

Investigating the Needs to Develop an Integrated Holistic Marriage Education Module (IHMEM)

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ABSTRACT

Due to the escalating statistical figure of divorce rate amongst Muslim couples in Malaysia, there is a need to enhance the marriage education program to be more effective in overcoming the problems of marriage, as well as to provide the knowledge and skills to the spouse and to prevent the divorce cases. Therefore, this article is aimed to explore the views of experts and couples with marital conflict on the needs of marriage education in Malaysia. This article employed an interview method with ten participants; amongst them are five Consultation Officer from the Islamic Religious Office and five people who are facing marital conflict and seeking advice from the Islamic Religious Office. The data collected between March until June 2016 and were managed and analyzed using thematic analysis approach. The findings of the interviews revealed two main outcomes (i) the views of experts and conflict people about marriage education; (ii) the views of experts and conflict people on the content of marriage education course. The findings highlight that marriage education course is important to provide a platform for knowledge and relationship skills between husband and wife. Various topics need to be included in preparing the module of marriage education, such as financial management, conflict management skills, effective communication skills, listening and express feelings skills.

Keywords: Marriage Education, Divorce, Marital Conflict, Financial Management, Communication Skills

1. Introduction

The mental health professionals may face significant challenges in dealing with couples who need to undergo marriage therapy. Unfortunately, most couples with marital problems never seek for therapy. Between 80 to 90 percent of the divorced couples reported that they did not consult a therapist for their marital problems (Halford et al., 2003). Furthermore, there are various limitations in marriage therapy due to several factors such as failure in improving marital satisfaction after attending the therapy (Johnson, 2002), avoidance to seek professional help because of their sense of fearfulness toward treatment which may be more aggravating, or can interfere with their privacy, fear of stigma and seen to be problematic as well as the high cost of treatment (Glenn et al., 2002). Unlike marriage education, the couples faced less fear,

stigma, risk, unobtrusive personal life and inexpensive. Furthermore, some form of marriage education course can be carried out by laymen or clergy (Stanley et al., 2001).

Marriage education is a form of a formal course that provides some information with regard to marital life which is designed to help individuals and couples to achieve success and happiness in their marriage. The goal of marriage education is to give the individual and married couple the needed knowledge and skills to build and maintain a healthy and happy marriage (Ooms, 2005) and at the same time to reduce the divorce rate (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). Marriage education has a broad scope. It can be categorized into two parts, namely pre-marital education programs and marital enrichment programs (DeMaria, 2005). This field is sometimes referred more widely as relationships education (Ooms, 2005).

Marriage education is aimed at the prevention level, which is to provide information and awareness to enrich, protect and strengthen the relationship before the problem worsen. In Malaysia, the term marriage education has not been well grown as a field (Huang, 2005). Even thus, there are various programs have been carried out to address the problem of divorce. Among these are marriage counseling services as a way to solve the problems in the marriage (Zawanah, 1998), a pre-marital course conducted by the Islamic Religious Department and various programs such as short courses and workshops on family and parenting skills that are organized by the NGO and government. This course can participate in all levels of society.

Research also has shown that participation in the relationship and marriage education programs, especially programs that focus on conflict management, can benefit couples by improving the quality of conflict management and communication. However, whether marital relationship education can prevent divorce is still unclear (Parker, 2007). Various studies have been conducted in marriage education programs such as cognitive-behavioral approach on marital adjustment (Kalkan & Ensarli, 2008; Worthington et al., 2007; Markman et al., 1988); and communication effect on marital satisfaction (Halford et al., 2003; Schilling et al., 2003; Samuel et al., 1986). Research shows that by participating in marriage and relationship education programs, couples can improve communication, conflict management and enhance their relationship quality (Parker, 2007). Although the formal marriage education course was offered to couples before they get married, the course is only focused on the delivery of information and knowledge in the form of lectures instead of teaching relationship skills (Syarifah Syukriah, 2003). The methods of implementing this course are less encouraging and do not bring impetus in the long-term benefits for couples. Therefore, there is a need for more effective approaches to marriage education in order to address problems in the marriage, by highlighting the required knowledge and skills to the couples in the effort to prevent conflict and divorce (Syarifah Syukriah, 2003).

The marriage education program in Malaysia has to be more open and innovative. At present, the pre-marital courses focus more on providing information for couples to start a marriage. A continuity of the course should be implemented as a measure to maintain marriage

life and prevention of divorce. Hence, this article aimed to explore the views of experts and individuals about the needs of marriage education program in Malaysia.

2. Method

The development of this marriage education module is based on *Model Pembinaan Modul Sidek* (2005). It involved two phases: Phase 1: Drafting the module and Phase 2: Evaluating the module (experimental study) (Figure 1).

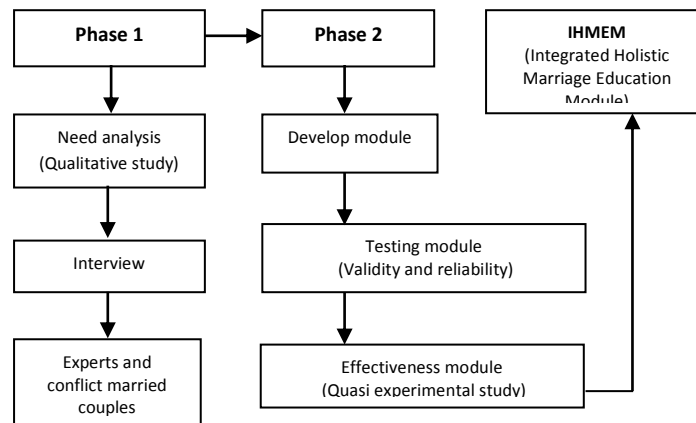


Fig 1: The process of developing integrated holistic marriage education module

In Phase 1, to investigate the needs to develop the module, it involves qualitative methods for data collection and analysis process. There are several methods of data collection in qualitative methods such as interviews, observation, collecting documents, and data from the audiovisual such as pictures, video recording, film and art objects and so on (Creswell, 2003). For this study, the interview method was chosen because researchers intend to gain information and opinions from the experts and individuals about marriage education.

2.1 Research Participants

The participants of this study consisted of five Consultation Officers from the Islamic Religious Office and five individuals who are facing marital conflict and seeking advice from the Islamic Religious Office. The individual were selected based on their consent during the counseling session when they were referred to the registered counselor. Their involvement in the research is totally on a voluntary basis.

2.2 Research Locations

The Counseling Division under the Islamic Religious Department Selangor is the responsible body of government to manage the marital and religion problems. In this study, two main regions of the Islamic Religious Department in Selangor were selected, namely Pejabat Agama Hulu Langat and Pejabat Agama Klang. These locations were chosen because of its capacity to help the researcher to achieve the objectives of the study.

2.3 Research Instrument

This study was carried out by using a research design that employed a qualitative approach. The data were collected using interviews. The researchers developed their own protocol questions, based on the objectives of the study. This interview protocol question was used as a guide to gain experience on the subject of marriage education and views on the need to develop a marriage education module. An interview protocol was developed by researchers based on guidelines by Spradley (1979) to build four different types of questions; descriptive, structured, and contrary to the evaluation questions. At the beginning of this interview, the researcher built a rapport (building relationships) with the respondents.

2.4 Interview Procedure

The interviews were conducted with the experts and conflict couples. Informed consent was attached to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. Permission was required from the couples and the Islamic Religious Department before collecting the data. The researcher explained the procedures of the interview, and the background of the researcher prior to the interview session. The respondents were informed about their anonymity and were required to sign the consent form to participate in the study voluntarily. After their consents have been obtained, they were interviewed in the counseling room. The interviews took about two hours to complete. After returning from the fieldwork, the researcher transcribed the transcript from the interview sessions.

2.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were managed and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach.

3. Result

The results of the demographic profile of the experts and participants of the study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profile of experts

| Respondent | Pseudonym | Workplace |
|------------|-----------|---------------------------|
| Expert 1 | Maimunah | Pejabat Agama Klang |
| Expert 2 | Zahirah | Pejabat Agama Klang |
| Expert 3 | Roslan | Pejabat Agama Klang |
| Expert 4 | Laila | Pejabat Agama Hulu Langat |
| Expert 5 | Nasuha | Pejabat Agama Hulu Langat |

Table 2: Demographic profile of participants

| Demographics | Pseudonym | Age | Age of spouse | Duration of marriage | Number of children |
|---------------|-----------|-----|---------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Participant 1 | Jamil | 30 | 30 | 5 years | 2 |
| Participant 2 | Jasnita | 32 | 35 | 4 years | 2 |
| Participant 3 | Salmah | 22 | 25 | 1 years 3 month | 2 |
| Participant 4 | Fuad | 37 | 35 | 10 years | 3 |
| Participant 5 | Huda | 27 | 32 | 2 years | 1 |

The findings from the interview presented various views and insights on the marriage education program and its content. The following section discusses the views of the experts and couples about marriage education and content for marriage education module.

3.1 The Views of Experts about Marriage Education

All of the experts agreed that marriage education program is very important to conflict and normal couples. As expert 1 said:

.. They (couples) need marriage education. Before getting married, they attend the pre-marital course, but we don't know the effectiveness of it. When the problem arises, they fought, cannot

handle the problem. So, it is better giving them knowledge plus the skills to manage and handle the conflict (Expert 1, Maimunah).

Some of them emphasized that Shariah and Islamic knowledge is important to be inserted in the education marriage program.

Knowledge is a must for a couple to get married, especially the Shariah knowledge. I believed that this knowledge can be a pillar for couples to build a strong marriage (Expert 3, Roslan).

For me the important knowledge is religious knowledge.. As the basic knowledge for Muslims to perform the solat, then the responsibility as husband and wife, responsibility as a Khalifah in this world (Expert 2, Zahirah).

3.2 The Views of Conflict Couple and Experts on the Content in Marriage Education Module

Participant 1 and 5, suggested that the content of the program must highlight the key responsibility in marriage, such as the responsibility of husband and wife.

“It has to be about responsibility. More of us didn’t know about what is a responsibility which is huge such as sustenance, husband, and wife responsibilities” (Participant 1, Jamil).

For me, we should emphasize on the responsibility. Especially the husband and wife responsibility. Nowadays, most of the people know their responsibility, but sometimes they ignored it. If the couple knows, clear and understand their roles and responsibilities they can sustain their marriage (Participant 5, Huda).

For participant 2 and 4, they stressed on communication in marriage.

“... It is about communication because men cannot understand the wife’s feeling..When wife wants to express their feeling, husband look it as nagging. So the communication is very important” (Participant 2, Jasnita).

“.. Must be communication, how to create love and affection between spouse. For me it is important” (Participant 4, Fuad).

Furthermore, the participants also shared about the form of the module. Participant 1 favored the program to be done in a more relaxed manner such as sharing experience in a coffee table talk. Contrary to that of participant 1, Participant 4 has the opinion that the program should provide more opportunity to express feelings, to discuss issues through face to face with the spouse about their misunderstanding and to list what are the expectations of husband and wife in their marriage life.

Meanwhile, participant 2 suggested that the education programs must focus on the lower education couples. Their responds as below:

“I prefer the relaxed program, like coffee table talk with three or four couples in a session. We share and listen to our story and experience in leisure” (Participant 1, Jamil).

“Focus on the lower level of education, with the abandoned child/children, where it is a cause of social problems because the parent ignores their needs” (Participant 2, Jasnita).

“If the program like seminar maybe the effect is small because too many participants, I suggest doing it in a small group like 4-5 couples with a facilitator. The facilitator must be an experienced person or well trained in marriage education” (Participant 4, Fuad).

Participant 5 suggested that marriage education can be conducted through talks and workshops.

“This program (marriage education) may do it in talks and the activities with the couples” (Participant 5, Huda).

With regard to the suitable time for marriage education, most of the experts suggested that the appropriate time for couples to attend marital education in the early year of marriage.

For me, early in marriage between 1-5 years. Why in the early years of marriage? Because it should be as a prevention. It is like prevention is better than cure. Do not wait until problems arise then do the action (Expert 3, Roslan).

It is better before the conflict happens, educate them how to handle the conflict (Expert 4, Laila)

When discussing the content of marriage education, various perspectives were given. Expert 4 highlighted that the couple's bonding to Allah and clarification of the roles of husband and wife are vital for positive communication. Meanwhile, expert 5 suggested that the content of the module should consist of religious responsibilities such as praying. She added that sessions to express their feelings and for the couple to try a new environment one in a while as helpful and should be part of the content.

One of the important content should be highlighted in the module is the relationship of a couple with God. When a couple lives under the God blessing, they will be happy. Second, regarding positive communication, the third is the duty, roles, and responsibilities each other (Expert 4, Laila).

Emphasized on the importance of performing prayer, how to express the feelings, suggest to couples go holiday, take a vacation, experience the second honeymoon (Expert 5, Nasuha).

4. Discussion

The findings revealed that most of the experts need the marriage education as a new tool to help them dealing with couples and marital relationship. Learning not only through educational institutions, but it also involves learning informally or through life experience. Lifelong education is closely related to adult learning aimed to improve life by enhancing their skills in work, family, and community. Long-time married couples or newlywed couples should work and learn how to improve the quality of their marriage relationship. This is because the individual's life is moving through various stages of development. When someone married they will experience another stage of development in his or her life. This process known as the family life cycle. According to Nichols and Schwartz (2004) the cycle of human life is organized but it is not fixed and it is a continuous process. It is a set of patterns or expectations or predictions and the progress of the assignments experienced by the family along their life.

Hence, marriage education is a learning process to improve and strengthen marriage relationships. Marriage education should have religious values because the main purpose of the marriage is to get the bless of Allah SWT. Thus, the views of experts highlighted that religious knowledge is important in providing the marriage education program. This finding support the study of Lambert and Dollahite (2006) who found that the teachings of religion can help married couples to prevent, solve and overcome marital conflict. They also found that prayer and worship can foster open communication in marriage.

The views of conflict couples and expert on the needs of the content of marriage education module are about responsibilities as husband and wife, communication, physical (household needs, financial), psychological (spiritual needs, sexual, mutual respect), and spiritual (moral values, religious).The recommended communication issue are in line with the findings of previous studies that focus on the issue of communication in marriage education (such as Halford et al., 2003; Samuel et al. 1986; Schilling et al. 2003). For example, Halford et al. (2003) found that marriage education program is consistent leading to changes in communication skills and relationship satisfaction. Couples who can not manage their conflict less satisfied with the style of interaction as well as their relationship (Kurdek, 1991). Conflicts exist for various reasons and issues. Among the key issues that led to conflicts were financial, communication, sexual intimacy and childcare (Issacson & Schneider, 2008).

5. Conclusion

In highlighting the major findings of this research, the experts and couples have the same opinion about the needs and the content of marriage education module. Participants agreed that marriage education is important for married couples and for professionals in helping relationship. The knowledge and relationship skills should be design in the marriage education

program to help conflict couples to achieve a happy marriage. Couples can learn and practice the skills of listening and problem solving and learning how to manage emotions and behavior better when faced with conflict. Marriage education programs also help couples to discuss and resolve differences in their expectations of the relationship.

The results of the study offered insights on some of the issues proposed to be used as a content module which issues of effective communication, handling conflict, the importance of religion and law in marriage, financial management and knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of married couples. Through marriage education a new understanding of the life transitions will be experience by couples in their lives. It is called a family life cycle. Marriage education emphasizes the importance of the life cycle as well as the family background to the couple. This is because when people get married, they will bring in the marriage relationship of different attitudes, ideas and behaviors that they have built from main family. Therefore, couples should be prepared to understand and to overcome every challenges that arises in their life cycle transition.

Education is important not just formal education but also informal education to help couples manage their family life. Husband and wife who know and understand their needs and have the knowledge and skills in handling their relationship will be able to keep their marriage harmoniously. Researchers noticed that with the element of psychoeducation in marriage education can help and educate couples to solve their marital problems. Findings from this study can be used to inform a professional such as a counselor, therapist marriage, religious officials or those who directly or indirectly helps couples to improve and enhance their marital relationship.

There is indeed a potential opportunity to offer this marriage education. Marriage is a time capsule that requires human to undertake various efforts to strengthen and sustain this institution. Furthermore, by offering various initiatives on important transitions (such as the first five years of marriage, being a parent), in the event of misunderstanding, and as an early preparation for young people for their future relationships, all of these have the potential to be useful as the target of conducting and offering marriage education.

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