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Battlegrounds of Marriage: Conflict Experiences of Filipino Wives in Intercultural Marriages

Abstract

Intercultural marriage as a subject of research remains unpopular despite its rich history. With this scarcity of literature base, most studies regarding the topic described the general aspects of marriage while specific issues of it such as marital conflict leave much to be investigated. Such research gaps warrant the writing of this report.

This report aimed to describe the conflict experiences of Filipino wives in intercultural marriages. Specifically, this report looked into the sources, experiences, and typologies of conflict as perceived and experienced by 15 Filipino wives in intercultural marriages.

Keyword: marital conflict, intercultural marriage, Filipino wives, marriage

1. Introduction

Intercultural marriage, also known as bicultural marriage, has a rich history (Schmidlechner, 2003; Shute and Spitzberg, 2003). However, studies on the subject, particularly in the Philippines, only gained popularity among scholars in the 1950s. One of its earliest research accounts was the study conducted by Hunt and Coller (1957) on Filipino-American intercultural marriages.

In the Philippines, the statistics of intercultural marriages reached 7,742 cases in 1989. The following year, the number significantly increased to 13, 782. A majority of intercultural marriage cases in the Philippines often involved Filipino women. Most of them married Americans, Chinese, Japanese, and Australians. In 1991, the Filipino-Japanese marriage was the most popular type compared to other intercultural marriage combinations (1992 Statistics of Filipino Women, cited in Medina, 2001).

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Most researches on intercultural marriages involving Filipino women tackled the general aspects of married life rather than focusing on specific issues such as marital conflict. Although there are already studies on intercultural marriages such as those conducted by Bauzon (1999), Chua (1994), Cahill (1990), Samonte (1986), Pierce (1983), and Hunt and Collier (1957), marital conflict as the focus of research remains unpopular. Even in Filipino monocultural marriages, this subject is still not thoroughly explored. Such research gap warrants the need for this study.

This article, which is an offshoot of the author's master's thesis, is an attempt to look at the marital conflict experiences of Filipino wives in intercultural marriages. It specifically aimed to describe the following: [1] typologies of marital conflict among Filipino wives, [2] the sources of marital conflict, and [3] experiences of marital conflict. Moreover, this report wanted to answer the following research questions: [1] Are the sources of marital conflicts in intercultural marriages similar to monocultural marriages? [2] Are marital conflicts among intercultural couples more intense compared to monocultural couples? Lastly, [3] Do cultural differences significantly escalate marital conflict episodes?

2. Marital Conflict and Its Sources

Like monocultural marriages, intercultural marriage also has its tribulations and ordeals (Romano, 2004). As what the conflict theory of the family asserts, conflict is part of marriage and family life. Such conflict, however, may differ in terms of its sources and the nature and extent of expression (Strong, DeVault, & Sayad, 1998). Marital conflict as defined by Giles-Sims (1983) is "a mutually antagonized discrepancy between idealized expectations and the reality of insufficient resources, different personal goals and values, and impulses between the couples."

Marital conflict, as many studies suggested, are primarily caused by various factors such as domestic-economic, personal, and socio-biographical factors (Mitchell, Bullard, & Mudd, 1962; Gianopoulos & Mitchell, 1957). More specifically, a number of quantitative studies asserted that economic factors (income and household expenditures), differences in gender role perceptions and expectations (Madden & Bulman, 1981),

socio-biographical factors (social background and education), and personal factors (personality traits) are the most common sources of marital conflicts.

Although a few studies have looked into this aspect, cultural differences also stimulate marital conflicts particularly in intercultural marriages. In fact, the quantitative study of Takano (2002), pointed out that 19% of the marital discords in interethnic couples involved in his study are attributed to cultural differences. In intercultural marriages, the differences in culture play a crucial role in facilitating marital discords between the couples encompassing the other sources of marital conflicts within monocultural marriages.

Cultural differences, according to Falicov (1995), are associated with the dysfunction of the intercultural couples' inability to develop a symmetrical view of their differences and similarities. In addition, couples in intercultural marriages usually enter the process of cultural transition that allows them to adjust toward an adaptive and flexible view of cultural differences, thereby making it plausible to maintain individual values and to negotiate conflicting areas.

3. Typology of Marital Conflict

There are various types of marital conflicts as studied by Noller and Fitzpatrick (1990). According to them, there are three common types of marital conflicts, namely constructive conflict, conflict avoidance, and destructive conflict. Based on their typology of conflict, constructive conflict involves open discussions and arguments to resolve problems. Conflict avoidance entails the tendency of any of the couple to retreat and to avoid arguments as a solution or as a mode of conflict management. Destructive conflict, considered as a severe form of conflict, on the other hand, involves the infliction of physical and emotional harm as a means to solve the problem or as a form of conflict confrontation.

Like Noller and Fitzpatrick, Patten (2000) also reported a typology of marital conflict based on her interview with E. Mark Cummings. Such classification is quite similar to the previous typology explained in the preceding paragraph. According to E. Mark Cummings, as narrated by Patten there are three types or categories of marital

conflict: destructive, constructive, and productive. Destructive conflict involves aggression, be it verbal or physical, in which resolution is hard to accomplish. The second type is the constructive conflict in which problems are resolved and are instrumental to the improvement of marriage life. The last category of conflict as classified by Cummings is the productive conflict in which problems are shared and discussed but are not necessarily resolved.

Homes (2002) in Richardson, McKeown, and Thomas (2005) presented a typology of marital conflict that highlights conflict avoidance and conflict engagement. In conflict avoidance, a couple may avoid issues as an expression of loyalty to one's partner or as a manifestation of an individual's tolerance. The author further characterized each of the categories. In conflict avoidance, one partner will minimize if not, stop negative reaction. However, the problem with this type, as the author asserted, is that conflict avoidance may result in shaky relationships as resentments continue to build up until it will reach the perturbation point, hence will explode. Conflict engagement, on the other hand, is a type of conflict in which couples confront the problems so they can be resolved, thus will increase trust and intimacy.

4. Method

4.1. Participants and Procedure

The data of this report emanated from the in-depth interviews conducted by the researcher for his master's thesis. Fifteen (15) key informants were chosen through a non-probability sampling, specifically the purposive and referral sampling. A set of criteria guided the researcher in the selection of the key informants to wit: [1] Filipino woman married to a foreigner of any nationality for at least 3 years, [2] with at least one child, and [3] has been staying in the Philippines for at least a year. As the criteria suggest, the informants of this study are Filipino women married to foreigners of any nationality. The key informants are all mothers, with at least one child, and have been

residing in the Philippine provinces of Misamis Oriental or Camiguin for at least one year.

Generally, Filipino wives (15) in the study are relatively young. In fact, slightly more than half (8) of them are below 40 years old. The age range is 27-65 years and the median age is 36 years. Most of the Filipino wives are highly educated. Suffice it to say, two obtained a master's degree while six of them achieved an undergraduate degree. Three had some college schooling while one finished a vocational course. Moreover, almost half (7) of the Filipino wives are economically productive as manifested by their occupation, be it self- or company employment. A majority (13) of the Filipino women's foreign spouses are Caucasians while only two are Asians. Of the 13 Caucasians, five are Swiss, three are Germans, two are Americans, and the other three are Scottish, Danish, and Norwegian. For the Asian spouses, one is a Sri-Lankan and the other is a Palestinian.

The researcher designed an interview guide, which was drafted in English and was later translated into Cebuano (local language). After this translation, the interview guide was then translated into English to ensure consistency and validity. The translation of the interview guide from English to Cebuano language was not translated literally; instead, it was contextually translated in order to capture the real meaning of the statements. After this, the researcher edited a few statements to ensure that informants will understand the questions. During the actual interviews, some of the questions were both addressed in English and Cebuano due to the inability of the informants to comprehend despite the fact that they are Cebuano (local language) speakers.

Actual interviews were audio-recorded so that answers will be fully documented and in order to overcome non-recording problems. On the average, the interviews lasted for about 50 minutes. The longest interview recorded was about 1 hour and 20 minutes. Transcription of the interviews followed after every interview per area was conducted.

5. Results

5.1. Typology and Associated Concepts

The Filipino wives involved in the researcher's study identified several terms or words to refer to marital conflicts both in English and Cebuano (local language). During the interviews, the term marital disagreement was used interchangeably with the term marital conflict in which most of the Filipino wives recognized and understood.

Five English words namely argue, misunderstanding, confrontation, quarrel and disappointments and six Cebuano words namely *gira*, *dili pagkasinabtanay*, *sumpaki*, *bingkil*, *away*, and *lalis*, were used to refer to by the Filipino wives to connote marital conflict. Filipino wives professed that the English terms argue, misunderstanding, and disappointments denote light disagreements while the term confrontation denotes either light or intense disagreements.

They also attributed the Cebuano terms *lalis*, *away*, *sumpaki*, *bingkil*, and *dili pagkasinabtanay* as light marital disagreements while the terms *gira*, *lalis* and *away* as intense disagreements. While there are various local terms for marital disagreements, the most frequently used are *away* and *lalis*. Both *away* and *lalis* could be perceived as intense or non-intense disagreements depending on the viewer. Among the 11 key informants (n=11), seven of them asserted that *lalis* and *away* are two different terms while four informants argued that they are similar.

The six informants, who thought *away* and *lalis* are different, argued that the term *away* has a heavy connotation, which could mean marital disagreements involving the infliction of force or violence and emotional harm. *Lalis*, on the other hand, which could either be light or intense but without physical or emotional harm, may involve healthy discussion, argumentation, and avoidance (light) or it can also involve verbal arguments characterized by exchange of heavy words, not talking to each other for days, or if not withdrawal, walk out and leave the house (intense).

The four Filipino wives who asserted that both *lalis* and *away* are the same terms, described that *lalis/away* can be both intense and light disagreements. One Filipino wife argued that *away* and *lalis* have the same meaning. She contended that

away and *lalis* are the same although *away* is not really that deep. The other three informants described that in *away/lalis*, some disagreements are light while some disagreements are intense. Light disagreements based on their illustration may involve discussion and withdrawal while intense disagreements for them may involve intense arguments (shouting and yelling), withdrawal, and the infliction of violence.

5.2. Comparison of Marital Conflicts in Intercultural and Monocultural Marriages

Are the marital disagreements in intercultural marriages the same as those in monocultural marriages? Most (9) of the key informants claimed that there are differences. These Filipino wives provided three reasons namely, arranged from the most to the least frequently mentioned, the cultural differences as instigators to marital conflicts in intercultural marriages, the differences between foreigners and Filipino men in terms of values, lifestyle, and attitudes, and the differing areas of conflict between monocultural and intercultural marriages.

The first reason, which would distinguish the marital disagreements in intercultural marriages different from monocultural marriages, is the differences in culture as a factor that stimulates marital discords that four Filipino wives asserted. For example, Fe, 42, married to an American, described that culture plays a consequential role in the marital relations among intercultural couples.

The second reason, as asserted by three informants, is the differences between foreigners and Filipino men in their values, lifestyle, and attitudes. One key informant cited that Filipinos are alcoholics, gamblers, outgoing, and *babaero* (womanizers). According to her, Filipinos are quite opposite to her husband and to most foreigners she knew. Two other key informants attributed the differing areas of conflict as the third reason why disagreements between monocultural and intercultural marriages differ.

The remaining six Filipino wives, however, asserted that marital disagreements in intercultural marriages are the same with monocultural marriages. All the six

informants claimed that the areas or sources of conflict that intercultural couples disagree on are the same with that of monocultural couples.

5.3. Sources of Marital Conflicts

The areas or sources of marital disagreements experienced by the informants in their marriages maybe classified into five major categories. The categories, arranged according to the most to the least frequently mentioned, are personality/attitudinal clashes, economic-related issues, differences in cultural practices, differential gender role expectations and behavior, and communication problems.

The Filipino wives reported 12 various personality traits/attitudes, which they claimed had caused the occurrence of marital disagreements in their marriages. These personality traits, arranged from the most to the least frequently mentioned, include domineering, friendly/*(barkadista)*, bad tempered, irritable, frank/outright, disorderly/untidy, not forward looking, dishonesty, sensitive, procrastinator, judgmental/*(hinawayon)*, arrogant/stubborn, and passive.

Aside from personality issues, the Filipino wives in the study also attributed economic-related issues (finances) as sources of conflict. Most of the Filipino wives (9) who had marital conflicts over finances did not have employment or sources of income at the time the conflicts occurred. The 11 Filipino wives provided five main reasons to such disagreements namely, arranged from the most to the least frequently mentioned, spendthrift, inability to decide money matters, giving money to one's kin or friends, lending money to friends, and jobless.

Six key informants attributed their inability to decide on money matters as the reason of conflict over finances. These women claimed that because their husbands are the ones who handle their finances, they hardly had a chance to decide on what and when to buy. Another area in the conflict over finances in which six Filipino wives identified is the issue of being a spendthrift. Five of these key informants declared that their husbands complained about the way they spend their money.

Cultural disparities are another source or area of conflict experienced by the intercultural couples involved in this study. Nine key informants narrated their experiences of marital conflicts that are traceable to cultural differences. Most (6) of the cases of marital conflicts involving cultural disparities were associated to the differences in child disciplining and child rearing while three other specific cases were linked to certain cultural practices of varying cultures.

Six Filipino wives identified culturally determined child disciplining and/or child rearing practices as sources of marital conflicts. As asserted by five Filipino wives, it is culturally well known for Filipinos to inflict punishment to children as part of disciplining while Caucasians in particular, do not want to inflict punishment. The same five Filipino wives who claimed that child disciplining is an area of squabbles in their marital relationships accepted that in several occasions they had inflicted punishment to their children, which consequently caused marital disagreements.

Few Filipino wives (3) identified the differential gender role expectations and behavior as another source of marital disagreements. Issues as regards how men and women should behave, who should work outside, cook, or who should play with the kids, who dominates, and reproductive right (woman's desire to have a child that the husband denies) were considered by the three key informants as sources of conflicts.

Communication problems became a source of marital discords among five intercultural couples in this study. Three of the Filipino wives who attributed communication as a problem have relatively low education while two other Filipino wives had some college schooling. As the responses of some informants (5) would suggest, communication is an area of disagreement in intercultural marriages particularly because of the differences in language. Some of their disagreements were due to the inability of the wives (2) to translate local language to the language their husbands can understand.

Four Filipino wives argued that language differences sometimes accelerated conflicts with their husbands because of misinterpretation of either the statement or the action. For instance, Maggie, had instances where she was talking to their workers in Cebuano suggesting a proper and effective way to finish their work and her husband misinterpreted it as if she was interfering and deciding like the boss.

5.4. Experienced Marital Conflicts

All the Filipino wives (15) have experienced marital disagreements in various forms. Slightly over half (8) of the key informants claimed that they had experienced both light and intense marital conflict, while the remaining seven asserted that they only had light. Of those eight who claimed they have had intense conflict, three of them claimed that they also experienced violence.

All the key informants described similarly how light disagreements differ from intense disagreements. As they previously defined in their typology of conflicts, light disagreements involves healthy discussion or avoidance of conflict; while intense disagreements involves heated arguments, nagging, swearing, yelling, shouting, or withdrawal. Violence, though it is an intense disagreement, was treated by the key informants separately as *away*.

While 12 key informants reportedly did not experience violent conflicts, about three Filipino wives who are comparatively highly educated openly shared that they have had violent conflict experiences. However, contrary to popular conceptions, the women themselves were not the victims but the aggressors. Their violent expressions during conflict are different from popular conceptions because when they inflict violence they do not direct it to their husbands. Their violent behavior only served as an expression of intense anger without harming their partners.

6. Discussion

Do cultural differences really spark marital disagreements? Results showed that some of the key informants have had marital disagreements traceable to cultural differences. These Filipino wives recognized that disagreements in monocultural marriages are different from intercultural marriages because of cultural differences that obviously would not be applicable to couples in monocultural marriages. Like this study, other scholars have already attested how cultural differences may affect the marriage life of intercultural couples. For instance, Falicov (1995) asserted that the differences in

culture play a crucial role in facilitating marital conflicts in intercultural marriages due to the couple's inability to balance their similarities and differences.

Differences in cultural practices, as already pointed, triggered marital conflicts among a few intercultural couples in the researcher's study. The differences in child rearing and disciplining became an area of disagreements and such differences were attributed to the [1] issue of corporal punishment in which the foreign husbands disagree, and [2] the room assignment of infants in which the husbands disagree with their spouse's preference to sleep with their infants. Such finding is similar and is supported by Beiver's (1998) and Romano's (2001) assertions that culturally different parenting styles can become a potential conflicting area in intercultural marriages.

Unexpectedly, the issue of finances in relation to the financial support extended to the family of the wives did not become a major issue. This is contrary to what Romano (2001), Hunt and Coller (1957), and Moran (1992) claimed. One of the assumptions of the researcher's thesis is that cultural differences will determine the conflicting ways in the handling of finances among intercultural couples due to Filipino wives' deep sense of responsibility to financially support their family. Despite this cultural background, Filipino wives in intercultural marriages involved in this study did not experience such conflict.

So why did conflict of this nature not occur? Living arrangement and length of stay in the Philippines could have affected the minimization of the conflict. The fact that the intercultural couples in this study have been staying in the Philippines for quite a long time already, their husbands must have adapted the culture of the Filipinos over the years so that it now becomes part of their consciousness that helping the families of their wives is also part of their responsibility. Unlike those intercultural couples living abroad, the husbands of the informants have quality relationships with in-laws and wives' relatives, especially those closely residing with them. Thus, whenever these people ask for assistance, the husbands will likely help them given that they have a direct if not close connection.

Although cultural differences were attributed by some Filipino wives as sources of conflict in their marital relationships, it appears that cultural issues remain insignificant. Such result attest that cultural conflict aside, conflicts among mono-

cultural couples are quite similar to that of intercultural couples. As pointed in the review of literature, couples may have conflict traceable to personality, economic, and gender issues.

The key informants considered personality issues as the most crucial area of conflict. For instance, a majority of the key informants considered the issue of dominance as the major cause of personality disagreements. While dominance is the major cause of the occurrence of conflict, this at the same time affects the degree of conflict. Thus, couples will not only disagree on a particular source of conflict but will also disagree on the way couples handle or resolve conflicts. The conflict over the conflict process in effect also determines the occurrence of conflict. This is similar to what Homes (2002) argued that couples would also experience what he calls, metaconflict or the “conflict over the conflict process”.

Economic-related issues were also identified by the informants as one of the strains of their marriages. Conflicts of this nature can be explained partly due to the absence of work among the wives. Of the 11 informants who had disagreements over finances, nine of them did not have work when their narrated cases of marital disagreements emerged. The absence of work among the key informants, specifically the housewives, partly explains why marital disagreements of this sorts will likely to emerge.

Although not as crucial as personality and economic conflict, gender issues were also described as sources of marital conflicts among the couples in this study. The occurrence of marital discords over gender issues as claimed by the three wives were due to unmet/failed expectations. Although it is specific to the division of household work, the study of Kluwer, Heesink, and Van de Vliert (1997) is similar to the findings of this study to some respect. The authors contended that wife’s discontent with division of labor was associated with wife’s demand so that it will eventually result in conflict.

The discords over gender issues may have been affected by the differences between how man and woman perceive gender roles rather than differences in culture. Although there are only two non-Christian Asians in this study, it is significant to note that both of their Filipino wives reportedly experienced conflict over gender issues

compared to other intercultural marriages between Filipino women and Caucasian husbands.

With these various issues of marital relationships in intercultural context, couples in the researcher's study, however, did not experience intense conflicts. Results of the aforementioned study showed that a majority of the 15 key informants only experienced non-violent conflicts. Why is this so? Seven of the 15 informants' spouses are divorcees. These spouses have had unsuccessful marriages and must have experienced frequent marital disagreements. Since they are now in another marital relationship, it may be presumed that the foreign spouses would rather make their marriages work this time. Thus, when disagreements come their way, they preferred to solve these as much as possible or prevent their escalation.

Some of the foreign spouses (6) are not permanently staying with their wives due to the nature of their work. When these husbands return home after a long absence, their wives tend to pamper them as if they were on vacation. Instead of sparking conflicts with their spouses, the wives savored the moments with their husbands around to compensate for the times they were separated.

The length of marriage can also explain why marital disagreements experienced by key informants reportedly were non-violent in general. It should be noted that their median length of marriage is 10.6 years. According to the informants, through the years, they were able to adapt, understand, accept, learn and correct whatever differences they had with their husbands so that if disagreements come their way they can decide what to do with them.

In summary, the sources of conflict in intercultural marriages are quite similar with monocultural couples, although, in the former type of marriage, couples may have marital conflicts traceable to cultural differences. Since cultural differences did not play a crucial role in the escalation of marital conflict, discord experiences among Filipino women involved in the researcher's study is not generally intense as previously assumed. Thus, couples in both monocultural and intercultural marriages may have the same intensity of conflict.

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