A study on the relationship between self-differentiation and communication patterns and marital relationship quality among Chinese couples

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Abstract: In this study, a random sample of 102 Chinese couples aged between 25 and 50 years was primarily surveyed using a standardized questionnaire method. The results showed significant gender differences in self-differentiation, communication patterns and relationship quality between husbands and wives. Compared to their husbands, wives had lower levels of self-differentiation, were more likely to use the negative communication pattern of demand/withdraw, and perceived lower marital relationship quality. The self-differentiation of couples is positively associated with the quality of marital relationships and inversely related to communication patterns. However, there is no significant correlation between communication patterns and the quality of marital relationships.

1. Introduction

The marital relationships is the main axis of modern family relationships. Marital relationship quality is also often referred to as marital quality in many research literatures. It is an important indicator of the quality of a marital relationship. In the 40 years since China's economic reform and opening up, Marital relationship quality has continued to decline, and the divorce rate has continued to rise. The crude divorce rate in 2019 was as high as 3.4‰, 1.6 times that of 20 years ago. Therefore, marital relationship quality is a very common social and family problem in today's society. Although each family reflects different situations and has differences in content and nature, almost every family has experienced or is experiencing marital relationship quality problems [1]. Marital relationship quality not only affects the physical and mental health [2-4], job satisfaction [5] and subjective well-being [6] of both spouses, but also affects their children's mental health [7-8], peer relationship [9] and social adaptation [10].

Self-differentiation is a central concept in Bowen's family systems theory, it refers to the individual's ability to distinguish between reason and emotion, and to maintain a balance between individual independence and emotional connection with others in the family. Bowen believes that

people with high self-differentiation can build higher-quality marriages and experience more happiness and harmony in their marriages [11]. That is, the level of self-differentiation can predict the marital quality, and this hypothesis has cross-cultural universality. Since then, many studies have verified that self-differentiation is closely related to marital quality [12-13].

Communication patterns refers to the way in which information, thoughts and feelings are transmitted and fed back to both parties in interpersonal communication. It is one of the important factors that affect the marital quality. As early as 1967, Navran found a significantly high correlation between communication and marital relationships (r=.82). Since then, a large number of related studies have shown that the way partners communicate and interact is a key factor in the marital quality.

In summary, both self-differentiation and communication patterns affect marital relationships. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the internal influence mechanism of Chinese couples' self-differentiation and communication patterns on marital relationship quality, tested differences in variables based on their profile, and tested the existence of possible correlations among the variables. Findings from this study could provide guidance for couples with marital strain to build stronger, more resilient relationships.

2. Participants and Measures

2.1. Participants

This study randomly selected couples aged 25-50 years as the survey objects with a couple as the basic unit of sampling, whereby both couples were asked to complete the questionnaire separately. A total of 240 questionnaires were sent out, and 226 were returned, with a recovery rate of 94.2%. After excluding questionnaires that were obviously not filled in carefully and questionnaires that had some questions were not completed, 204 valid questionnaires (i.e., questionnaires from 102 couples) were finally obtained. From the frequency statistics, it can be seen that most of the samples in this study are between 31-45 years of age, have been married for about 6-20 years, are generally in the upper middle class in terms of education and income level, and the vast majority have children.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Differentiation of Self Inventory-Short Form (DSI-SF)

This study adopts Self-differentiation Inventory-Short Form (DSI-SF) compiled by Drake (2011), which has good reliability and validity. It is a total of 43 items, adopted Likert level 6, "1" means "not at all characteristic of me" and "6" means "very characteristic of me". The scale includes four dimensions of emotional response Emotional Reactivity (ER), I-position (IP), Emotional Cutoff (EC) and Fusion with Qthers (FO) for measuring the individual's level of self-differentiation.

2.2.2. Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ)

This study used the Communication Pattern Questionnaire (CPQ) revised by Later, et al (2016). At present, many researchers use this scale when they study couples' communication problems. The CPQ evaluated using the Likert 9-point scale, "1" means "very unlikely" and "9" means "very likely". The entire questionnaire includes 35 items, but only 16 of them are scored. The 16 items are divided into 3 subscales: constructive communication, self-demand/partner-withdraw, and partner-demand/self-withdraw.

2.2.3. Quality of Relationship Inventory (QRI)

The Relationship Quality Inventory (QRI) is a self-assessment questionnaire developed by Pierce et al. (1991) to measure the quality of an individual's relationship with a specific person, most commonly used to determine the quality of a couple's relationship and their satisfaction with the relationship degree. It is a total of 25 items which using the Likert 4-point scale, "1" means "not true" ,"2" means "sometimes true", "3" means "often true" and "4" means "almost always true". So far, the QRI has been shown to be useful in both clinical and nonclinical studies of intimate relationships.

2.3. Data Analysis

This study made use of SPSS 26.0 software, mainly using descriptive statistics, analysis of variance, and correlation analysis to analyze the data. Specifically, descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the demographic characteristics of Chinese couples; variance analysis and t-tests were applied to compare the differences between couples in demographic characteristics, self-differentiation, communication patterns, and marital relationship quality. In addition, pearson product-moment correlation was utilized to analyze the correlation between variables such as self-differentiation, communication patterns, and marital relationship quality.

2.4. Ethical Consideration

This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of Lyceum of the Philippines University-Batangas, and the guidelines set forth in the Ethical Code of the Philippine Psychological Association were strictly adhered to during the study.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Analysis of Scores of Self-differentiation between Husband and Wife

Table 1: Differences on Self-Differentiation between Husband and Wife (Paired Comparison) (n= 204)

Subscale	Husband			Wife			t/F	p-value	Int.
	Mean	Std.	Int.	Mean	Std.	Int.			
Emotional Cutoff	3.52	1.09	-	3.29	0.99	-	1.630	.106	Not Significant
Emotional Reactivity	4.03	0.98	-	3.39	1.04	-	4.815	.000	Significant
Fusion w/others	4.10	1.01	-	3.68	1.05	-	3.127	.002	Significant
I-position	4.46	0.79	-	3.99	0.82	-	4.765	.000	Significant
Self-Differentiation	*82.01*	*14.15*	*High*	*72.5*	*13.86*	*Moderate*	*5.128*	*.000*	*Significant*

Legend: 21 – 40 Very low differentiation, 41 – 60 low differentiation, 61 – 80 moderate differentiation, 81 – 100 high differentiation, 101-120 very high differentiation; For the subscale, The higher the score, the more is the specific dimension is exhibited by the respondents. Difference is significant at 0.05 alpha level.

The results of this study show that there was a significant difference in the educational level of the respondents (husbands) in the dimension "I-position" (t/F=3.515, p<0.05). There was a significant difference in the respondent's (husband's) total self-differentiation score in terms of the number of children (t/F = -2.04, p < 0.05). The total score of self-differentiation and sub-scale scores of wives have no significant differences in age, marriage years, education level, income and

number of children. Table 1 shows that, from the perspective of the total score of self-differentiation, the husband has a high degree of self-differentiation, the wife has a moderate degree of self-differentiation, and there is significantly different between husband and wife on the total score of self-differentiation (t/F = 5.128, p < 0.001). From the four dimensions of self-differentiation, there were very significant differences on the dimensions of "Emotional Reactivity" (t/F = 4.815, p < 0.001), "Fusion with Others" (t/F = 3.127, p < 0.05) and "I-position" (t/F = 4.765, p < 0.001), but not significance differences on "Emotion-Cutoff" dimension.

3.2. Analysis of Scores of Communication Patterns between Husband and Wife

The results of this study show that age, years of marriage, educational level, income and number of children have no significant impact on the communication pattern of couples. In addition, table 2 shows that there were significant differences between husband and wife on the constructive communication (t/F = 2.625, p < 0.05) and Self-Demand/Partner-withdraw (t/F = - 4.33, p < 0.001), but not significant differences on the Partner-Demand/Self-Withdraw dimension and the total communication pattern score.

Table 2: Differences on Communication Patterns between Husband and Wife (Paired Comparison) (n= 204)

	Husband			Wife					
Subscale	Mean	Md	Int.	Mean	Md.	Int.	t/F	p-value	Int.
Constructive Comm.	70.55	71.00	Below Md.	68.11	68.00	Above Md.	2.625	.010	Significant
Self-demand/Partner-Withdraw	26.99	26.00	Above Md.	31.85	32.50	Below Md.	-4.330	.000	Significant
Partner-demand/Self-Withdraw	28.42	28.00	Above Md.	27.80	28.50	Below Md.	.589	.557	Not Significant
Communication Patterns	*125.96*	*124.50*	*Above Md.*	*127.76*	*126.50*	*Above Md.*	*-.871*	*.386*	*Not Significant*

Interpretation based on data norms. Above Md.-high, Below Md. - Low. Difference is significant at 0.05 alpha level.

3.3. Analysis of Scores of Relationship Quality between Husband and Wife

The results of this study show that years of marriage have a significant impact on marital relationship quality of husbands (t/F=3.850, p<0.05); income have a significant impact on marital relationship quality of wives (t/F=4.451, p<0.05). Table 3 shows that husbands reported high relationship quality (M husband = 84.83) while wives reported medium relationship quality (M wife = 80.06). The husband's reported marital relationship quality was significantly higher than that of the wife (t/F=3.259, p<0.05).

Table 3: Differences on Relationship Quality between Husband and Wife (Paired Comparison) (n= 204)

	Husband		Wife				
Subscale	Mean	Int.	Mean	Int.	t/F	p-value	Int.
Relationship Quality	*84.86*	*High*	*80.06*	*Moderate*	*3.259*	*.002*	*Significant*

25-40 Very low relationship quality, 41-65 low relationship quality, 66-80 moderate relationship quality, 81-95 high relationship quality, 96-100 very high relationship quality. Difference is significant at 0.05 alpha level.

3.4. Correlation analysis of Self-differentiation, Communication Patterns and Marital Relationship Quality

Table 4 shows the correlations between the individual's level of self-differentiation, communication patterns of couples, and quality of marital relationship. Self-differentiation is positively correlated with the marital relationship quality of both husbands (rxy=0.414, p<0.001) and wives (rxy=0.272, p<0.05). Self-differentiation was negatively correlated with communication patterns of both husbands (rxy= - 0.246, p< 0.001) and wives (rxy= - 0.280, p< 0.05). Husband's communication pattern showed a positive correlation with wife's communication pattern (rxy=0.309, p< 0.05). Husband's marital relationship quality showed a significant positive correlation with wife's marital relationship quality (rxy=0.478, p< 0.001). However, this study did not find correlation between communication patterns and relationship quality.

Table 4: Correlation Matrix of the Variables of the Study (n=204)

	Self Diff. (H)		Self Diff (W)		Comm Patterns (H)		Comm Patterns (W)		Relationship Quality(H)		Relationship Quality(W)	
	r_{xy}	p-value	r_{xy}	p-value	r_{xy}	p-value	r_{xy}	p-value	r_{xy}	p-value	r_{xy}	p-value
Self Diff – H	-	-	.125	.210	-.246	.013	-.048	.631	.414	.000	.0286	.392
Self Diff – W	.125	.210	-	-	.092	.357	-.280	.004	.148	.139	.272	.006
Comm-Patterns H	-.246	.013	.092	.357	-	-	.309	.002	-.083	.405	-.067	.502
Comm-Patterns W	-.048	.631	-.280	.004	.309	.002	-	-	.060	.546	.091	.363
Rel. quality – H	.414	.000	.148	.139	-.083	.405	.060	.546	-	-	.478	.000
Rel. Quality - W	.086	.392	.272	.006	-.067	.502	.091	.363	.478	.000	-	-

Relationship is significant at 0.05 alpha level.

4. Discussion

4.1. Relationship between Self-differentiation and Marital Relationship Quality

There was a positive correlation between self-differentiation and marital relationship quality in the study, which is consistent with previous studies [14-16]. Whether husband or wife, the higher the self-differentiation of an individual, the higher the marital relationship quality. This may be because individuals with high self-differentiation show more rationality rather than emotion in family relationships, are able to view the relationship between husband and wife rationally, and tend to be more emotionally independent as a couple, rather than overly dependent on each other or integrating with each other, thus promoting marital relationship quality.

4.2. Relationship between Self-differentiation and Communication Patterns

There was a negative correlation between self-differentiation and communication patterns in the study, which is inconsistent with the research hypothesis of this study. This researcher believes that high self-differentiators should be able to look at the relationship rationally and not easily disturbed by emotions in the daily communication of the couple, then they will take a positive and constructive way of communicating with their spouses. Therefore, high self-differentiators should also be positive communicators. However, this study did not yield such a result. Instead, self-differentiation was negatively correlated with communication patterns. Definitely, there has not been a single previous study that has demonstrated a relationship between self-differentiation and communication patterns, so further research is needed.

4.3. Relationship between Communication Patterns and Marital Relationship Quality

There was no correlation between communication patterns and marital relationship quality in the study, which is not consistent with previous studies [17]. A number of western studies have found that positive, high-quality communication patterns are highly correlated with marital satisfaction and stability; negative communication patterns were positively correlated with divorce rates and significantly predicted divorce [18]. Both long-term follow-up studies and cross-cultural studies have confirmed this point.

4.4. Correlation between husband and wife in three variables

There was a positive correlation between husband's communication patterns and wife's communication patterns in this study. This result is well in line with the findings of Christensen & Shenk [19]. Their research on communication patterns is based on systems theory, which suggests that the elements of a system are interdependent and that couples' behaviors are interdependent and reinforcing. The utilization of constructive communication by one party triggered corresponding constructive communication from the other party. Similarly, avoidance behavior exhibited by one party resulted in increased avoidance behavior by the other party. Additionally, demanding behavior demonstrated by one party tended to provoke withdrawing behavior from the other party, subsequently leading to further demanding behavior from the initial party. This study also found that there was a positive correlation between husband's marital relationship quality and wife's marital relationship quality. It shows that that husbands and wives have high consistency in their perceptions of marital quality and marital stability. However, no correlation was found between husbands' self-differentiation and wives' self-differentiation, which is not consistent with previous Bowen's hypothesis [14]. Bowen believed that people tend to marry people with similar levels of self-differentiation, suggesting that there is a correlation between husbands and wives' self-differentiation.

5. Conclusion

This study showed that the wives have mid-range self-differentiation and relationship quality, but their husbands rank higher in both and communication patterns in these couples are generally good, which implies that a potential opportunity for growth and improvement in how these wives experience their relationships and sense of self within them is feasible. There is a correlation between self-differentiation, communication style and marital relationship quality. According to the results of this study, researchers can propose appropriate marital intervention programs for wives with moderate self-differentiation and marital relationship quality, that is, through self-differentiation training and marriage therapy to improve the degree of self-differentiation and marital relationship quality.

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