The manifestation and copying styles of marital conflict observed in China: cultural analysis

YANG Yanchun

Abstract. Marital conflict observed in China will be presented based primarily on professional insight and analysis of clinical cases. We will describe the characteristics and nature of marital conflict, analyze couples' reaction to the crisis, and present the effects of marital conflict on couples. Finally the role and contribution of traditional values and culture in contemporary marriage will be discussed.

Key words: marital conflict, copying style, China.

INTRODUCTION In association with the economic development of Chinese society and the rapid change of culture in China, marital relationships are changing and conflict between husbands and wives are increasing (Wang et al., 1997). This is reflected not only in the increase in the divorce rate, but also the loss or confusion of the role of marriage for family members. It becomes extremely important for Psychologists and Psychiatrists to understand forms of marriage conflict that are triggered by the change in culture, and to provide the corresponding solutions (Jandt, 2004; Mezzich et al., 2005; Tseng et al., 2005). This article will examine marital problems based on the clinical analysis of 40 couples with marital conflict who visited the outpatient clinic of the mental health center of West China University Hospital, Sichuan University between March 2004 and December 2005. This article intends to discuss marital conflicts influenced by traditional Chinese culture, and the possible effects of invading foreign cultures. We aim to shed light and provide reference for the management of marital conflicts and the maintenance of domestic mental health.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MARITAL CONFLICT From clinical material, it is revealed that the marital conflicts in question occur mainly in couples aged between 35-50 years old. The majority (86%) of the couples tend to resist seeking help from the mental health system for some time. Females tend to begin to seek help before male patients. Regarding occupational status, 95% of female help seekers were professionals, and only about 5% are housewives. Most of the female professionals have very high or relative high social positions. Among help seekers, 95% of females were diagnosed with depressive disorder, 10% of them were diagnosed with major...
depression, and 74% were diagnosed with mood disorder. 87% of help seekers admitted that they are being emotionally abused in their marriage, and 12% of female patients have been physically abused by their husbands. Those women who have been physically abused usually have a lower education level, and lack a stable job. It is unlikely for men to actively seek help regarding their marriage conflicts, and most of them have displayed violent behaviors toward their wives.

REACTIONS TO MARITAL CONFLICT There are several patterns of reactions observed when couples face marital problems. They are:

1. Periodically emotional attack, including harsh language, personal attack, and emotional abuse. By committing these, both partners can temporarily express and relieve their suppressed outrage. Males tend to have more aggressive and impulsive actions, while females tend to act irrationally and attack their spouse verbally. The consequences of their reactions is that both spouses are more emotionally remote from each other.

2. Somatic expression of marriage crisis is more likely to occur among the lower educated and mid-aged women. Physically, they unconsciously express their anger that is derived from marriage conflict. This is partly because they can not be financially independent, and they are very much dependant on their husbands for their own living expenses, as well as for the children’s educational financial support. Although they have suffered from emotional and physical abuse from their husbands, they lack the proper methods to defend themselves, and stress is manifested and reflected by their physical symptoms. As medical patients, they won’t allow themselves to be referred to the mental health department until their physical symptoms cannot be relieved by repeated medical examination and treatment. They feel shame about going to the mental health department, and deny that their problems are caused by their marriage conflicts. These females seek assistance and emotional support from others by presenting their physical symptoms. Consistently playing the role of a patient exacerbates the marriage conflicts, and it meanwhile reinforces the regressive behavior of the wife. Dissociation disorder is most common in females who don’t have a high education background. This is inferred by an altered state of consciousness, including environmental consciousness and self consciousness, such as the change of one’s identity, having multiple personal identities, symbolic hallucination and illusion regarding marriage conflicts and sexual suppression, or the belief of supernatural power, and so on.

3. Withdrawal of the females from the marriage relationship is recognized through the tendency of a mother to over focus on their children’s growth and development. They are usually emotionally over involved in their relationships with their children, and this leads to an undesirable, unhealthy, and negative relationship with children.

4. Males can react variously regarding marriage conflicts, such as developing intimate relationships with other females outside the family, becoming addicted to alcohol, overindulging in the Internet, and gambling. The consequence is that the marriage conflicts become worse.

5. The role of sexual activity changes within marital conflicts. In Chinese culture, females are more passive and submissive in sexual conduct. The wife usually expects her husband to start foreplay. The quality of sexual activity is an important aspect for the wife, who uses it to assess and determine the quality of the relationship. It is obvious that sexual abuse from husbands is reported less often than emotional abuse. The wife usually abuses the husband emotionally by swearing at him, humiliating, ignoring, or sexually avoiding him, and this is an effective way to control the husband.
CONSEQUENCES AND EFFECTS  Marriage crisis is usually a significant inducement of depression, dissociation disorder, transformed disorder and mood disorder related with domestic chronic stress. The effect of marriage crisis on the male is highly related to alcoholism, abusing cordial, gambling, having sexual relationships outside of marriage, and exhibiting depression and behavior regression. Marriage crisis also has strong psychological effects on children. They may feel a loss of security, a drop in their self confidence and self-esteem, and they may become emotionally remote from their parents. Children may also become highly contradictory towards their parents, and they may exhibit signs of guilt. These negative feelings significantly prevent the children from developing their personality, intelligence, social roles, and relationships with their playmates. This factor of marital strife leads to psychological problems in teenagers.

ROLE OF TRADITIONAL VALUES AND CULTURE The relationship between parents and children is the most essential relationship in the Chinese family. This is because, in Chinese culture, the children are expected to pursue a high social position and achievement. This brings honor to the whole family. Moreover, in Confucian culture, children’s education is highly emphasized. The growth and achievement of children is also an important aspect of Confucian society as it adds female value for mothers. Therefore, in order for a woman to play the role of a good mother, it is important to have a high level of intimacy with her child, especially if he/she is her only child. In contrast, the importance of being a wife, and giving support and attention to her husband, is relatively neglected. Instead, the main focus in the family is giving a high level of attention to children for their education and academic achievement. The strong focus on children’s growth forces the women to be relatively tolerant and submissive to marriage problems. Academic achievement from children relieves and compensates the mother’s suffering from a painful marriage relationship. This is also partly because, in Chinese culture, females are expected to be a both a submissive wife and a wise mother, not just one or the other. As mothers are themselves more and more educated, they value the education of their children, and they even give up a good marriage in the hopes of providing their children a better living environment. In the last thousand years, overbearing masculinity in Confucian culture forced low educated women to be submissive and tolerant to the violence within marriage. In some less developed areas, females still hold a tolerant and submissive attitude towards violence from their husbands, especially towards emotional and sexual abuse. Furthermore, the protection of one’s reputation, and the belief that domestic conflicts should not be made public, prevents the couple from solving conflicts through a legal process or seeking help from mental health institutions. Avoiding public help intensifies marriage conflicts, until they become unbearable. Symptoms such as depression, somatoform, and dissociation express emotional pain from marriage conflicts and significantly reduce the pressure from the neighborhood and the public. However, the benefits from being a patient cannot solve these problems, rather it enables couples to control their relationship in a pathological way. The consequences of being in the hospital not only satisfies both partners’ unrealized desire in a constructive way, but also allows couples to understand that control and domination of the relationship is the foundation of potential marriage conflicts. They become aware that these conflicts will continue repeating again and again, and that using medical treatment alone cannot relieve the physical symptoms.

The economic development of society and the influx of foreign culture impose great challenges on traditional marriage. Along with the changes in China’s economic system, modern wives are more educated. The development of information technology increases communication among people from various cultural backgrounds. The value of marriage from traditional culture has been questioned. Females no longer feel shame about divorcing or getting re-married. Also, because
they are more financially independent, modern females are more likely to value the quality of marriage, rather than enduring an unhappy relationship. Therefore, women in modern China may more actively search for support and solutions for marriage conflicts.

REFERENCES


