

DYADIC DISCERNMENT AMONG YOUNG SPOUSES IN CONFLICT: A DECISION SCIENCE OF MARITAL AND FAMILY THERAPY

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ABSTRACT

Marital conflicts that strain young couples' marriage typically go unresolved, leading to extended battles, physical injuries, third-party intervention, and, eventually, divorce. This study aims to define dyadic discernment as a decision science in the context of marital and family therapy. A couple who are in marital conflict with a wise and well-informed decision-making process is termed as dyadic discernment. Discernment counselling helps couples make wise and well-informed decisions on whether to (i) improve the marital relationship and increase marital satisfaction; (ii) divorce and work on individual well-being and custodial arrangements; or, (iii) maintain the status quo and cope with the current situation while waiting for a better time. Conflict issues and considerations in dyadic discernment among young spouses are discussed. Finally, the need for a psychometrically sound instrument called the Dyadic Discernment Scale (DDS) is presented in this study.

Keywords: Dyadic discernment; Discernment counseling; Marital conflicts; Family therapy; Young couples.

INTRODUCTION

It's not uncommon in a marriage for the husband and wife to have opposing viewpoints, tastes, interests, and talents in resolving minor disagreements. Fighting is a natural aspect of couples getting to know each other. The husband's or the wife's experiences, observations, and discussions will help resolve conflicts that stem from these differences of views (Azlisham et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2020). However, the discussion process can turn into greater conflicts if the questions posed fail to elicit thoughtful answers from their couples (Afifi et al., 2015). The discussions may also lead to a dead-end the couples mutually wronging each other and being interfered by a third party (Askarshahi et al., 2019). This created conflict not only disrupts the emotional well-being of the couple, but also the emotional stability of the couple's married life and their children (Henry, 2015).

A study by Sadeghi and Agadjanian (2019) on the tendency of young couples in Iran to divorce found that level of education, economic stress and confusion of the role as the head of the family are contributing factors to the failure of young couples in the country to make dyadic discernment when faced with conflicts in marriage. A study by Askarshahi et al. (2019) found

that the most effective factor that leads to the filing of a divorce petition among conflicting couples is attitude. The couples showed an attitude towards divorce from the early stages of their marriages and this was left untreated for a long period of time. Furthermore, the support of family members, the influence of social media and a lack of community involvement do not dissuade couples from divorce.

However, due to modernisation, there is a dramatic change in how the term “marital conflicts among young spouses” is perceived by people. According to Frye et al. (2020), marital conflicts are the weakness of couples in solving problems and resolving conflicts that arise. Couples are prone to stress when faced with problems, making stress and conflict management less effective (Garber, 2019; Bilsky et al., 2020; Van den Eynde et al., 2019). Accordingly, experience, knowledge and skills are very important in forming a good relationship (Norazmi et al., 2020; Zaid et al., 2020; 2021).

Hence, this study aims to identify the challenges in young couples’ relationships that produce conflict, as well as to recommend appropriate considerations so that they could make sensible decisions, for which we coined the term “dyadic discernment.”

DYADIC DISCERNMENT

Dyadic refers to the interpersonal relationship between one person and another, or between one group and another (Liden et al., 2016). It can occur in a variety of situations, such as a person’s relationship with their employer’s organization, marriage, and family, and society with its environment (Liden et al., 2016). Discernment is the ability of an individual to understand information clearly and accurately (Poore, 2014). Dyadic discernment refers to a couple’s ability to reduce conflicts in marital relationships by making informed, mature and thoughtful decisions in terms of dyadic relationships to either pursue divorce or otherwise for the well-being of individual family members and the family system (Doherty et al., 2019; 2021). Indeed, young couples who are able to assess, manage and resolve conflicts wisely and effectively are mature in terms of thoughts and actions in the event that similar or more challenging conflicts occur again in the future (Terrell, 2013).

Nevertheless, a more challenging scenario in married life occurs when couples are forced to take the decision to separate due to married life pressures being too heavy, even if one party insists on staying together (Doherty et al., 2021). Couples are faced with a situation of ambivalence, mixed agenda or uncertainty about trying to preserve their marriage as throughout married life (Liker et al., 2014; Hoesni et al., 2012). They have to face constant conflict, whether they stem from small issues that should be dealt with wisely, such as a lack of hospitality, to major issues involving other parties, such as domestic violence, substance abuse, infidelity and third-party intervention (Askarshahi et al., 2019; Sadeghi & Agadjanian, 2019). In addition, leadership is also one of the contributing factors to the breakdown of an institution (Norazmi et al., 2020), as well as altered decision-making styles (Asfahani et al., 2021).

Therefore, dyadic discernment is defined as the wise decision-making process of couples who are in marital conflict on whether to (i) improve their marital relationship and increase marital satisfaction; (ii) divorce and work on individual well-being and custodial arrangements; or, (iii) maintain the status quo and cope with the current situation while waiting for a better time.

Discernment Counselling

Discernment counselling, as developed by Doherty et al. (2011; 2016), is an approach designed to help couples decide on the next step in their relationships. More specifically, discernment counselling provides “greater clarity and confidence in the decision about a direction for the marriage, based on a deeper understanding of what has happened in the marriage and each partner’s contributions to the problems”. The next steps that couples could pursue include maintaining the status quo in the relationship (path 1), pursuing separation or divorce (path 2), or making a 6-month commitment to couples therapy (path 3). From the discernment counselling sessions, the conflicting couples then gain clarity on the issues that exist in their households so that they are able to make mature and wise decisions. Spouses or parties involved need to emphasise proper institutional management that is appropriate to the current situation (Zaid et al., 2020). In addition, good leadership and management can also form an institution that moves in parallel with its goals (Norazmi et al., 2019).

Doherty et al. (2016), in their study on people’s sense of ambivalence during the divorce process, encouraged couples on the brink of divorce to assess their relationships with a marriage therapist trained in the discernment counselling protocol before making the final decision. Doherty et al. (2011) found that among 2,484 divorcing parents, 1 in 4 reported some belief that their marriage could still be saved. About 3 in 10 individuals indicated an interest in reconciliation services. In over 11% of couples, both partners reported that they believed their marriages could still be saved. Looking at these facts, Doherty later adapted and expanded traditional methods of couples therapy for ambivalent or mixed-agenda couples. Impressed by the late family therapist Betty Carter’s novel approach, they developed her unpublished technique into a full-blown treatment protocol, today known as discernment counselling (Doherty et al., 2011; 2016).

Seedall (2018), meanwhile, stated that discernment counselling helps young couples facing marital problems resolve marital issues, either through a divorce, maintaining the status quo or undergoing marriage therapy for six months without touching on their marital conflict issues. Julian (1987) defined discernment as the ability to make an informed judgment between one’s beliefs and past experiences to make decisions. According to Julian, the discernment process is not easy as it needs to be balanced between intuition, knowledge, experience and religious guidance. The results obtained from the process of intuition, knowledge, experience and religion can lead to wise and mature decisions. Poore (2014) added that discernment is what underlies the ability of individuals to create meaning and understand the meaning of life. Individuals who are able to assess, manage and resolve conflicts wisely and effectively are able to make mature decisions in the event that similar or more challenging conflicts recur in future (Terrell, 2013). As a result, discernment counselling helps young couples facing conflicts in marriage make wise and mature decisions based on a thorough analysis of the issues and conflicts.

Admittedly, it is difficult for young couples to avoid conflict in marriage as marital relationships involve two individuals who are of different genders (Mandemakers et al., 2010; Schumann et al., 2019) and of course, have different instincts and feelings (Liker et al., 2014). Sometimes involving the intervention of in-laws (Hoesni et al., 2012), as well as the conflicting couple themselves, who have to give up the protracted conflict (Liker et al., 2014; Thadathil et al., 2020). Young couples who take into consideration dyadic discernment when they are faced with conflict will increase the quality of their marriages (Poore, 2014) and make them more

harmonious (Noor et al., 2019). Their positive thinking also encourages them to constantly add knowledge, improve self-weakness, and get closer to religion (Noor et al., 2019), as well as improve the balance between their personal/family life and work (Assiri et al., 2021).

Statistics on Marriage and Divorce

In Malaysia, after graduating from tertiary education or entering the workforce, the majority of people marry between the ages of 24 and 29. Despite this, divorce rate among young couples has risen year after year. Between 2009 and 2013, there were 67,169 divorce cases among young couples aged 15 to 30 years old. The number has subsequently increased to 97,335 cases between 2018 and 2020 (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2019). Meanwhile, the Counter Service Transaction Statistics for Marriage and Divorce 2020 stated that 69,314 divorce applications were submitted, with 17,359 cases involving financial issues, 6,574 cases involving third-party harassment and 4,884 cases involving physical and mental abuse (National Registration Department, 2020).

Marital conflict is a global issue that transcends national borders (Choi, 2019; Doherty et al., 2019). In Singapore, the gross divorce rate per thousand of the population is 1.9 per cent from 5.9 per cent of marriages. Meanwhile, in Turkey, the gross divorce rate per thousand of the population is 1.9 per cent of 6.6 per cent of marriages, and Australia recorded 1.9 per cent of divorces per thousand of the population from 4.5 per cent of marriages (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). In Malaysia, the highest divorce rate in 2019 was recorded in the state of Perlis at 2.6 per cent per 1000 population, followed by Putrajaya (2.5 per cent) and Terengganu (2.3 per cent). In 2019, the median age of divorce for all states in Malaysia is between 35 and 38 years for men and between 32 and 35 years for women (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020).

ISSUES OF DYADIC DISCERNMENT AMONG YOUNG SPOUSES IN CONFLICT

Divorce is not a shortcut for conflicted young couples to escape the problems that have plagued them throughout their life together (Hassan et al., 2020). Growing children also need attention and commitment to survive (Ahrons, 2006) and be independent as they grow into adulthood (Ahmad et al., 2019; Ellison et al., 2011). As a result, young couples experiencing marital conflict must find a solution to the issues in their marriages (Nasir et al., 2018), so that, the disagreement does not fester until the source of the solution is gone.

A study conducted by Askarshahi et al. (2019) on 140 divorce applications in Yazd, Iran, in 2017 found that the most effective factor in the filing of a divorce among conflicting couples was attitude. This study used random sampling based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the tool for collecting data was a checklist of demographic information. The questionnaire constructed by the researcher comprises 48 items divided into four constructs, namely attitude, behavioural control, subjective norms and intention. The constructed questionnaire was based on the construct of the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) and validated in a qualitative study. Data were then analysed with the AMOS software using goodness-of-fit indices (GFI) model, SPSS using ANOVA, post-hoc and independent t-test.

Askarshahi et al. (2019) found that an individual's attitude towards divorce shapes their decision to divorce while living in the realm of marriage. Divorce attitudes can affect marital behaviour, eroding feelings of love in marriage and ideal commitment, such as patience, tolerance and being able to compromise (Amato, 2011). However, individuals under 25 years of

age are more likely to divorce than individuals aged 25-30 years and above 30 years (Askarshahi et al., 2019). This study is in line with the findings of the Main Findings Report of the Fifth Malaysian Population and Family Survey (NPFDB-5) 2014, which states that most divorce cases occur within five years of marriage. In the study, women were more likely to file for divorce at 37.3 per cent, compared with men at 35.4 percent. The causes of women applying for divorce during that age period were a lack of understanding (38 per cent), cheating husbands (20.5 per cent) and irresponsible husbands (15.2 per cent). Men, on the other hand, cited a lack of understanding (56.2 per cent), cheating wives (11.8 per cent) and interference from in-laws (10.0 per cent) (National Population and Family Development Board, NPFDB, 2016).

A study by Sadeghi & Agadjanian (2019) found that the level of education, economic stress and confusion of the role as the head of the family are contributing factors to a couple's failure to make dyadic discernment when faced with conflict in the household. The responsibility of leading the family, setting an example and keeping the children safe have been lost because the father has lost the function of leading the family (Zur Raffar & Hamzah, 2015). Furthermore, the fathers are heavily dependent on wives who have higher levels of education, and more permanent and stable employment (Sadeghi & Agadjanian, 2019). This situation causes the family structure to become chaotic and the husband loses his role as the head of the family (Zur Raffar & Hamzah, 2015).

Accordingly, Perry (2018), in his study found that young couples are too focused on their careers compared with the family and family's needs instead succumb to their self-weakness by having an affair and engaging in drug abuse, which are the causes of failure to perform their roles as the husband or wife in the household. As such, this study looks at the need for religion to help young couples to be more responsible to their spouses and family members (Ellison et al., 2019). Furthermore, the effects of conflict can injure children's emotional well-being (Ahrns, 2006), impair their educational process (Henry, 2015) and push them into criminal activity (Allendorf & Ghimire, 2013). Furthermore, the wife's happiness is a construct of a happy family, fulfilling personal life and job satisfaction (Assiri et al., 2021), and improving the quality of life (Fakhri et al., 2021).

CONSIDERATION OF A DYADIC DISCERNMENT SCALE FOR YOUNG SPOUSES IN CONFLICT

Although divorce is not the last option that should be taken by young couples in conflict, the divorce rate among youths is constantly increasing every year (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2019). Statistics from the Department of Statistics Malaysia show that the highest divorce rate occurs in the age group of 30 to 34 years for both sexes, with the marriage beginning at the age of 25 to 29 years for both sexes, or the equivalent of about ten years of marriage (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). In terms of the impact of divorce, divorce causes the economic position of a family to become more unstable (Bulanda et al., 2016), affects the emotional well-being of divorced individuals and children (Garbinsky et al., 2020; Hoesni et al., 2012) and increases the number of single fathers and mothers in the country (Hassan, 2015; Ahmad et al., 2019).

However, government and private agencies providing family assistance and counselling to individuals and couples in marital conflict have increased over time (Jie et al., 2021). But, it was found that a holistic solution to reduce the divorce rate has not been found, and the number of counsellors registered with the Malaysian Board of Counselors (LKM) who are qualified and

competent in handling marital conflicts is limited. Of the 9,243 counsellors registered with LKM, only 1,605 of them are qualified and competent in handling marital and family conflict issues (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2020).

Therefore, consideration of a dyadic discernment scale helping young spouses in conflict makes wise and well-informed decisions on their marital status. In this study, the Dyadic Discernment Scale (DDS) is defined as an instrument for measuring the ability of conflicted young married couples to make wise and well-informed decisions. The ability is demonstrated by strong and effective leadership traits, as well as the know-how to assess long-term impacts and risks. Their abilities are manifested by their knowledge; attitude and behaviour (Yi & Hohashi, 2018) on their choice to either (i) improve the marital relationship, (ii) divorce, or (iii) maintain the status quo.

In conjunction, discernment counselling helps couples who are in conflict improve their abilities. Studies show that individuals who are immature in decision-making face dilemmas in the realm of marriage, and make hasty decisions that bring about life-long regrets (Choi, 2019). In marriage, these couples tend to act violently by injuring their partners, cursing, and be easily influenced by their siblings' suggestions, as well as neglecting alimony (Askarshahi et al., 2019; Allendorf & Ghimire, 2013; Kyung-Sook et al., 2018; Ahmad et al., 2019) and child maintenance (Hakovirta, 2019). Therefore, the level of maturity of young married couples needs to be measured to assess the extent to which couples are matured in making decisions.

CONCLUSION

Young couples experiencing marital conflict must find a solution to the issues in their marriages so that the disagreements do not fester until the source of the solution is gone. Divorce causes the economic position of the family to become more unstable, affects the emotional well-being of divorced individuals and their children, as well as increases the number of single fathers and mothers in the country.

Therefore, the Dyadic Discernment Scale is suitable for exploring the phenomenological experiences of young spouses who have undergone the process of help-seeking and discernment. The Dyadic Discernment Scale (DSS) is meant to measure the ability of conflicted young married couples to make wise and well-informed decisions on their marital status. Their abilities are manifested by their knowledge, attitude and behaviour on their choice to either (i) improve the marital relationship, (ii) divorce or (iii) maintain the status quo. In conjunction, discernment counselling helps couples who are in conflict improve their abilities. Accordingly, premature decisions can be reduced. DDS has an important global implication in the marital and family therapy theoretical framework, as well as in terms of practice in State Islamic Religious Departments (JAIN) in Malaysia.

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