MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION OF MIDDLE CLASS JAVANESE COUPLES

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ABSTRACT

This research set out to learn more about Javanese couple's strategies in handling their conflict. The strategies of three couples from middle class social status, resident in the city of Yogyakarta, were explored by using semi-structured interview methods and repeating the interviews over three cycles.

It was found that the strategies applied for managing conflict reflect avoidance of conflict, while the strategies for problem solving tend to be strategies related to self management, that is, the attempt to control oneself in order to cope with stress. It appears that these strategies are strongly influenced by traditional values and philosophies.

Keywords : conflict- resolution; Javanese couples

Anthropological studies on Javanese life by Geertz (1961), Jay (1969), and Guinness (1986) show that harmony is the most important value in human relationships. This value is reflected in most areas that include human relationships. These studies find harmony appears to be valued at the expense of emotional expression. People may preserve harmony without emotional attachment. However, when negative feelings do exist, one needs to keep them to oneself to prevent them from disturbing the equilibrium. Geertz and Jay, furthermore, find that harmony is maintained only on the surface and that it never touches the source of negative feelings to be reconciled.

In the past, marriages in Javanese society were arranged and parents did not include emotional considerations in the choices of partners. Geertz (1961, p. 134) notes that adjustments between spouses include pretence of avoiding friction, including pretending to be in love. However, with the impact of social modernization, emotional aspects are now being considered. As shown in Williams' (1990) study, arranged marriages are not popular any more and young generation prefers to have a greater role in their marriage decisions. Parents have to give their blessings to their children's choices. Because the arrangement of marriages today is different from that of the past, the way in which harmony continues to be preserved, is worthy of study.

Koentjaraningrat (1985, p. 263) states that to the Javanese, expression of love is

required between spouses, although open displays are disapproved of. The idea that even positive affections are better not to be displayed even discourages people from expressing their negative feelings and antagonisms toward others. So it is understandable if suppression of such negativity exist in interpersonal relationships. Such suppression, while maintaining peacefulness, may cause an accumulation of animosity and explode into more serious hostility. It is suggested that this can lead to difficulties unless channels for resolution are found. However, finding a way to release tension is not easily done since many other things need to be considered.

To the older generation (Williams, 1991, p. 128) emotional needs were fulfilled outside with same-sex friends because spouses never expected their partners to be their best friends. It can be inferred that when experiencing problems, spouses disclosed to friends. However, disclosing to other people seems to be difficult for Javanese people because they also consider other people as a source of embarrassment. Such consideration is taught very early in childhood. Children are threatened with being made fun of by the neighbors if they know the children's misconduct (Koentjaraningrat 1985, p. 242). This gives emphasis to the fact that children, even adults, have to avoid revealing the bad sides about themselves to others. There is an Indonesian saying *You splash a basin of water and you will wet your own face* which means that people themselves will suffer the embarrassment caused by telling others about their own or their families' bad sides. This saying also stresses people's obligation to maintain their own and their families' respectability.

Thus, most people prefer to keep problems to their selves and try to achieve the Javanese ideal self, that is, to be patient and accepting.

The preservation of harmony between spouses in traditional ways seems difficult particularly for marriages today. Modernization makes people, to some extent, practice more modern values while in some ways they still maintain the traditional. It seems that, among well-educated people, adjustments can be made more easily since they have wider perspective. However, many others do not have the same opportunity. It is assumed then, that among the latter, there is confusion about the task of preserving harmony.

Statistical data shows that the rate of marriage dissolution among Javanese people at Yogyakarta Special Region, which include divorce and separation, tends to decrease every year (Kantor Statistik Propinsi DIY, 1986, 1989). Two possibilities can be put forward to explain this decrease. First, is the fact that arranged marriages tend to end in divorce (Kasto, 1982; Haryani, 1982; Hull, 1983; Partini, 1990). With the change in marriage arrangement, it is thought that couples may be more committed to their marriages and make greater attempts to make their marriages work. The second is that *Undang-Undang Perkawinan* or Law of Marriage established in 1974 makes polygamy and dissolution more difficult, especially for civil servants. The law also states the lower limit of age approve to marry for men and women. This may also have an influence in the decrease of marital dissolution because couples marry when they are considered as already socially and emotionally mature.

These low figures of divorce and separation lead to a question about how Javanese couples approach and solve their marital problems. Amongst other things, more knowledge of this may influence the selection of the appropriate approach of mediation to be applied to this society.

Conflict is an inevitable part of human relationships. It can be positive or negative, depending on how people view it. It is positive when it is functional. Simmel (see Retzinger, 1991) states that conflict "resolves divergent dualism; it is a way of achieving some kind of unity". Conflict is viewed as a "glue" which strengthen human relationships. Coser (Retzinger, 1991) agrees with Simmel. He also suggests that conflict has a function of personal and social change, so that conflict prevents stagnation.

Conflict is also viewed negatively because it can be dysfunctional. Some theorists regard conflict as a disease in the system of human associations, destructive, causing rigidity, and withdrawal between parties (Retzinger, 1991). It seems that the strategy chosen to manage conflict may cause such negativity. Deutsch (1969) states that if people's strategies have the tendency to expand and escalate conflict, that it becomes independent of and irrelevant to the original cause and the conflict will be destructive. Simmel and Coser (see Retzinger, 1991) agree that negativity is not caused by the conflict it self, it results from the intolerance towards conflict and rigidity in approaching it.

Conflict strategy may vary from person to person and from one type of conflict to another, due to many different aspects underlying the choice. However, these strategies can be approached with different views. Two approaches will be described further. The first approach is from the sets of behavior observable in conflict management, and the second is from the quality of settlements resulting from conflict strategies.

Studies applying sequential analysis focus their attention on sets of communication behavior which exist in the way people manage conflicts. One pattern found is the pattern of Demand-Withdraw (Christensen and Heavey, 1990; Christensen and Shenk, 1991) or Pursuit/Withdrawal (Markman *et al*. 1993). This pattern is described as one party, the demander, pressuring the other party through emotional requests, criticism, and complaints in order to make the other party participate in problem discussion and to reach settlement. The other party, the withdrawer, retreats through defensiveness and passive inaction. It seems that in marital conflict there is a tendency for wives to be the demanding parties and for husbands to be the withdrawal (Christensen and Heavy, 1990; Christensen and Shenk, 1991; Markman *et al*. 1993). Noller (1993) on the basis of gender differences concludes that this tendency relates with the differences of power accessible to men and women. Husbands withdraw because by resisting the pressures from their wives they can maintain their power and leave the others in position where they are helpless to act. However, this tendency will only be apparent when the marital relationships is disturbed. Markman, Silvern, Clements, and Kraft-Hanak (1993) found that among non-clinical married sample the pattern of Pursuit/Withdrawal is not evident. This finding supports one result of Christensen

and Shenk's (1991) research which found that non distressed couples are less likely to engage in demand-withdraw pattern than clinic and divorcing couples.

Other sets of communication behavior which can be put forward are those which reflect avoidance of and engagement in conflict, which is distinguished into destructive and constructive engagement (Raush *et al.* 1974) or competition and cooperation (see Fitzpatrick, 1988).

A set of behavior is coded as avoidance when it consists of denial, externalization, or defensive acts (Raush *et al.*, 1974), speaking abstractly about an issue, making jokes and retreating by yielding (see Fitzpatrick, 1988), and avoidance of responsibility for problems or solutions (Miller *et al.*, 1986). Constructive engagement, or co-operation, is a set of behavior emphasizing communalities, initiating problem solving and accepting responsibility (Fitzpatrick, 1988).

Competition, considered as destructive engagement, consists of behaviors which emphasize one party's interest over another's, including negative communication behaviors such as blaming, or finding fault with the partner (Fitzpatrick, 1988).

Solution of problems is an aspect of conflict when one has started. The strategies for solving problems can be distinguished on the basis of the degree of solution. There are strategies which genuinely resolve the conflict, those which resolve problems superficially, and those not resolving the conflict at all.

The strategies which genuinely resolve conflict are those called co-operation (Fitzpatrick, 1984), compromise (Schaap *et*

al., 1988), discussion or integrative communication (Sillars, 1981), constructive engagement (Raush *et al.*, 1974), intellectualization (Straus, 1974; 1979), or problem solving (Schaap *et al.*, 1988). These approaches lead to problem solution and emphasize agreement, mutual understanding of and the benefit gained by the parties involved.

The second category is solving conflicts superficially. Strategies under this category are usually beneficial only to one party and ignore the other's interests. These include competition (Fitzpatrick, 1984), destructive engagement (Raush *et al.*, 1974), pushing-aggression and soothing (Schaap *et al.*, 1988), or distributive strategies (Sillars, 1981). Using these strategies, with the exception of soothing, people sometimes include violence in order to get their own ways. Jorgensen (1977) distinguishes the degree of violence as low, medium, or high, intensity. Straus (1974, 1979) refers to the low intensity of violence as the tactics stressing intellectual approaches, while the medium intensity as verbal aggression, and the high intensity as physical aggression.

Finally, studies on conflict strategies (eg. Raush *et al.*, 1974; Sillars, 1981; Fitzpatrick, 1984; Schaap *et al.*, 1988) have examined avoidance as a strategy for conflict. This avoidance may exist in the form of denial, or externalization (Raush *et al.*, 1974), or relying on the passage of time and 'letting the problems work themselves out' (Gottman, 1993). Withdrawal in the so-called Demand-Withdraw, or Pursuit-Withdraw, pattern (Christensen and Heavy, 1990; Christensen and Shenk, 1991;

Markman *et al*., 1993) seems to be another form of avoidance.

Among Javanese families, decades ago, marital conflicts were handled in a general pattern. Geertz (1961, p. 136) notes that the pattern includes the avoidance of showing anger and of showing the conflict publicly. Giving in, mostly by husbands, is also applied in order to avoid unpleasantness. A common way of handling conflict, however, was found in almost every couple interviewed by Geertz, that is, not to speak for a couple of days as the expression of hostility. It seems that this pattern is positive in that it puts aside anger that may interfere in reaching in solution. However, giving in and not speaking are not supportive in the process of problem solving since couples never talk the problem over.

The approach to conflict above seems to relate with *rukun*, the most powerful value in interpersonal relationships. This value is still strongly held by Javanese people in spite of the changes brought about by modernization. This value manifests itself in every aspect of human relationships. Since authors in Javanese culture ie. Geertz (1961), Jay (1969), Koentjaraningrat (1985), or Guinness (1986), do not give in-depth explanations of harmony in the context of husband and wife relationships, harmony will discussed in general.

Rukun is a virtue in human relationships. Parties are supposed to be at peace with one another all the time. However, when friction and tensions exist, it can be expected they will not come to the surface. This suppression of friction and tensions illustrates the Javanese value of harmony.

Harmony, as suggested by Geertz (1961, p. 46) means ″...co-operation, unity of effort, minimization of conflicts.″ She states further that:

″The direct expression of self-interest is constrained by a desire for rukun (harmony). This value not only guides the participants in their discussions toward compromise but also restrains them from expressions of antagonism and hostility, inducing them to try to maintain an appearance of harmony throughout the process of negotiation. A concern for rukun makes it necessary for the opposing parties to relinquish those personal desires likely to cause overt social disturbance″ (Geertz, 1961, p. 48).

The ideal of the value that consists of a method of negotiation to achieve compromise, however, is rarely practiced as found by Geertz. She notes that: ″...in practice *rukun* actually refers not to mutual aid and co-operation but to the appearance of such and to the absence of overt interpersonal conflict″ (Geertz, 1961, p. 149).

What Geertz has noted indicates that rarely is the value practiced according to the philosophy behind it. People stress only on the appearance of being at peace to avoid disturbing social balance. Similar phenomenon also found by Jay during his study in Modjokerto. He states that harmony as a state of being ″is a state in which all parties are at least overtly at social peace with one another″ (Jay, 1969, p. 66). Thus, the value never touches the reality inside. Considering harmony as the method of resolving conflict, Jay states further:

"...it requires the individual to subordinate, perhaps even sacrifice, his personal interests. In practice this action thus allows the other parties involved, those pressing their own interests, to gain the greater advantage but without hard feelings, angry words, or physical aggression" (Jay, 1969, p. 66).

Thus, Jay's statement about subordination of personal interests is consistent with Geertz's above. However, Jay's statement that not all the parties commit themselves equally in the subordination of personal interests, raise a question about the equality of rights and status. One party has to give in order to reach solution and harmony. Guinness (1986) views this phenomenon from the perspective of the social rank of the opposing parties. Parties of lower rank status are giving in more.

Harmony may manifest itself in various ways, depending on the particularity of the situation. The way to achieve harmony itself is interesting since it seems that there are no specific rules relating to how to achieve it. A more certain rule exists particularly in matters involving properties such as divisions of inheritance and belongings caused by divorce or death (Geertz, 1961; Jay, 1969). However, there is no rule or guide about how to manage personal conflicts when they escalate to the surface. Guinnes (1986) notes that harmony can be achieved through many virtues such as family-like solidarity, the unity of efforts, or intimacy. It seems, therefore, that the maintenance of harmony is more concerned about preventing conflicts and less about restoring a disturbed harmony.

METHOD

The present research looks at sensitive issues in couple's relationships. It requires a sensitive methodology and the one enables to understand subtle differences. For this reason, naturalistic inquiry was chosen.

Participants

This research focuses on couples who appeared to be non-distressed. The purpose was to better understand conflict resolution strategies in relatively happy relationships. Three couples of Javanese society involved in this research. They had the following characteristics live in Yogyakarta, a city in which society is more traditional than modern, come from a middle social class with middle to higher levels of education.

It should be noted that Javanese people who live in Yogyakarta have been found to be different from those who live in other part of Java. Mulder (1992, p. 53) found that differences in manner are apparent between Javanese from Yogyakarta, South-Central Java, and East Java. So, in order to limit variation in the sample only those from Yogyakarta were chosen.

The participants in this study are the Ahmadis (Markonah and Mamad), the Hardiyantos (Monica and Frans), and the Sumantos (Hayati and Rahadi).

Procedure

The aim of naturalistic research is to understand constructive realities and this can be achieved through in-depth data collections. Couples involved in this research, each partner was interviewed in

three cycles, which meant a total of six cycles with each couple. This procedure gave the opportunity to cross-examine the statements of each partner and clarifying misunderstandings and areas of continued uncertainty.

Recording the data

The subjects were interviewed in a semi-structured format which were taped recorded and the results were presented in verbatim transcripts. The reason for using this method is that it gives the participants opportunities to develop their answers in ways which are meaningful to them (Burgess, 1984). It also allows the researcher to probe for details (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975) to construct a comprehensive understanding about an issue.

Questions were focused on disagreements experienced by the subjects. The aim of questions was to illuminate two main areas: a couple's conflict-management and problem-solving methods. To obtain descriptions about disagreements experienced, the questions were based on: (a) behaviors appear in disagreement; (b) responses to problem statements; (c) how problems were stated; and (d) what has been done to solve the problems.

Disagreements in husband-wife relationships may exist in many areas. Problems in daily life may be categorized into emotional and non-emotional matters. They may also differentiated into daily, personality, and structural problems. Therefore, different strategies may be used to handle each type of problem. In order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding about a participant's strategies,

particular questions were asked which related to each of the above categories.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In general, it can be concluded that all participants perceive quarrelling negatively. They tend to see that quarrelling is destructive and dangerous to their relationships.

The use of the term *ramé* to refer to quarrelling indicates their perception that people tend to be aggressive and destructive in disagreements. Quarrelling is also perceived as a social stigma. These perceptions influence the strategies applied during disagreement. Although each participant uses different strategies, these have similarities in their nature.

Conflict Management

The main strategy for conflict seems to be avoidance. This avoidance manifests itself in forms of the participants' reluctance to get engaged in disagreeing conversation, stopping the coming tension directly, and their avoidance of raising problems.

Some strategies are used for not engaged in disagreement. It is interesting that saying nothing (the participants used the term *diam*) is the main strategy chosen by the participants. By not responding the participants seem to let their spouses release their tension without any response to prevent the tension getting worse.

"…*when my husband talked harshly I would say nothing…whenever he was angry with me, it was my turn to keep silent, to say nothing…I am afraid that*

if I say something then the situation will get worse…" (Markonah Ahmadi).

"…I *feel disappointed...and often say nothing because of it...I speak to him less than usual...although we interact normally. Sometimes I speak a little for three days..."* (Hayati Sumanto).

"I said nothing when she argued...it did not mean that I was angry with her...I only tried to speak less...when she is angry with me I will listen and stay diam…" (Rahadi Sumanto).

"…*It is better for me to ngalah (accept it that way)...because we usually get into a quarrel when I say something about it (my husband's attitude)... I often find other activities such as going out for a while...I comfort myself by doing something I can do...*" (Monica Hardiyanto).

"…*when there is a problem, conflicting or disagreeing now and I only stay diam (keep silent) ...I understand that she could not accept or agree with my idea...I stop the discussion...I prefer to ngalah rather than to get ramé ...when we get ramé, and this is my habit, I avoid her…* " (Frans Hardiyanto)

Sometimes the action of not responding is continued with withdrawal (known as *neng-nengan* or *jothakan*).

 "...Sometimes I speak less for three days..." (Hayati Sumanto).

"...we usually do not speak to each other when we had problems..." (Monica Hardiyanto). *This statement is consistent with the husband's:*

"...she used to ignore me for sometimes…we stayed diam for an hour or two or even one whole day, but I

prevent this to happen for three days…" (Frans Hardiyanto).

Other than being not responding and giving in the avoidance to keep the tension low appear in some other ways. Agreeing without arguments with partner's decision (*manut*), being tolerance and understanding (*ngemong*), withdrawal with *neng-nengan* or *jothakan* (both meaning not to speak to each other), making indirect responses or shifting the topic of interest and joking, and physical avoidance are the alternative of avoiding tension.

To avoid raising problem the participants also use self-management strategies. These strategies are attempts to change oneself rather than the situation, through analyzing a situation as objectively as one can, or ignoring and forgetting the problem.

"*I tell myself to forget it... I don't want to think about it anymore... I released it away. Cuddling the baby or playing with the children can "wash" my anger away... it's gone, just like that... those kids are my consolation, so we were never not speaking for a whole day ..."* (Markonah Ahmadi).

"…*I usually think that it is not worth it to make a problem*…" (Monica Hardiyanto).

"…*I think her words were cynical, but I accepted them...I would understand but it took a longer time to be aware of it...I admitted that she was right*…" (Mamad Ahmadi).

"…*that I did introspective thinking (mawas-diri)... trying not to do the same thing in the future...*" (Hayati Sumanto).

The perception that quarrelling is destructive is probably affected by the tendency to include aggression as a strategy for disagreeing. Although the participants make the attempt to be careful with this aggression, they seem to be unable to leave it. The Ahmadis' verbal aggression is softened by directing their words to the other (their son).

> "*He said (to our son in the manner that I could hear him) 'your mother will certainly will not let you'...next time obey your mother Arief…*" (Markonah Ahmadi).

> "*My wife told our son '...pinch your father' or 'pull your father's leg hair…*' (Mamad Ahmadi).

Monica and Hayati express their aggression passively through the state of not to speak to each other. This also evident in the participants' perception that quarrelling is better not to be heard by other people, that disagreement may cause negative impression toward the quarrelling couple.

> "*…if other person is present, then I will say nothing to my husband…*" (Markonah Ahmadi).

> "*I will suppress my anger the best I can do in the presence of other people…*" (Mamad Ahmadi).

> "*I do not like the children hear us in heated situation...we were quarrelling and my emotion was still there for two or three days. A guest came. We joked and when the guest left we started to speak again...so the guest would not know that we had a problem at the time…*" (Hayati Sumanto)

> "*…if they can hear us in quarrel they may get a certain (negative conno-tation) impression about us...(in our situation) tension was ended when a guest came...we got rukun again...*" (Rahadi Sumanto).

> "*…when somebody came we talked in usual manner...when the person left we continued what we had left…*" (Monica Hardiyanto).

> "*...if other people knew that we were disagreeing they would perceive us as never be at peace...other people should know that our relationship is harmonious..."* (Frans Hardiyanto).

These modes of aggression may suggest non-assertiveness, which is probably due to the participants' lack of communication skills.

Problem Solving

Discussion is a strategy claimed by the participants as their problem-solving method. Usually, discussion occurs in a delayed manner, that is, after a time-break following a quarrel.

> "*...we are at ease sitting around...we talk about what had happened the day before…*" (Hayati Sumanto).

> "*...so I delayed to wait for the right moment…* (Frans Hardiyanto).

The term discussion to the participants, however, seems to engage both parties differently. Each participant perceives discussion as a strategy to give explanation or disclose one's feelings without inviting reaction from the other.

"...but before I started I warned him that I did not want us to quarrel..." (Hayati Sumanto).

"What I can do is giving her explanation...because I thought it (what I had done) is alright I explained it to her..." (Rahadi Sumanto).

"...she spoke to me again... I explained to her what I had meant with what I had said last time. I consider this as a means of solving problems…" (Frans Hardiyanto).

In cases of Frans Hardiyanto and Hayati Sumanto, they even take the role as 'an expert' that they initiate discussions, provide and decide upon solutions.

"...it seems that my husband is often manut (agreeing without too much complaint)...I made more decisions than my husband...he is more passive…" (Hayati Sumanto).

"...but many solutions came from me...(they are) not absolutely mine...I will put more ideas for better solutions…" (Frans Hardiyanto).

The participants also indicate that they avoid engaging their partners in dealing with their own problems. The wives prefer to apply self-management strategies such as *mupus* (it is no need to make a situation a problem) and being *nerima* (accepting without complaint), distracting themselves from the problem and forgetting, *mawas diri* (do the introspective thinking) and blaming themselves, or thinking rationally to make themselves understand their husbands. Ignoring problems and leaving them to be solved by the time are strategies shared by the wives, Rahadi, and Mamad.

"I ignored him...I told myself to forget it (the problem)...it had gone away...(Markonah Ahmadi)

"...it happens many times that problems are not solved...they are solved by themselves...they just gone..." (Hayati Sumanto).

"I tried to forget it...I will not think it as a problem..." (Monica Hardiyanto).

"...I could not share the problem, I thought about it myself. Then I thought it would be better if I think about things I can manage rather than feeling stressed..." (Mamad Ahmadi).

"...I released my emotion by writing down... whatever I like to write, I went out...when I was home later there was no problem anymore..." (Rahadi Sumanto).

The husbands, on the other hand, use a self-management strategy such as physical avoidance to cool themselves down. This indicates that they avoid being engaged in destructive manner caused by their being emotional. Refusing to 'attack' the problem directly also appears to be Rahadi and Mamad's strategy. Rahadi's writing his 'emotions' down and Mamad's using religious quotation ('...your sin is your own responsibility. Your right and left angels will register your good and bad deed...'), are strategies that close the possibility for quarrelling. Frans seems to be the only one who prefers sensible and direct actions.

These self-management strategies, of course, do not guarantee a genuine solution for the problem. However, they are safer strategies to use because they will not raise disagreement. To cope with stress, the participants need other people to disclose

to. All, except Markonah, are willing to share their problems with other people and ask them for suggestions. However, none seems to choose professionals as the right people to disclose to. Moreover, the disclosure is still limited to general problems. These facts suggest that these participants are still reluctant to share their marital problems. This may be a result of the idea of keeping marital problems secret from other people, being an idea shared by Markonah, Mamad, and Frans. This reluctance, however, is also consistent with the idea of giving a good impression toward others.

It seems that in general, the above strategies are not very effective in coping with stress. There have to be strategies that help these participants to release their tensions. However, there were not explored during the interviews. It seems that Hayati is the only one willing to disclose her feelings to her close acquaintances and thus release her tension through it.

The strategies used by the participants suggest that these participants perceive their engagement in conflict to be destructive. Therefore, they prefer avoiding rather than getting engaged in disagreement. It is also interesting, however, that although they avoid being destructive they do not make the attempt to engage in constructive manner either. The state of not speaking to each other usually ends because of simple routine activities. It never is intentionally ended with problem-solving strategies. Furthermore, none of the couples mentioned that tension was ended with an apology. Mamad even admitted that expressing an apology was difficult for him. Hayati perceived that expressing apology was not necessary because when

her relationships with her husband were back to 'normal', this meant that the matter had been settled. Probably, expressing an apology is not customary to these couples. More about this matter will be presented in the discussion.

DISCUSSION

The strategies applied by the participants in managing their disagreements may reflect the tendency of avoiding conflict. As Gottman (1993) points out, conflict avoider do not have specific strategies for resolving conflict. They regard the solution of problems by the passage of time and working things out alone as problem-solving methods. These strategies suggest that conflict avoiders never handle a problem directly by working on it. Rather they ignore or deny its existence.

The self-management strategies applied as problem-solving methods found in this research, seem to be similar to what are called coping strategies (see Sabourin *et al.*, 1990). Some strategies such as *mupus* and *nerima*, forgetting, or ignoring, reflect what is called resignation and selective ignoring. These coping-strategies are defined as passive strategies because people do not do anything actively about their problems. What is interesting about Sabourin and associates' (1990) study is that the use of resignation differentiates distressed from non distressed couples. It is also suggested that distressed couples use more passive coping-strategies, which even exacerbate conflict.

Considering Sabourin and associates' finding above, the present research participants' tendency to avoid conflict and coping strategies raise a question about

their marital status. According to this finding, their strategies reflect the characteristics of distressed marriage. However, regarding the method of classifying couples by, for example, Halford *et al.* (1990) and Christensen and Shenk (1991), that seeking marital counseling is a sign of distress, these couples cannot be considered distressed. But it should be noted that, among Indonesian people, such professional services are still regarded as luxury. People prefer to seek advice from their close friends as another coping strategy. This raises another question of whether the participants are distressed or whether they are behaving appropriately within the culture. Researchers such as Sayers and Baucom (1991) and Margolin and Wampold (1981) have applied the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale to couple from Western cultures. However, one would need to be very cautious in applying such scales to other cultures because of its culture-bond characteristics.

Within the Javanese culture the choice of conflict resolution strategies appears to be strongly influenced by the philosophy of *rukun* and what is called the inner-centered aspect of Javanese inner life (Reksohadiprodjo, 1973). The tendency to avoid conflict is also culturally based.

As indicated by Jay (1969, p. 66) *rukun*, or harmony, is a mode of action. It may also be a strategy to manage conflict. However, as he puts it, the manifestation of *rukun* itself may appear in many different ways. They are similar in that they reflect *rukun* as the state of being, or harmony. Thus, what have appeared as different strategies to avoid conflict may reflect this

rukun because they maintain relationships low in tension.

The tendencies of the participants to stay away from conflicts and solve their problems superficially, however, suggest that they preserve harmony in appearance only, and ignore the harmony 'inside'. This supports Geertz's (1961, p. 149) remark about *rukun*:

> '*The term* rukun ... *signifies a state of agreement, of unanimity in a group concerning its means and purpose, at least in outer behavior. If there is no overt expression of divisive opinions and feelings, the the group is said to be* rukun'.

Rukun can also explain the reason for the participants' using self-management strategies, such as *mupus*, being *nerima*, and *mawas diri*. Because the most important aspect of *rukun* is the absence of overt conflicts, these strategies will avoid 'inviting' argument caused by disclosure.

The preference for self-management strategies can also be explained by what Reksohadiprodjo (1973) refers to the inner-centered aspect of the Javanese inner life. To the Javanese, people are responsible for their own feelings and actions. Thus, they have '...the inclination to solve problems of life through introspection or *mawas diri* first, before acting in relation to the outer world' (Reksohadiprodjo, 1973, p. 20). Through introspective thinking people will achieve calmness and thus have a clear mind that enables them to think objectively and creatively. Blaming the world outside for their feelings and actions is considered immature and naive. So, the participants' self-management strategies are consistent with this aspect of Javanese inner life.

These strategies, however, also suggest that the participants rarely disclose to each other about their feelings. Although *nerima* and *mupus* will enhance their tolerance toward frustration, they will need someone else to share their feelings. Interestingly, although the husbands disclose to trustworthy people, they share only their general problems. This suggests that they try to manage their marital problems themselves. Two of the wives, on the other hand, were willing to share their feelings with other people they trust. Thus, these participants, to some extent, release their tensions with the help of other people.

The participants perceive conflict as destructive. Their use of the term *ramé* to refer to disagreement indicates that it may include anger. There are some Javanese remarks about being angry, such as those mentioned to explain Markonah's being angry, for example, 'Do not be angry, you will look older than you are'. This kind of remark made to tease an angry person. It is not that a person does not have the right to be angry, but the remark indirectly emphasize a better way to solve what makes a person angry. Another Javanese expression puts this: '*Ana rembug dirembug*', meaning 'If there is a problem then lets discuss it'.

The destructive perception of conflict seems to be strong because the participants include aggression in their strategies. However, this destructive engagement does not occur because hostility is expressed in more socially desirable ways, that is, through *jothakan* or *neng-nengan*. These terms refer to a passive way to express aggression.

The participants' negative perception also discourages them from arguing openly or in a loud voice. This is to maintain the family's good impression. Moreover, the fact that these couples live very close to their parents (or parents-in-law), where the possibility of being overheard quarrelling is high, may force them to use low-tension strategies.

The attempt to maintain a good impression, probably, also affects how these participants present themselves in this research. In some ways, they are still reluctant to reveal their conflict experiences. However, their revelations that seem very limited, may also reflect their denial or forgetting of their unpleasant experiences caused by conflict.

Another interesting finding is the absence of apologizing. Asking somebody for forgiveness is known in the Javanese culture. This is an important mean to achieve *rukun* (see Jay, 1969, pp. 177-9). Asking forgiveness is important because animosity may cause illness, physically or psychologically. However, apologizing spontaneously seems not to be customary to the Javanese. It is more common, as Jay describe it, that asking for forgiveness being performed in a more formal way. A person asks another for forgiveness, if the other is a neighbor, will come to the other's place and speaks his or her asking for forgiveness in high Javanese. The formula, as it is translated into English, is: '(I) beg forgiveness for all may faults', and this is followed by a beg for blessings (see Jay, 1969, p. 179). There are some interesting parts about this asking for forgiveness. First is the formality of performing it, that it is spoken in high Javanese. Second is that the formula does not mention explicitly what mistake has been done toward the other. Thus, generality can

cover the shame of being wrong. Thirdly, it is performed when people are disturbed by illness. It seems that people become aware of their wrong doings after some considerable time. This suggests that people are not ready to apologize when they are aware of their making mistakes, but wait until they are 'reminded' by circumstances such as uncured illness.

The mode of asking forgiveness, that is, by formal, general, and delayed performance, may explain why the participants are not expressing apologies. This is the matter of habit not there. To these couples, changing themselves is a sufficient expression of admitting mistakes.

CONCLUSION

Traditional values appear to influence people's behavior strongly. This may alert professionals who work in family therapy to at least, two considerations. Firstly, attempts to change communication behaviors may require a considerable length of time because such attempts have to include the changing of behavior strongly entrenched in the culture. Secondly, the traditional attitude of *nerima* influences strategies of coping with stressful life. Kodiran (1975, p. 350) argues that the people's attitude of *nerima* makes them highly value the ability to withstand sufferings, but gives them little incentive to try to change their situation. It is assumed that this attitude also affects the people willingness to make attempts to solve their marital problems. The term being *jodho* (being matched because of their fate) or not being *jodho* any more (Geertz, 1961) may reflect this attitude. Thus marital problems or dissolution are regarded as nobody's

fault, they are merely because of the couple's fate. This attitude, therefore, will make it difficult to motivate people to do something about their marital problems.

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