depression, health problem and so on (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Beach, Fincham & Katz, 1998).

Further research is needed to extend the meaning of the findings of this study. In particular, the small sample size of the survey limits the analysis. Bigger sample size is recommended by increasing more number of respondents is required for future research. It is also important to examine other constructs of marital quality such as marital adjustments and happiness since the focus in this study was just on marital satisfaction. Other factors that may explain the cultural context of the respondents may be added to enrich the understandings of the phenomenon.

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