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Mate selection criteria among postgraduate students in Malaysia

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify mate selection criteria of Malaysian postgraduate students. 30 participants were selected purposefully for semi-structured interview. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The results were classified into three categories of the most important criteria, important criteria and moderately important criteria for mate selection. The findings show that Malaysian postgraduate students valued both internal qualities such as religion and external qualities such as physical attractiveness for mate selection. Implications of this study are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Relationship is the primary basis of connection among individuals. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the reasons of relationship can be sought in physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization needs. One of the significant relationships that individuals build in their lives is marital relationship. Marriage is the union of two people. This union is not just physical, but also spiritual and mental. Based on Brown (2009), marriage is one of the most important and faithful choices of both men and women. The possibility of happiness is low in marriage without considering the related significant factors. Based on Abdullah, Li & David (2011) couples cannot be really happy when they do not understand each other.

Mate selection has never been dismissed from the society and social conditions (Brown, 2009; Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001). Many studies indicate that selecting a mate is one of the most important decisions that individuals make in their lifetime (Abdullah et al., 2011; Brown, 2009; Buss et al., 2001; Maliki, 2009; Neustadter, 2012; Regan, Levin, Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, 2000). According to Maliki (2009), one of young people's major tasks, especially when they are in university, is to find a state of identity. They need to develop intimacy with others at this stage. In this case, intimacy is an essential ability to relate one's deepest hopes and fears to another person, and also to accept the intimacy needs of another person. In the process of mate selection, various qualities may attract a university student to a partner. However, when a relationship develops they may find those qualities undesirable. This realization may lead to an end in the relationship. On the other hand, there is an assumption that

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individuals bring factors from their own family (before marriage) to marital life, which may affect their relationship. Therefore, mate selection among students should be paid close attention (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003).

Criteria of mate selection are different in terms of culture and society. Selecting a marriage partner is a culturally-defined process (O'Neil, 2006). Health factors, age, body shape, social factors, educational factors, cultural factors like religion and clothing, psychological factors, physical and beauty, genetic factors, occupation, and so on are usually the focuses for mate selection. The concept of each criterion is not universal. For example, based on O'Neil (2006), physical beauty is a key factor if love is an important criterion for partner selection. However, the concept of beauty is different among cultures. In traditional societies in Africa, plump and large bodies are attractive, while in Europe and North of America such physical feature is considered ugly and unhealthy. While in china, moon-shaped face is desirable, angular face is attractive in North Europe. The concepts of beauty also changes over the time. This makes the concepts of criteria in mate selection different in cultures.

Scholars have examined the criteria of mate selection. Many studies show that physical attractiveness and physical appearance are important criteria in mate selection (Abdullah et al., 2011; Buss, 1989; Buunk, Dijkstra, Fetchenhauer, & Kenrick, 2002; Furnham, 2009; Hancock, 2002; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005; Todosijević, Ljubinković, & Arančić, 2003). Buss (1989) selected his samples from 37 cultures and found that physical attractiveness in potential mates was highly valued.

Physical health is another important criterion in mate selection (Buunk et al., 2002; Maliki, 2009; Regan et al., 2000; Shackelford et al., 2005). Maliki (2009) found that physical health was an important criterion among 83% of students.

Many studies support that financial status is an important criterion in mate selection (Badahdah & Tiemann, 2009; Buunk et al., 2002; Regan et al., 2000; Shackelford et al., 2005; Todosijević et al., 2003; Townsend & Wasserman, 1998). According to Buss (1989), from 36 out of 37 cultures, good financial prospect was highly valued in mate selection. Furthermore, Maliki (2009) found that financial status was an important criterion among 67% of the students. Generally, both mates have to be in the same economic classes. Financial status of families must be in a same level or not different greatly. Without any doubt, diversity in household economy causes differences in individuals' attitude, behavior, and performance.

Educational background is another important criterion in mate selection (Maliki, 2009; O'Neil, 2006). Based on Maliki (2009), graduates preferred to marry someone with good educational background like themselves. Marrying partners with lower educational background could cause challenges. Similar educational background results in similar attitudes, values and beliefs among spouses (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001).

Religion is an important criterion for selecting mates (Badahdah & Tiemann, 2009; Maliki, 2009). Religion and politic powerfully relate to individual's values and beliefs (Furnham, 2009). According to Maliki (2009), it is significant for potential mates to have similar religious beliefs. Maliki (2009) showed that students preferred to marry within their religious group. Religion can be a binding force for those with the same religion to get married together.

Partner selection is different among students in Malaysia. They may meet in campus or other places and develop a relationship coincidentally or they may propose by their family. Although the last method is very rare in modern families, it still exists among some families in Malaysia. Is it a personal choice marriage? Can they find partner with their desired criteria?

Based on Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), Muslim couples get divorced every 15 minutes in Malaysia. There were 27,116 divorces in 2009, up from 17,749 in 2005. Divorce rates among Muslims are now at an all-time high, making up about 82 per cent of total divorces in Malaysia.

Since, marriage is sharing life with another, it is natural to have different criteria and expectations or roles (Celik, Halmatov, Halmatov, & Saricam, 2012). On the other hand, partner selection is important in establishing the foundation of family, and affects marital satisfaction. Therefore, identifying certain mate selection criteria is important among students in Malaysia. Accordingly, when marriage relationships become complicated, theoretical and applied ways that match the latest mate selection criteria and scientific research should be introduced.

Theoretical framework of study

Social Exchange Theory focuses on what is given and what is received. Every type of behavior and every interaction between individuals (such as rewards and expenses) are studied potentially (Emerson, 1976; Sprecher, 1998). Researchers based on this theory have investigated why one’s behavior toward another person is chosen. According to this theory, individuals make decisions based on the greatest offered benefit (Nock, 1992). Social Exchange Theory and its rational choice formula clarify the selection process further as follows:

$$\text{Maximum Rewards} - \text{Minimum Costs} = \text{Choice (Mate Choice)}$$

Theorists believe that in this exchange, receiving entails expense. By definition, exchange usually is an attempt to gain satisfaction and reward. It is spent on a specific selection and while ignores other choices. Benefit is the difference between reward and expense and is achieved when reward is greater than expense (Skidmore, 1979). The assumption in this theory is that individuals exchange their high value traits with their mates’ high value traits to attract them (Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993). Based on Shipman (2010), individuals weigh their values according to who is available if the mate with high value traits could not be found.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In order to identify mate selection criteria among Malaysian postgraduate students, this study focuses on married postgraduate students (master and PhD) in Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). These universities are chosen randomly among public universities in Malaysia. This study focuses on Malaysian postgraduate students. This selection from only Malay people was made based on Buss et al. (1990) suggestion that there is common mate criteria among individuals. However, every culture has its own specific criteria of partner selection. Individuals are selected based on prior knowledge such as marital status and work experience in counseling and psychology through purposive sampling. The purpose of selecting participants from counseling and psychology discipline was extracting criteria of mate selection based on experts’ ideas to gain more valid data.

There is not any specific rule for sample size in qualitative method (Patton, 2001). Therefore, 10 random participants were selected from each university. This led to thirty interviews from participants. The interviews stopped when no new data found. 24 participants were PhD students and 6 participants were doing their masters at the moment of conducting this research. 16 participants were clinic counselor, 2 participants were school counselors, and 12 participants were university lecturers. All the participants were married.

2.2. Semi-structured interview

Since research design in qualitative method facilitates the process of conducting the interviews, table 1 shows the interview framework of this study.

Table 1: Interview framework

I am
I have identified you as a member of the panel for my interview, entitled Mate Selection Criteria (spouse selection criteria for marriage). I would appreciate it if you could list known and effective criteria that could affect marriage mate selection. During these phases I may ask you to give feedback on responses that I gathered from other participants. The data will process collectively. Please feel free to answer the questions. With this topic in your mind

First step	Second step	Third step
Main questions	Additional questions	Clarifying questions
Can you tell me: -What the criteria that you like your life partner have are?	-Additional questions based on participants responses	-Do you like to give me comment or tell me anything else regarding this matter?

Since the participants were expert in counselling and psychology field, the validation of interview questions was checked through member checking technique. After each interview, the participants were asked questions regarding thematic structure.

2.3 Data analyze

The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to make valid inferences from the data. Thematic analysis is a technique for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was used to extract certain words and themes.

3. Results

Table 2: Criteria considered important in mate selection

Mate Selection Criteria		
Most important	Important	Moderately Important
-Religion	-Intelligence	-Favourable social status
-Mental health	-Sociability	-Culture
-Profession	-Physical health	-Families' social appropriateness
-Physical attractiveness	-Refinement and neatness	-Marital status
-Financial status	-Physical appearance	-Age
	-Character	
	-Education	
	-Chastity	

The results showed that the most important factors in mate selection among participants were religion, mental health, profession, physical attractiveness, and financial status, which were closely followed by intelligence, sociability, physical health, refinement and neatness, physical appearance, education, character, and chastity. There were also moderately important criteria such as favorable social status, culture, families' social appropriateness, marital status, and age among Malaysian postgraduate students.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study showed that there were several important criteria among postgraduate students in Malaysia. The obtained criteria were not different from previous studies in mate selection, but were different in preferences. Also, studies show that criteria of mate selection is different in societies, ways and times (Brown, 2009; Buss et al., 2001). The reason behind this is the impact of culture in mate selection criteria (Buss et al., 1990; O'Neil, 2006).

Religion as the most important criteria in mate selection shows the large effect of culture. Based on what participants mentioned, Islam is dominant in Malay culture and people pay close attention to religion. They believed that religious people were more committed to life. These findings were consistent with the findings of Le et al. (2002). Mental health, profession, physical attractiveness, and financial status were other important criteria by the participants. Malaysian preferred physical attractiveness criteria more than physical appearance, but it did not mean physical appearance was not an important criterion in mate selection. These results were supported by the findings of previous studies (Abdullah et al., 2011; Buss, 1989; Buunk et al., 2002; Furnham, 2009; Hancock, 2002; Li et al.,

2002; Shackelford et al., 2005; Todosijević et al., 2003). Profession and financial status were also the most important criteria in mate selection, because individuals need to be supported to have better lives. These criteria were more highlighted by females (Badahdah & Tiemann, 2009; Buunk et al., 2002; Regan et al., 2000; Shackelford et al., 2005; Todosijević et al., 2003; Townsend & Wasserman, 1998).

The results of study showed more criteria in important level such as; intelligence, sociability, physical health, refinement and neatness, and physical appearance. Sociability was highlighted by the participants. They believed that sociability is sharing friendliness, ideas, attitudes, interests and values. So this criterion was important in social life and communication. This finding were consistent with the findings of other studies (Badahdah & Tiemann, 2009; Furnham, 2009; Hancock, 2002; Shackelford et al., 2005; Todosijević et al., 2003). Other important mate selection criteria were character, education, and chastity. According to the participants people with good and pleasant characters could easily accept and attract other members of the family. So, they easily adapt to new situation of life since people have different backgrounds (Maliki, 2009). This is also congruent with the teaching of Islam. The results in terms of education showed that educated individuals preferred to marry collage-graduates like themselves. This result was not consistent with the result of Abdullah et al., (2011). Abdullah et al. found that education was not an important criterion in mate selection among Malaysians especially for males.

Culture is moderate level criterion of mate selection among Malaysians. Based on the participants, Malaysians may marry people from another culture, but not very different from their own. Other criterion in this level was marital status. The results show that Malaysians were liberal about accepting partners with previous marriage, but this was different in term of gender. Males were more willing to accept people with children from past marriages compared to females. This finding was consistent with the finding of Abdullah et al., (2011). Age was another criterion that considered moderately important in mate selection. This finding was consistent with the finding of Abdullah et al., (2011) that age was an important criterion for male and not important for female, but different from Maliki's (2009) finding. Maliki concluded that age similarity was more valued by Nigerian students (Maliki, 2009).

In general, Malaysian postgraduate students valued both internal qualities (religion) and external qualities (physical attractiveness) for mate selection criteria.

This study had several implications. The results of this study were informatively valuable for students or other individuals who are planning to get married and select their mates. The findings give insight about marriage relationship and help them get ready to accept new conditions based on research and norms. Both men and women will know about the important criteria for mate selection in different related areas. This helps them to focus more on and be aware of certain and useful criteria for marriage partner to match their needs and them. Moreover, they can gain better understanding of their thought and feeling about each other. In addition, these findings may be useful for marriage counselors, and marital therapists to facilitate marriage counseling sessions effectively.

Overall, this study identified criteria of mate selection among students based on the norm in Malaysia and it does not mean people cannot have criteria different from the norm.

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