

Understanding Quality of Marriage among Malays

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Abstract

This qualitative research examines the perceptions of forty-five married Malay individuals about what they understand to be the ingredients of quality marital relationships. It utilised semi-structured interviews as a primary data-gathering instrument. In this paper, the researcher explains some of the reasons for the research question about quality of marital relationships, why the researcher decided to use a qualitative research design and how these interviews were conducted. Finally, this paper describes how the data are being analysed and identifies some issues that have arisen during this process.

1. Introduction

The existing complex and confused states of the institution of marriage in Malay society may well reflect the robust nature of socioeconomic and cultural transformation in the midst of modernisation and development in the nation. The current deteriorating situation marked by the prevalence of marital breakdown and instability in Malaysia is accompanied by a strong public and political demand to address it and to find different solutions to the problem. Reasons for, and the causes of, the deterioration and erosion of the institution of marriage have been the focus of much concern and debate among various scholars and commentators. Some scholars pinpoint the lack of concern of government for the sovereignty of marriage while others blame the influences of globalisation for the breakdown of familial relationships and erosion of values. These concerns have led to the call for marriage and family institutions to be strengthened irrespective of the pace of development. Similarly, the call is to address factors like societal values and external influences that can affect the family system.

Even though a lot of effort has been put into solving marital problems, the results are not encouraging and it is increasingly realised that in order to understand how to enrich marriages among Malays in Malaysia, it is vital to understand the nature of Malay culture and marriage. According to Jones (1997, p. 1) marriages remain under-researched in the South-East Asian region, especially in provincial areas. The long-standing dominance of Western culture and context that is reflected in this research arena in Malaysia adds to the urgency to intensify indigenous studies across different fields and methodological approaches. Developing an understanding of what fosters long-lasting marital relationships is essential if policy goals to support marriage and discourage divorce are to be achieved. The research aims to identify the perceived strengths in the marital relationships that are seen to be successful. We know the adverse effects on society of marital breakdown: the opportunity to develop positive benefits to society of good quality couple-relationships provides a strong justification for this study.

2. Methodology

2.1 Qualitative Design Using Semi-structured Interviews

This research deals with human personal relationships within a specific cultural context. As presented in various scholarly works, qualitative methods facilitate the study of issues in depth, without imposing pre-existing notions on the research setting (Patton, 2002).

A qualitative methodology was used in this research because it was considered to be the most appropriate way of discovering or uncovering the perceptions about good quality marriage by Malays themselves. Quantitative researchers themselves acknowledge that their methods are difficult to apply to dynamic situations and to nuances of human relationships (Padgett, 2004, p. 4). It was considered crucial in this research to hear personal views from Malay individuals themselves, because the research would contribute to the planning of culturally appropriate ways to improve marital relationships in Malaysia and to make these relationships more resilient and vibrant. The ubiquitous studies of middle-class, Judeo-Christian, Western groups represent the vast majority of past and contemporary studies into marriage. Not only do these studies tend to privilege a particular cohort but they generally utilise quantitative research designs that are not appropriate to adapt to, let alone adopt within, a different culture. Any investigation of Malay marriages must acknowledge at the start that Malaysia is a very distinctive and unique society and that any question about how they may regard marital quality would reveal and portray new and insightful information — the information that can contribute new ideas to both scientific discourse and theories about marriage and its stability.

In addition to the dearth of studies conducted and shared about Malays, there is also a growing need for more in-depth qualitative research in studies pertinent to social and human development, especially in the area of marital relations and processes. Qualitative research offers an approach that is both complementary to, and transcendent of, conventional scientific inquiry (Padgett, 2004, p. 3). Interest in qualitative research has increased markedly in the past decade across many disciplines (Drisko, 2004, p. 193), in part because of the recognition that systematic qualitative research can add depth and understanding to important social issues. Why employ a semi-structured interview technique? Qualitative semi-structured interviews can be used interchangeably with in-depth interviews (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) and are similar to structured conversations where the researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant's views, but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 108). Semi-structured interviews enable the gathering of what is called in the research literature 'thick description' (Patton, 2002), namely, the context of practices within a society, which can be further analysed and verified to develop thematic interpretations about the research question.

The strengths of the semi-structured interview as a data collection methods are that it can uncover participants' perspectives, assist participants to describe complex interactions, and can help in gaining an understanding of the research problem without imposing pre-existing notions on the research setting (Fontana & Frey, 2005). It can also facilitate immediate verbal clarification of what is said by participants (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990). Given the idea that an in-depth interview was issue-oriented (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) and the need was to simply explore the range of views about quality marriage in Malaysia, it was decided to utilise semi-structured interviews with all participants. The focus was on seeing the world through the eyes of the respondents as much as possible; to explore with them their thoughts and feelings; to thoroughly understand their point of view (Alston & Bowles, 2003); and to help participants to express their own personal perspectives and experiences (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Patton, 1990). Such an approach was expected to facilitate the most culturally appropriate means of gaining information from respondents and to be ethically sensitive to the research participants — in this case a sample of forty-five Malaysians. Sieber elaborates on this:

Being ethical in the conduct of sensitive research also means being culturally sensitive in the way one designs the research and interacts with research participants, community members, gatekeepers and relevant others. Cultural sensitivity refers to the understanding and approaches that enable one to gain access to individuals in a given culture or subculture, to learn about their actual lifestyles (beliefs, habits, needs, fears, risks), and to communicate in ways that the individuals understand, believe, regard as relevant to themselves, and are likely to act upon. (1993, p. 19)

The semi-structured interview — which relies on a set of loosely structured questions and tries to guide the conversation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Robson, 2002) — was considered an essential tool to help unpack this phenomenon of quality-of- marriage, although the researcher found little research in Malaysia which used this method. Through semi-structured interviews, individual respondents were allowed some latitude and freedom to talk about what was of interest or important to them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 125). This would generally result in a large volume of non-standard data, obtained with a wide variety of questions from a number of respondents. Even though it was understood from the start that making sense of the large number of interview pages could well be overwhelming (Patton, 2002), time-consuming to analyse and very hard to manage (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), yet the process became a fascinating scientific inquiry. Respondents were asked about their experiences and perceptions of marital happiness and quality of marriage.

Interviews allowed for flexibility and openness; they were exploratory and discovery-oriented (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) which allowed the participants to express the meanings and the processes of their marital interactions within their own frame of reference. While several questions generally guided the interviews (Robson, 2002), this study explored many issues in-depth, and relied on the answers given by the participants to determine the flow of the questions. This study was exploratory and descriptive in nature and it is expected that the richness of the resulting qualitative data will provide a detailed description of the relationship dynamics operating in Malaysian marital dyads. The inductive approach taken is consistent with the research goals of exploring, through small, rich samples. By contrast, most quantitative studies provide little insight into participants' understandings of the marital relationships.

2.2 Process of Interviews

The data collection process commenced with two pilot studies which were conducted before the fieldwork began in Malaysia. The pilot tests were intended to assess the practicality and utility of using interview techniques relevant to the study. Thirteen participants, Malays living in Western Australia were asked to provide feedback on an interview schedule and the guiding framework. They were asked to comment on any confusion and their overall impressions of the loosely structured instrument, as well as to make general suggestions for improvement. The aim was to develop an interview guide that would address key topics in a sequence that would make most sense to informants (Kvale, 1996; Padgett, 1998). Once the interview schedule was refined following these pilot interviews, the researcher undertook the research in Malaysia. The interviews were conducted in either Bahasa Malaysia or English — depending on the preference of the participants. Purposely selected for inclusion in the research were groups that represented a diversity of socioeconomic backgrounds, gender, and age ranges.

All had to be currently married. Each participant was assured full confidentiality and the interview lasted approximately one hour. All the interviews took place in the participants' home or workplace. At the onset of each interview, participants were given a copy of a letter explaining the procedures and outlining the confidentiality of the project. The participants were asked whether or not they preferred being audio-taped and were told that both audio-taping and note-taking were acceptable to the researcher. The general question addressed in this study was "what are the elements or ingredients of strong marriage for Malay individual?" During the interviews, participants were allowed to wander to areas or topics they identified as significant. All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and verified. The recordings and the field notes were transcribed producing approximately 2000 double-spaced pages of raw data.

2.3 Sampling

The sample of interviewees was drawn from the population of people living in the Kubang Pasu district of the State of Kedah, Malaysia. This location was chosen as it had one of the highest divorce rates in the State for the few past decades — although it must be noted that this rate has reduced over couple of the years. The sampling approach taken was that of 'maximum diversity sampling' and is one that is recommended when doing unstructured, semi-structured or in-depth interviews (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995; Patton, 2002). This strategy was augmented via a 'snowball sampling mechanism' (Patton, 2002) whereby those who were interviewed were asked to identify others who they thought might be interested in contributing to the research. Given a small sample of great diversity, the data collection and analysis produced two types of findings: high quality, detailed descriptions of each case which were useful for verifying uniqueness; and important, central, common patterns that prevailed among the heterogeneity of the cases (Patton, 2002).

Initially, networking via a range of key informants was used for generating a target sample. These 'knowledgeable insiders' were helpful throughout the research in understanding local norms and identifying promising respondents (Padgett, 1998, p. 53). These community leaders and religious officers were asked to help the researcher by suggesting potential respondents for the study. The sampling frame required a sufficient number of participants in order to achieve 'saturation point' (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Richards, 2005; Robson, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), that is, for it to become evident that any additional participants would be simply repeating what others have reported (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). The saturated sample consisted of forty-five individuals.

Table 2.1: Demographic profile of the respondents

Demographic profile	Frequency	Percentage
Gender:		
Female	17	37.8
Male	28	62.2
Age:		
20–30	8	17.8
31–40	8	17.8
41–50	15	33.3
More than 51	14	31.1
Education level:		
Primary school	18	40.0
High School	1	2.2
Lower Certificate of Education (LCE)	6	13.3
Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE)	7	15.6
Malaysian Higher School Certificate (MHSC)	3	6.7
Degree	5	11.1
Master	4	8.9
PhD	1	2.2
Income:		
More than RM3000	5	11.1
Not Working	11	24.4
RM1001–RM1500	8	17.8
RM1501–RM2000	2	4.4
RM2001–RM3000	12	26.7
RM501–RM1000	7	15.6

3. Analysis

Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data. It can be a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative and fascinating process (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 150). The coding and analyses of this study followed methodological guidelines developed by prominent qualitative researchers (Bazeley, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Janesick, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse & Richards, 2002; Richards, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998).

3.1 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory focuses on the process of generating theory rather than a particular theoretical content (Patton, 2002). It emphasises steps and procedures through constant comparison of the emergent data. Utilisation of a grounded theory approach helps to construct a theory or model based on the data, rather than the preconceived views of the researcher. This is done by using open coding to discover major themes in the data and axial coding to collapse themes into fewer, broader categories. By these means, a conceptual model is developed to reflect the relationship between major themes. Given that analysis is the interplay between researchers and data, what grounded theory offers as a framework is a set of ‘coding procedures’ to ‘help provide some standardization and rigor’ to the analytical process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 13). Even though qualitative analyses transform data into findings, no formula exists for that transformation (Patton, 2002), as grounded theory offers a set of flexible strategies, not rigid prescriptions (Charmaz, 2000, p. 513).

Acknowledging this complexity, the challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data, which involves reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significance, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal (Patton, 2002, p. 432). In this study, the data were analysed and a conceptual framework was developed using an inductive method similar to that used in traditional grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Inductive analysis involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data. This early stage of inductive analysis is often called open coding (Punch, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to emphasise the importance of being open to the data (Patton, 2002, p. 454). The data obtained were analysed inductively, meaning that themes and categories arose from the data and were not determined in advance before the data collecting stage (Janesick, 1994).

During the first-level coding, the researcher reads the transcripts to examine similarities and differences between data segments and connects these similar 'meaning units' together as categories. At this predominantly concrete level, information evident in the text is coded (Berg, 1989). A tentative coding scheme is developed, consisting of categories and sub-categories. The researcher is able to set categories of constructs to guide the ongoing coding of interviews. In developing codes and categories, the analyst must figure out what things fit together and begin to look for recurring regularities in the data which reveal patterns that can be sorted into categories (Patton, 2002). Following this process, findings emerged from the data through the analyst's interactions with the data. All the interviews were coded manually and the qualitative software package NVivo (QSR NUD*IST Vivo) was used for organising non-numerical data. In this process, the researcher coded all statements that were relevant to the coding scheme, developed and guarded against selective attention to points of particular interest (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). As the coding progressed, a few additional categories were identified and added to the code guide, using the same process.

With the completion of coding, the researcher undertook the next level of analysis, comparing and contrasting the categories to discover the relationships between them. The goal at this second level of analysis was to collapse the categories into themes and sub-themes by locating patterns that appeared consistently in the data set. The researcher also used different additional strategies in the analysis. One form of analysis was to look for metaphors in the responses, as an indication of what respondents meant by factors contributing to 'good' marital relationship. Another form of analysis was to search for words and phrases that individual interviewees used to describe what they were looking for in a good and healthy relationship, and to cluster these expressions into categories. In addition, the researcher also checked for consistency within each response. The researcher was the interviewer as well as the translator. The interviews were transcribed in Bahasa Malaysia, coded and then translated into English. Two types of translation processes were utilised. First, the researcher translated the text using Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Malay Dictionary. The internet-installed dictionary was also used in order to allow a more careful review of the translation process, especially in the meanings of words and phrases as well as the context. In addition, a translation of a single transcript was perused by colleagues to ensure that independent coding and comparative themes could be made and verified.

3.2 Traditional Laborious Manual Analysis and Qualitative Software Programme NVivo: An Integrated Approach

Initially, the data was coded manually, identifying categories and properties of this qualitative interview data. The data produced was textual in character, thus producing voluminous paperwork which was analytically demanding (Lee & Fielding, 1991). This was a very long and time-consuming process, and a line-by-line analysis of every word or phrase that could be considered to point to a key theme was undertaken. The verbatim transcripts were read several times and the audio interviews were reviewed in order to detect any inadequacy or mistake in coding. From this iterative process of reading, listening and categorising, the researcher developed a list of concepts and categories for the data. Coding continued until saturation point was reached. From these reviews, the researcher developed a much more detailed initial coding scheme grounded in the data. This list was used for the second stage of coding. In this initial manual step-by-step approach, the researcher undertook a quantitative analysis of the regularities and repetitions within the texts as they emerged from the transcripts. Words or phrases that were similar in categories and properties from one transcript to another were counted until the very last of the interview transcripts.

The constant comparative method involved comparing emerging themes from the data with those that had already been identified. In the next stage, the potential themes, patterns or categories were counted across the whole data and presented in matrix form. In order to add trustworthiness to the manual analysis of raw verbatim transcripts, all of the data were then entered into a NVivo programme, a software programme which is considered to be a highly efficient and reliable tool in qualitative analysis of data (Bazeley, 2007; Richards, 2005). It is important to note that qualitative computer software does not really analyse data — rather, it facilitates data storage, coding, retrieval, comparing and linking. It is human beings who do the analysis. The analysis of qualitative data using these tools still involves creativity, intellectual discipline, analytical rigor and a great deal of hard work (Patton, 2002, p. 442). While exploiting the technological advantages offered by NVivo which allowed the researcher to manage, access and analyse data, the researcher was careful to heed the warning that using NVivo would not eliminate the need for the researcher to think, construct and account for the data and the methods as well as processes of analysis, and to keep a focus on all the data without losing the richness and complexity that is a critical component of qualitative approach. Once again, the researcher reviewed the transcript data documents using line-by-line analysis in order to develop categories or patterns which are called nodes in this software.

During this process, line-by-line coding sharpens our use of sensitising concepts — that is, those background ideas that inform the overall research problem (Charmaz, 2000, p. 515). Charmaz (2000) notes that line-by-line coding is likely to lead to the refining and specifying of any borrowed existing concepts. As the researcher coded the document, patterns, themes and categories started to emerge from the data. The coded themes were based on recurring ideas, issues or key phrases emerging across interviews. In NVivo, these nodes store the references systematically so that they can be easily retrieved. As the interview transcripts were processed, new nodes appeared, as new ideas, topics and categories evolved. In this work, codes and categories were generated as the researcher defined emerging themes. Glaser and Strauss (1967) point out that the reasons for employing this iterative strategy are a) to help researchers avoid becoming immersed in anecdotes and stories and unconsciously adopting subjects' perspectives; b) to prevent researchers becoming immobilised and overwhelmed by voluminous data; and c) to create a way for the researcher to organise and interpret the data (p.521). At the end of the process, every sentence was allocated to a 'node' or a 'child node' (a property of a node) which was then further explored, organised, changed or removed.

When the researcher first started coding the interview transcripts manually, there were more than seventy core categories with attached properties. NVivo analysis located categories and properties that had not been noticed. NVivo enabled the researcher to reflect on the analytical process, develop ideas and identify emerging themes as the data was coded. This is because NVivo has the benefit of allowing the researcher to keep asking questions, to add more categories and then think and write about those. After codes and categories were derived from the text, the patterns were compared across interview transcripts. This started with open coding, then clustering codes into families of concepts or categories and finally capturing emergent themes from the clusters of codes. During the later round of analysis, the possible categories were given their own coding schema (NVivo code and unique codes). The NVivo coding involved the use codes of particular meaningful words or phrases from participants. These were created and refined in order to capture helpful concepts linking thematic material in order to make an attempt at final thematic conceptualisation analysis. The themes were arranged hierarchically into major themes and minor themes. These themes were cross-checked and verified with the help of NVivo.

3.3 Enhancing Quality and Credibility of the Analysis

Addressing academic rigor and trustworthiness were crucial in this study. Several strategies were pursued in order to enhance the rigor of the work and preserve the highest standard of academic integrity and scientific trustworthiness (Bazeley, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Padgett, 1998, 2004; Richards, 2005). These included engaging an independent reviewer, checking and re-checking codes and being vigilant in auditing and record-keeping. Given the importance of culture in this study, every effort was made to be aware of its influence throughout the stages of the research as suggested by Barnes (1996) who cautioned that culture can become invisible if the researcher does not make it overt all the way through the research. In order to ensure reliability, credibility, accuracy and rigorousness of the coded patterns and emergent themes of the analysis, three interview transcripts were coded independently by an outsider reviewer. This process of verification was conducted to identify, compare and cross-check major themes emerging from the researcher's work and the reviewer's analysis as well as to ascertain any discrepancy in codifying the categories and themes.

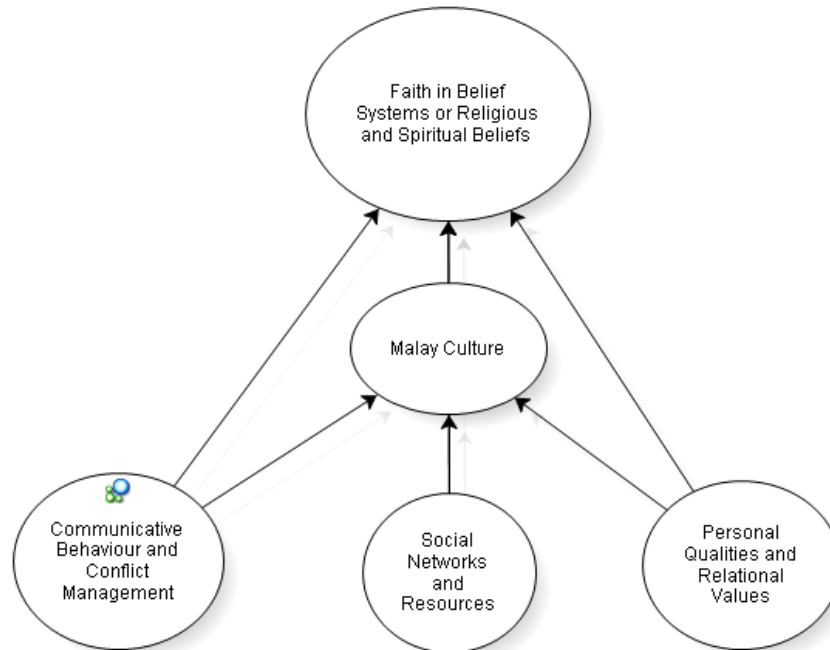
The review and analysis of the transcripts by the independent reviewer showed little difference, from the categories and themes coded by the researcher. This strategy was utilised to assist with establishing the trustworthiness of the data analysis process and to augment the rigorousness and credibility of the data analysis by attempting to uncover any potential personal bias on the part of the researcher. This independent analysis was followed by discussion with colleagues aimed at final justification of coding. Once themes and initial concepts were developed, a conscious effort was made to find different or additional themes which might disprove or alter the initial findings. Again, this was a means of adding validity to the findings. There is a very little research illuminating qualitative methods for analysing data in a non-English language despite the fact that there is now a large volume of cross-cultural research being undertaken on various subjects. Issues of cultural and language transferability have been taken into consideration in this study because of the central role that culture and interpretation of language have in qualitative research. As Twinn (1997) cautions, the use of translation in any data must be given careful thought as translation can distort the essence of the phenomenon from the informant's perspective. However, it is considered that distortion due to translation was minimised in this study as the researcher was also the interviewer and translator.

4. Emerging Themes

The analysis of the interview data culminated in the identification of four broad themes which captured the complex ways that people describe the concept of quality marriage. The themes emerged after several rounds of coding and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The first and most central of the emerging themes identified is that of the role of ‘*religious and spiritual belief system*’. It captured the thrust and fundamental entity of participants’ experiences of marital quality. For the respondents, their religious belief system and spiritual relationship with God was a source of strength that they considered enhanced the quality of their marriage. The term ‘*social network and resources*’ was assigned as the second theme. This theme covers various support systems and financial resources that were perceived as crucial in sustaining healthy marital relationships. The third theme named is ‘*communicative behaviour and conflict management*’. This theme includes discussion of several types of communication and conflict issues that contribute to positive relationship between spouses. The fourth and final theme that the researcher identified is that of ‘*personality attributes and relational values*’. This theme incorporates personality attributes and dyadic interaction that are seen by participants to be essential in maintaining and nourishing good quality of marriage among Malays.

Diagram 4.1: The Emerging Themes of Quality Marriage among Malays in Malaysia



5. Summarising the Tensions and Opportunities

In this research, five areas have been generated capturing particular research tensions: choice of qualitative design; instrumentation; recruitment of sample; sensitivity of subject matter; and data handling. These are briefly summarised in the following discussion.

5.1 Choosing Qualitative Design

Qualitative research has a long, distinguished and sometimes anguished history in the human disciplines (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 1). Even though qualitative research design is getting more prevalent in Western scientific inquiry, that phenomenon is still lagging behind or can be considered ‘marginalised’ in a Malaysian context. The arguments against qualitative research designs, methodologies and such fields of discourse centre on issues of objectivity, subjectivity and scientific status. The uneasiness about the usefulness of qualitative designs across disciplines alerted the researcher to a struggle which the researcher might face in establishing the usefulness and validity of the research. Originally, the researcher planned to use survey questionnaires with the ‘usual-standard’ form of the ‘tick box’ because that is a form of research that is commonly applied within scientific worlds of intellectual inquiry. At the initial stage, it was very hard because the researcher wanted the research to be seen to be very empirical — knowing that there is no scientific dispute about numbers. The researcher struggled with finding the best design, acknowledging that both quantitative and qualitative research designs have their own styles of investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It became clear, however, at the very early stage of developing the research design that it had to fit with three things. It had to: answer the research question; be practicable; and be culturally relevant. As there was very little literature on quality marriage in Malaysia, there was no doubt that the researcher had to undertake an exploratory analysis rather than a more formal and quantitative survey.

5.2 Developing the ‘Instrument’

Another interesting issue was the feasibility or the appropriateness of the instrument used in the researcher’s study.

As the nature and objective of the study is to capture perspectives of quality marriage among Malays, the researcher became confident and remains convinced that this is the most feasible mechanism and proper way to conduct the inquiry. This is significant because qualitative inquiry depends on the researcher as the instrument (Patton, 2002) to conduct the study ethically and carry out the research process in accordance with the standards outlined for scientific discourse. However, the researcher remains aware of the biases and weaknesses in conducting unstructured or semi-structured interviews as personal and situational constraints can easily affect the integrity of the inquiry.

5.3 Locating a Sample

Recruiting potential respondents for the study involved a period of intense struggle. The reluctance of potential participants to be part of the study was predicted, as marriage is a personal matter and private in nature. However, it was not expected that it would be so difficult to enlist interviewees. The researcher had to utilise a variety of means to locate the participants, although the number of respondents required was very small. The reasons behind this lack of response from the sample frame of the public are still unknown even though a number of hypotheses could be suggested, among them the perceived sensitivity of the topic, time constraints or other commitments.

5.4 The Sensitivity of the Subject Matter

There are a number of areas in which research is more likely to be threatening than in others and this includes situations where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience (Lee & Renzetti, 1993, p. 6). Even though the topic of the study was not considered a 'taboo' subject by the researcher, it was recognised that respondents may feel discomfort, as this type of topic is too personal to share with others. In this regard, it is possible for any topic, depending on context, to be a sensitive one (Lee & Renzetti, 1993). It was expected that some respondents may have been reluctant to share their thoughts, even though there was no intention to obtain information on their personal marital life experiences. Following assurances that the researcher only wanted their views on factors that make up good quality marriage, a number of participants responded well, despite an initially hesitant and uncooperative manner.

Admitting that a qualitative interview is a special kind of knowledge-producing conversation that occurs between two parties (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006), the researcher assists the respondents share their stories by building rapport. There are effective processes for building rapport and gaining trust, for establishing equal-status relationships, for learning about people, and reducing barriers to effective communication (Sieber, 1993, p. 20). Disclosure of sensitive or confidential information is usually only possible once trust has been established between the field worker and the people being studied (Lee, 1993). In order to capture the subjects' perspectives, the researcher attempted to provide a supportive environment, and this included choice of language spoken and accepting participants' preferences of the location and time of interviews. Furthermore, in order to make respondents feel safe, comfortable and valued, the researcher showed genuine interest in their concerns, stories and queries and spent long periods of time establishing rapport with the respondents and their families.

In addition to this, the qualitative researcher tried to reduce any hierarchy between the researched and the researcher. In qualitative research, there is also the issue of power between respondents, key informants and the researcher. While the researcher sought help from the key informants (religious officer and community leaders) to get access to the potential interviewees, the concern was whether the respondents' willingness to participate was due to the power imposed by their 'leaders', and whether the interviewer's personal and subjective influences would affect participants' self-disclosure. In order to minimise these possible biases, the researcher presented and engaged himself as much as possible with the cultural embeddedness of the respondents and showing due respect to the respondents' backgrounds and viewpoints. The researcher realises the impossibility of any inquiry in the human disciplines remaining completely free of personal or other values (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Vidich & Lyman, 2000). The only solution is to minimise the effects as much as possible, and to be aware of the potential threat to the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

5.5 Handling Data

Qualitative researchers believe that rich descriptions of the social world are valuable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), adding depth and complexity. It was a challenge for the researcher to 'make sense' of the massive volume of data collected. The data from the interviews are words, and these words can take on very different meanings in other cultures. Given that all research is interpretive and it is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19; Janesick, 2000), the 'making sense' of analysis and conceptualisation of the inquiry becomes even more complicated and overwhelming. The struggle on the part of any researcher includes the questions he or she asks about the study and the interpretations the researcher brings to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world (Patton, 2002, p. 480). Translating and interpreting two languages in different cultural contexts could distort the whole meaning of the analysis. The researcher sharing language and culture with the respondents minimises the distortion. However, barriers to understanding can arise even among those who speak the same language (Patton, 2002). Handling and analysing a set of rich qualitative data with the use of the NVivo qualitative software programme eased the burden of systematic analysis. Initial manual analysis of the data and further analysis via this programme with grounded theoretical approach warranted adequate rigorous and credible scientific inquiry. Despite the overwhelming rich data that the researcher needs to 'make sense' and analyse, the software did help the researcher in organising, managing and sifting through thematic interpretation of the data without omitting his intellectual capability and creative thought.

6. Conclusion

The study reported here was designed to identify the meanings participants attach to the concept of marital quality through qualitative semi-structured interviews inquiry. It describes the methodological and analytical approach employed to gain the understanding of that topic. In addition to this, the discussion revolved around struggles and opportunities encountered by the author in achieving scientific integrity and scholarly accountability. Finally, the paper is expected to contribute to the existing intellectual discourse and scientific inquiry, particularly in understanding the concept of marital quality among Malays in Malaysia.

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