

Subjective Meanings and Expressions of Marital Love among Soon-To-Be-Married Urban Malays

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Abstract: Studies have shown that many married couples experience “deterioration of love” after marriage. A positive perception on love is crucial in ensuring a happy and satisfied marriage. Unhappy marriages are related to many psychological and developmental problems to the individual and individuals around the married couples. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore how soon-to-be married urban Malays give meanings and express marital love. Implicit approach to studying love was applied using the prototype love theory. Participants of the study were 245 soon-to-be-married urban Malays attending a compulsory premarital course within Federal Territory, Malaysia. Questionnaires consisted of participants’ personal background information, information on relationships and questions on how participants’ give meanings and express marital love. Findings indicated that participants give meanings to marital love by relating to gain God’s blessings. Findings also showed that “where” and “who” was present during the expressions of marital love were important in determining the kind of expressions of marital love among urban Malays. Results also showed that expressions of marital love which involve physical contact were less desirable. Implications and future direction of this research were also discussed.

Key words: Love • Marital love • Soon-to-be married • Urban Malays

INTRODUCTION

Love is regarded as an important psychological element within marriage [1, 2]. When married couples experience “deterioration of love”, it can eventually lead to unhappy and unsatisfied marriage [3-5]. This can create negative influence to the married couples and children within the family [6,7].

Despite the encouraging recent development on the psychological studies on love, these studies tend to overly focused on specific participants and aspects of love [8-10]. To illustrate, most of participants involved in the studies on love were White and dating college and undergraduate students in their early adulthood. Thus, reports that contributed to the field of the psychology of love mostly reflect their experience as individuals who were in the early stage of close relationships such as

dating and the falling in love stage [11, 12]. There has been a lack of research on more “mature” kinds of love such as marital love or love among older couples.

Researchers also expressed concern over the inappropriateness of applying general love concept to all stages of relationship [9, 10, 12]. For instance, a specific definition for studying love within long committed relationship named as mature passionate love [10]. She discovered that passionate love within long-term relationships has deeper meaning compared to the passionate love in the early love relationship. It includes such as consisting affection, differentiation, sexual openness, trust and transcendence. Other researchers found companionate love as important dimensions of love within marriage [12, 13]. The need for further research on studying love has been supported by many researchers that focussed on marital aspects [1-3, 10]. These studies

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indicated the importance of differentiating various dimensions of love that may be associated with different stages of relationship including marital love.

Another issue relating to the academic and scientific knowledge of love in psychology is that most love theories were developed from the west. Most of the current studies on love were conducted within the context of European and American cultures. However, certain research findings have shown culture to play an important role in determining the meanings of love. For example, a study carried out discovered that Asian participants value less on love in a committed relationship compared to Caucasian participants [14]. These findings are supported by studies that found fulfilling the needs and expectations of family and society was more important to the participants from non-western culture compared to personal needs (such as love) [14, 15]. Another study also found there were different ways how Caucasians and non-Caucasians perceive and express love within marriage [12]. Both groups however achieved similar marital satisfaction. The latter results indicated that even though love is viewed as important in many cultures, they may be expressed and experienced differently. Indeed some cultural differences on how love is experienced have continued to be discovered among Hispanics [16-20].

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that it is important for social psychologists to focus on the subject of love. However, studies on love should go beyond the early dating stages and those involving mostly young college couples, western samples and the use of general aspect of love. This is important to understand how love within marriage is understood in specific culture since more and more marriages among urban Malays are based on love such as resulting from migration from rural to urban areas to join workforce and the search for achieving a higher level of education.

As an attempt to contribute to this gap in research, this study focuses on exploring the meaning and expression of marital love among soon-to-be-married urban Malays using the implicit approach on studying love, specifically, the prototype love theory [21]. The theory suggests that laypersons interpret love concept around a prototype or an ideal within a specified love in specific context (soon-to-be-married), group specific (urban Malays) and specific type of love within a relationship (marital love). This theory is incorporated in this study because it helps to explore how laypersons give meanings to the concept and expressions of marital love.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and Procedures: This study consisted of 245 soon-to-be-married urban Malay participants attending a compulsory premarital course in Federal Territory. A combination of simple random and multistage cluster random sampling was carried out. To illustrate, 12 most popular premarital course centres in Federal Territory were identified using *Google* search engine. The list was counterchecked by officers in Federal Territory Islamic Affairs Department (JAWI). Then, six centres were chosen by using the tombola method [22]. The centres were contacted and informed about researcher's interest. Since the premarital course centres run under very tight schedule, researcher were only allowed to leave the questionnaires to the appointed representatives of each centre upon agreement. Questionnaires were distributed to the participants approximately five months before their actual date of marriage. Researcher was contacted once all the completed questionnaires were collected by the representatives.

Questionnaires: Questionnaires contained items relating to participants' personal (sex, age, level of education and monthly income) and relationship background (length of time getting to know spouse and expected date of marriage). Researcher applied the implicit approach in exploring marital love, specifically the prototype love theory [21]. Thus, an open ended question on how participants thought about marital love was presented to the participants. In addition, four situational open ended questions on how participants' view expressions of marital love was also presented: "How do you express your marital love 1) in public? 2) in the presence of in laws/relatives? 3) in the presence of children? 4) in private? were presented. This technique of exploring typical expressions of marital love within a marriage was adapted from Dyer [22].

Analysis: Background and relationship information reported by participants was analyzed using Statistical Program for Social Sciences version 19 (SPSS 19). Thus, descriptive statistics such as percentage, frequency and mean were derived using SPSS 19. Conversely, thematic analysis was executed manually using the guidelines provided [23]. Themes were extracted from the open ended answer using the explicit coding. First, similar words or phrases were coded and recorded. Each code was labelled using the keywords from the words/phrases. The developed codes were named as themes that occurred in the open ended answers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal and Relationship Background of Participants:

A total of 245 soon-to-be-married participants in this study consisted of 53.5% females and 46.5% males with a mean age of 25.38 years. More than half of the participants have Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) as their highest level of education. Almost all participants were employed (91%). Monthly income ranged from RM600 until RM4500 with a mean of RM1, 273.88. Majority of the participants (88.16%) personally decided on their future life partner for marriage. The highest reasons reported by participants as for their reason to marry was “abiding to religious law” (74.7%) followed by “own wish” (65.9%) and “to be loved” (66.4%). The least reasons to be married were contributed by family (3.5%) and friend’s pressure (.4%). More than half of the participants (60.8%) reported that they have decided on a date to get married.

Subjective Meanings of Marital Love: Results showed that there were 14 themes which were successfully formed. The highest five themes defined by participants as marital love in descending order were 1) existence of affection 2) understanding 3) mutual respect 4) love which require God’s blessings and 5) mutual compromise. The top five themes indicated that important love elements within marriage belonged to intimacy (existence of affection and understanding) and commitment (mutual respect, mutual compromise and gaining blessings of God) dimensions of love. One unique finding on how participants give meanings to marital love was the importance of gaining blessings of God in relation to love within marriage. This supports previous findings on Malays relating love to the love of Soon-to-be. Results also show that the top five important meanings to marital love did not match any aspect of passionate love as suggested [25]. However, the five least important meanings of marital love in ascending order as reported by participants were 1) entire acceptance of spouse 2) requires patience 3) existence of caresses 4) existence of compatibility and 5) inexpressible. The only theme that matches passionate love is “inexpressible” as suggested [25].

Expressions of Marital Love: Results indicated that there were various ways of expressing marital love. Patterns of open ended answers showed that participants only expressed marital love according to what they thought societal norms defined as appropriate. An expression of marital love that involved physical and close proximity

was considered as less desirable. Results also showed that close and physical expressions of marital love were more desirable to be expressed when husbands and wives were in private. In addition, results showed that expressions of marital love towards the spouse were not directly expressed towards the spouse, however, were more concerned accomplishing the roles and social expectation. For instance, “walking side-by-side” in public; “being hospitable and warm towards relatives/in” laws in the presence of relatives/ in laws and “helping children with homework” in the presence of children were examples reported by participants as showing expressions of marital love. Participants also reported that the only situation when expressions of marital love were directed to spouse was only when in private.

The application of the implicit approach using prototype love theory in this study contributes to the knowledge of how love is understood within marriage [21]. This study unravels the knowledge on how marital love is perceived and expressed in a specific culture namely, urban Malays. Findings revealed how the urban Malays give meanings and express marital love. A unique finding shows that love within marriage is viewed as having relationships with God. Love within marriage was also perceived as sacred. In addition, the expressions of marital love depended on the “situation” and “who” was present. Physical expressions of marital love were seen as less desirable compared to other types of expressions of marital love. This was evident during the presence of other people such as in public, in laws/relatives and children. The only time physical expressions of marital love were perceived as positive was when both husbands and wives were in private. These findings supported previous researchers that love is a product of a culture which is built through experience [8, 9, 25]. This study found that important aspects from culture such as belief in God and social norms in close relationships such as marital love influenced how participants feel, behave and think. This supports a study which suggested that social behaviour and thoughts including love have strong influence on love [26].

CONCLUSION

This study explored how soon-to-be-married urban Malays give meanings and expressed marital love. Findings from this study indicated that it is important to understand how people from specific culture give meanings and express love within a focussed context. Therefore, an implication from this study indicated that there is a need for a specific psychological model or

theory to explain love within marriage as described by specific context (ethnic group and belief system). More research on love which focuses on specific stage of love such as love experienced within marital love, ethnic and belief system ought to be explored further. Another implication from this study also indicated that a new aspect within the study of close relationship in social psychology is worth exploring. Moreover, in return, new knowledge gained from similar research may contribute to the helping professionals such as counsellors and therapists working with married couples. Future research concerning this study should focus on exploring the topic on love within marriage by using a different approach to studying love experienced within marriage. This is important since it will guide helping professionals such as therapists and social workers to deal with individuals with intimate relationships issues.

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