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Parental Influence on Mate Selection in Modern Chinese Society

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Research Article

Parental Influence on Mate Selection in Modern Chinese Society

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Abstract

Traditional patterns of mate selection in Chinese societies involving arranged marriages by parents have been changing towards individual choice of a marriage partner. However, it is unclear to what extent this transition has occurred in Chinese society. The values and experiences of contemporary Chinese adults about parental influences on mate selection were addressed by conducting six focus groups in Taipei, Taiwan, which included a total of 51 participants. The results from qualitative analysis indicated that most participants did not feel obligated to have their parents' influence who they would marry. However, most of them wished for their parents to approve the marriage partner in order to maintain family harmony. A minority of participants

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reported that they would conform to their parents' influence on who to marry. These results indicate that contemporary Chinese adults have adopted a combination of traditional Chinese (e.g., satisfying parents' expectations) and Western (e.g. greater personal autonomy on mate selection) values.

Keywords: Chinese mate selection, parental influence, focus groups, qualitative research

Over the past 75 years, Chinese society has experienced substantial social change, with dramatic economic modernization, universal education, and increased Western interaction and influence. With the increased exposure to Western cultures and transitions to modernization and universal education, Chinese society, including Taiwan and Mainland China, have experienced substantial changes in women's education and gender role ideology, as well as family structure and norms (Lin, 2009).

Changes in family norms are reflected in marital relationships, in general, and mate selection, in particular. In traditional Chinese society, marriage had the primary purpose of maintenance, continuity, and well-being of the larger family system (Xu, Xie, Liu, Xia, & Liu, 2007). Consequently, arranged marriages, where parents choose their children's spouses, was a long-held tradition in Chinese society (Chun & Sue, 1998). Individual interests and preferences regarding mate selection were of secondary importance in order to promote harmonious interpersonal relationships in the family and in the community (Thornton, Chang, & Sun, 1984).

However, arranged marriages in contemporary Chinese society are less common, with young adults having more choice in whom they marry (Chang & Chan, 2007). Contemporary Chinese people have more autonomy to base their marital decision on admiration, romantic love, and mutual respect (Chen & Li, 2007). On the other hand, the core Confucius principle of filial piety is still highly valued in Chinese societies (Chen & Yi, 2011; Liu, 2013). Consequently, the norm of filial piety likely still influences young adult children's desire to uphold their family honor by satisfying their parents' wishes and criteria for a mate. Consequently, even though mate selection is moving towards personal choices, research suggests that parents still exert considerable influence on who a child chooses to marry (Pimentel, 2000).

This mixture of individual choice in mate selection and continued loyalty to the norm of filial piety in the lives of Chinese young adults is illustrated in a study that found that many of them reported that they would comply to their parents' wishes regarding the decision to marry, seeing that their family's disapproval was an obstacle to marriage

(Kline & Zhang, 2009). However, a third of the respondents reported that they would not stop dating a person if their parents disapproved.

In the context of the interaction between the dramatic increase towards individual choice in mate selection and the traditional Confucian value of filial piety in Chinese societies, the values and patterns of parental influences on mate selection in contemporary Chinese families are not well understood. This study used focus group methods with sample of adults in Taiwan to explore and better understand contemporary Chinese experiences and attitudes on parental influences on mate selection.

Methods

Data for this study were gathered using focus groups. Focus groups involve an interactive group discussion on a particular topic within an open and non-threatening environment (Krueger, 1988). The open-response format and group discussion often create rich information that is impossible to obtain through individual interviews or quantitative research (Edmunds, 1999). Due to the practicality and enjoyable environment for participants, focus group research is becoming more popular in the social sciences, such as in political science, family studies, and marriage and family therapy (Piercy & Hertlein, 2005).

Procedures

Separate focus groups were conducted for men and women in order to facilitate more candid responses to sensitive questions. In addition, rapid societal changes have created cohort differences among married adults in Chinese societies (Pimentel, 2000); consequently, older and younger married adults were interviewed in separate focus groups, with groups being held separately for younger married adults, 39 years or younger, and married middle-age adults between the ages of 40 and 64. These participants were not married couples; rather, they were adults who are married. In addition, focus groups were conducted for never-married young adult women and men. Thus, there were six separate groups: older married men, older married women, younger married men, younger married women, never-married young adult men, and never-married young adult women. The design of homogeneity among focus group members in this research was meant to facilitate participants to express their thoughts more freely

based on their similarity in terms of age, gender, and marital status (Morgan, Krueger, & King, 1998).

The participants were recruited by a snowball sampling method by employing 20 to 25 contact people who each recruited four or five potential participants. The contact people were graduate students at Fu Jen University in Taiwan who targeted potential participants in Taipei City and New Taipei City (Xinzhuang District) areas of Taiwan and invited them to participate in the study. The contact people were trained by faculty at Fu Jen University, who have used this method of sample recruitment many times in their research. The participants were compensated a total of US\$ 32.64 (NT\$ 1000) for their participation in the focus group, which is a typical reimbursement rate in Taiwan. In addition, each contact person received an incentive of US\$ 3.26 (NT \$100) for participating in recruitment and another incentive of US\$ 3.26 (NT\$100) for each participant they recruited, which is the rate that faculty at Fu Jen University have used in past research.

After signing consent forms, the participants completed a one-page questionnaire about demographic information. The focus group started with general information provided to participants, including a welcome statement, a statement about the purpose of study, ground rules (such as confidentiality), and some ice-breaking questions. Then the interview proceeded with questions on the topics of marriage preparation, mate selection norms, parental influence on mate selection, characteristics of a desired marital partner, and marital dynamics. In each group, there was one facilitator and one assistant facilitator. The facilitators were two graduate students who were in a nationally accredited marriage and family therapy program in the U.S. Both were native Taiwanese, and the assistant facilitators were students at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan. The facilitators and the assistant facilitators received training in the method of focus groups and qualities of effective facilitators before they conducted the focus groups (Krueger, 1988).

Participant Characteristics

A total of 51 participants (male $N = 25$ (49.02%), female $N = 26$ (50.98%)) were included in the study, and all participants identified themselves as ethnic Chinese. There was a total of six focus group, with 7 to 10 participants in each group, which is consistent with focus groups methodological standards (Morgan et al., 1998). Among the single groups, the male focus group had 8 participants, and the female group had 9 participants. The average age was 27.41, and 94.12% were college graduates. Among the younger married groups, 9 males and 7 females participated. Their average age was 31.69, and

68.75% were college graduates. They had been married an average of 3.61 years. Eight males participated in the older marriage male focus group, and 10 females participated in the older married female focus group. Their average age was 51.56, and 22.22% were college graduates. They had been married an average of 23.78 years.

Measures

Open ended questions were used to prompt discussion among the focus group participants. The focus groups discussed a wide range of topics about marriage in Taiwan. The questions that were asked that pertain to the present study included: “How important is it in Taiwan for the parents to approve the marriage?” and “If the parents disapprove, what would women/men do with the relationship?”

Analysis

An audio recording machine was used to record the conversations during the focus group sessions so that the discussion was captured verbatim for subsequent analysis. The audiotapes were then transcribed verbatim in Chinese. The Chinese transcriptions were analyzed by a native Taiwanese graduate student and a team of native Chinese undergraduate students, using standard inductive, qualitative data analytic methods (Creswell, 2013; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). At least two native Chinese coders independently conducted the data categorization and analysis of each focus group. After they finished their coding, they met with the other coders for that focus group and compiled their results and resolved differences to minimize researcher bias and increase the trustworthiness of the findings (Piercy & Hertlein, 2005). The focus group interviews were subsequently translated into English so that exemplary quotes and examples could be reported in English in the report of the study.

Results

The results of the qualitative analysis suggested that many participants still hold some level of Chinese traditional values of in-group harmony when it comes to parental approval on their marriage, although the majority of participants have incorporated the values of the Western individualism and are much less affected by their parental influences. Overall, the younger participants reported being less influenced by their

parents' attitudes of a prospective marriage partner, although most of them, especially females, have not completely let go of the traditional values of parental influence and in-group harmony. On the other hand, the majority of the older participants held more traditional values regarding parental influence on mate selection. In terms of gender differences, younger female participants reported being more influenced by their parents than younger male participants. There were no noticeable gender differences among the older participants.

For most of the participants, their parents' influence on their choice of whom to marry wasn't a simple "yes" or "no" dichotomy. Among those that indicated that they would marry someone regardless of their parent's disapproval, they still expressed a desire to work to maintain harmony with their parents.

Parental Pressure to Marry

Both young female and male participants reported experiencing parental pressure to get married and wanting to meet parents' expectations to get married, although more female participants reported such pressure. A single female reported, "My parents don't want me to procrastinate my marriage until I am thirty." She shared that she is expected to "get married before thirty years old and have a child," or her parents would be disappointed. A single female stated, "Getting married feels like a way to get approval. If you are not married, your family might think there are some problems with you, 'why don't you get married?' That is why I say getting married is a way to prove yourself that you're a normal or a mature person." Getting married seems to be a way to prove her maturity to her family and friends. A male shared that "My mother is getting older. If I'm not married, it might cause her to worry. We are their (my parents') only people to rely on. Now, we need to put our parents into consideration when we make choices." A male participant stated, "We are often living under other people's expectations. When we are single, our parents ask when we are getting married. When we get married, they ask when we are going to have children.... They compare so much that I don't know why these things are necessary. I feel trapped." An older married female participant stated, "I know a couple who dated for eight years and chose not to get married. Their parents pushed them to get married. They are now finally married, but the couple has decided to not have any children."

Some participants also commented on the parental pressure that they feel to not only to get married, but also to have the traditional wedding rituals. For example, a single female shared that "The traditional wedding rituals are to satisfy the parents, to save the parents'

face. If you skip it, they might get mad. It might become a war between the parents and the daughter. The daughter might think it's her own business, but the parents think it's the family's event."

No Influence on Marital Decision

Most participants reported that their parents' approval did not matter in their marital decision even if their decision may frustrate family harmony. One single female shared, "I don't think it's that important to get approval from my parents because people who I like are different from what my mom would like. That's why I think just informing my mom would be fine." Another single female believed that "asking for permission (on marriage) is ridiculous." She said, "No one has the right to tell if you should get married or not, because you live your own life." One younger married female stated, "My parents didn't have any impact on my decision." A one single male stated, "According to the trend of the society, parents' opinions on marriage have become less and less important. Based on people around me, many people think parents' suggestions on marriage are merely suggestions that they may not take. If people want to get married, others' opinions cannot stop them." He also shared that he would "just get married and notify the parents" when he gets married. A single female shared that "If my parents' reasons were not important to you and they stand firm in their disagreement, I would run away from them." She would rather disregard her relationship with her parents than end her relationship with her potential husband. An older married woman stated, "I will let them do whatever my children want if they want to get married. My daughter got married after 7 or 8 years of dating. No one in the family disapproved her marriage." In addition, an older married male stated, "I will ask my children to bring their boyfriend or girlfriend to us. My wife and I can observe their behavior and know whether this person is good or not. Later on, we will give suggestions to my children, but they may still choose not to listen."

Some participants clarified that they would still ask for their parents' approval to marry someone, but it was mostly a way to notify their parents about their decision, rather than really asking for approval. A single female reported, "Some ask for permission on marriage just to inform the parents and gain acknowledgement from them. If the parents disagreed, they would still get married." A younger married male shared that when he asked for his parents' approval, "they (parents) knew they couldn't change my decision. Asking for my parents' approval was more like notifying them of my decision. If they disapproved it, they knew they couldn't change my choice."

Enhancing Family Harmony

Although most participants did not believe that their parents' approval was a deciding factor in who they would marry, many still expressed a desire for them to like their partner because it would enhance harmony in the family. A single female shared that "I think everyone should be able to date whoever they want, but if I could get parents' approval, it's even better." Another single female reported, "In our family, marital approval or disapproval probably isn't an issue. However, I still hope everyone can get along and have a peaceful relationship, or it would be a pain to experience disharmony between parents and my spouse. If my family doesn't like him and I still love him, I will still get married with him. My hope is that we at least have a peaceful relationship with my family even if my parents disapproves of my partner." A single male suggested, "Men and women face similar situations. If a man could never fit into the in-law's ideal frame, this marriage will be a struggle for everyone." Another single male shared that "If parents dislike her (marital partner), the marriage will be a long journey to harmony in the future."

Some participants stated that if their parents did not approve of their partner, they would try to change their parents' minds in order to maintain family harmony. A single male reported that he would "calm my parents' worries and concerns down because I need to keep this potential wife." One single female shared that "If my parents' reasons don't matter to me and they disapprove, I will convince my parents." A single male stated, "If my parents disagree with my marriage, I will ask them why. Why do you disagree? What can we change? If you cannot give us a specific reason, their disagreement is meaningless. Ask parents what they dislike about the girlfriend. If it's something changeable, then change and gain their trust."

Meeting Parents' Expectations on Marital Decision

A minority of participants reported that they would be influenced by their parents' criteria on a marital partner in order to fulfill their parents' expectations. More female than male participants reported wanting to fulfill their parents' expectations on a marital partner's criteria. A single male, shared that "parents sometimes are not negotiable. Thus, when it comes to marriage, we need to be really careful and marry the girl that meet up my parents' expectations." A younger married female stated, "My dad brainwashed me pretty well. He taught me to date someone that has higher degree and higher income than I do. If he doesn't meet these conditions, I don't dare to take him to visit my parents. I would only bring boys that meet up the criteria of my parents." A single female reported,

“Parents would ask if this guy has a car or a house; where does he live? Does the guy's mother like you? I need to make sure my mother likes this person. Sometimes it's hard to find the perfect balance and what they want. I think it is very hard.”

A few participants reported that parental disapproval would probably lead to difficulty in continuing their relationship with their partner. A single female stated, “I think it's really important to gain my parents' approval! I love my family; the person I want to marry is someone that I love too. I want him to like my family and my family likes him because it will strengthen our relationship.” Another female reported that she would probably delay her marriage until her parents approved. She said, “My partner and I can't do much about the disapproval. The relationship would probably not move on too fast. If I were married, I would not rush into having children. If I were not married, my partner and I would cohabit. In this way, I would wait for the time to prove my parents that my partner and I have a good relationship.”

Discussion

Results of the study indicated that most of the younger Chinese participants, both single and married, reported that their parents' disapproval of their marital partner would not determine whether or not they would go ahead with the marriage. Some participants clarified that they would still ask for their parents' approval to marry someone, but it was mostly a way to notify their parents about their decision, rather than actually asking approval. Only a few younger participants reported that parental disapproval would probably lead to a decision to not to go ahead with the marriage. Findings indicated that females were more likely than males to be influenced by their parents, which is consistent with previous research that also found that Chinese females were more influenced on mate selection issues (Guo, Feng, & Wang, 2017).

These findings suggest a shift in the influence of parents on mate selection in Chinese culture. Whereas the approval of parents on their child's marital choice has been a traditional aspect of Chinese culture, the influence of parents has been declining towards more individual choice among young adults.

The findings of this study are best viewed from the perspective of individualism and collectivism. Individualistic and collectivistic societies have different values and beliefs on marriage and mate selection. Individualist cultures emphasize the concept of autonomy and independence from the in-group. Individualism values personal autonomy,

self-fulfillment, personal responsibility, freedom of choice and, personal attributes (Hofstede, 1980; Waterman, 1984; Schwartz, 1990).

In contrast, in collectivistic societies, the goals of the group are higher priorities than personal autonomy and choice, and conformity to group norms and hierarchy is the basic concept of collectivism (Triandis, 1995). When it comes to mate selection, collectivism values interpersonal bonds, responding to the needs of others, and subjugating one's own desires and needs for the good of the family and larger society (Higgins, Zheng, Liu, & Sun, 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 1999). With the collectivistic emphasis of in-group harmony and obedience, marriage has the function of bringing two clans together, which is not merely decided by two people wanting to get married (Thornton et al., 1984).

Using the individualism-collectivism theoretical perspective to interpret the results of the study, the expressed freedom of most of the young adults and members of the younger married group to choose their own partner, regardless of their parents' opinion of their choice of partners, reflects the increasing influence of individualistic values in Chinese culture. On the other hand, the findings of the study also indicate that the collectivistic value of promoting in-group harmony has not completely deserted most Chinese young adults. Many participants, especially females, expressed a desire for their parents to like their partner because it would enhance harmony in the family, but they reported that their parents' disapprove would not change their mind about marrying a person that they had chosen. To maintain the harmony in the family, some participants stated that if their parents did not approve of their marital partner, they would try to convince or change their parents' minds.

Indeed, perhaps the most important contribution of the study is that it revealed the dialectic that many single and married younger Chinese adults experience with the contrasting values of individualism in the process of mate selection and their deep-rooted loyalty to the values of filial piety in honoring the wishes of their parents. In other words, these results indicate that most of the younger participants did not abandon their Chinese heritage in a rush to pursue individualistic ideals of mate selection. It wasn't an "either/or" decision for them; the process wasn't a linear transition from honoring their parents' wishes to making their own independent decision about mate selection. Rather, most of them expressed a respect for both sets of values—individualism and filial piety—and wanted to both choose their own partner and honor their parents.

A limitation of the study is that the participants were recruited in urban Taiwan, and the results may not generalize completely to people in rural regions, the Chinese population in Mainland China, or Chinese populations in other regions in the world. The Chinese population in each region may experience different degrees of Western influence

and modernization of each the region. Despite this limitation, the qualitative nature of the study contributes to the research on Chinese mate selection by allowing for a richness of data that adds important information about the influence of parents on marital choice decisions. Instead of simply responding to a categorical question in a quantitative questionnaire about if they would honor their parents' disapproval of a potential marital partner, the participants in the focus groups were able provide much more nuanced information. They were able to contextualize their decision to marry a person even if their parents disapproved of their choice in a marital partner.

The results of this study point out two important findings that are relevant to therapists. First, therapists need to be aware of changing values and norms in Chinese society as Western and individualistic cultural values influence Chinese society. It is clear that mate selection patterns and norms are changing among Chinese families. Second, it is also clear from the results of this study that there is substantial variation in the pace and level of change. While the influence of Western and individualist values on Chinese marriages is clear, not all Chinese adults, even young adults, have adopted them. Indeed, most Chinese young adults embrace both individualism and filial piety. Thus, therapists need to be sensitive and not generalize individuals' values and beliefs about mate selection to all members of Chinese societies.

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