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PREVIEW

**Evaluation of the Use of Western Instruments for Assessing  
Chinese Couples' Marriage**

**by**

**Guohua Xia**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty of**

**The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska**

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**For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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**Under the Supervision of Professor Barbara Plake**

**Lincoln, Nebraska**

**December, 2002**

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Evaluation of the Use of Western Instrument for Assessing

Chinese Couples' Marriage

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**Evaluation of the Use of Western Instruments for Assessing  
Chinese Couples' Marriage**

**Guohua Xia, Ph.D.**

**University of Nebraska, 2002**

**Advisor: Barbara Plake**

Many theories and models were developed in the last several decades about marriage functioning and its assessment in Western cultures, but few were developed in the Chinese culture. When Western instruments are translated and used among Chinese couples, the validity of the constructs developed in Western cultures become questionable. After reviewing the major Western models and instruments, this study combined qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate Chinese couples' perception of marital quality and their perspectives about using directly translated Chinese versions of two selected Western instruments, LWMAT and ENRICH, to assess marital quality of Chinese couples. The participants of this study think both of the instruments covered most important aspects of the marital life of Chinese couples. However, the results also revealed that the investigated Western instruments did not cover some of the important aspects or did not address some of the issues adequately in assessing Chinese marriage quality. Many Chinese participants regarded some of the items in the LWMAT as being not of much significance or incapable of distinguishing good Chinese marriages from bad ones. This study provided evidence suggesting that the face validity of many translated items of ENRICH is questionable. Differences in religions, social economic environments, value systems, thinking

styles, linguistics, and other factors make many items in ENRICH not suitable or problematic to be directly translated and applied to Chinese marriages. This study found that Chinese participants have a tendency to use moderate answers instead of extreme responses to the statements in ENRICH. The data obtained in this study suggested that the items with reversed wording seemed to be more likely to be troublesome. The practice of using mathematical or statistical methods to standardize the score and set a norm for Chinese couples may not erase these problems. It is warranted to do further study related to these issues in order to develop a valid and reliable instrument for practice and research related to the marriage with Chinese culture background.

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**This work is dedicated to**

**my family**

**and**

**all the people**

**who contributed to this study**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION TO ASSESSING MARRIAGE IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD

In the last several decades, there has been significant progress in the area of assessment of marital relationships. A large amount of research has been conducted to study marriage in the Western culture. Many theories and instruments have been developed to describe and evaluate marriage in Western cultures, particularly in the White-culture in the United States (Conoley & Bryant, 1996; Johnson, 1995; L'Abate & Bagarozzi, 1993; McCubbin, Thompson & McCubbin, 1996; O'Leary, 1987; Olson, McCubbin, Barnes, Larsen, Muxen, & Wilson, 1982). However, instruments to evaluate marriage relationships in Eastern cultures have not been studied so widely and deeply. A few instruments used in mainland China are translated versions of some popular instruments developed in Western culture (Wang, 1993).

Many studies have been conducted on the validity of scores from some popular psychological instruments about individuals and their possible cultural biases have been pointed out. Potential solutions and correspondent methodologies were discussed in depth (Sodowsky & Impara, 1996; Suzuki, Meller, & Ponterotto, 1996). However, the biases in results from using translated Western marital evaluation instruments in non-White cultures have not been studied as well. Some researchers think that conceptualizing and administering culturally sensitive

procedures for family evaluation may be more difficult than that for individual evaluation (Conoley & Bryant, 1996).

Marriages from different ethnic groups have different marital values, interaction styles, and ideations. Some widely used marital evaluation instruments and constructions that were developed in White culture may not be suitable to use in evaluating marriage from other cultures. For example, several instruments developed in the Western culture were translated into Chinese to evaluate the well-being or quality of marriage and family. Some efforts were made to correct the possible problems when translating them into Chinese, the language of the evaluated family. The psychometric quality of them was tested by quantitative methods on samples from Chinese population. Specific norms were developed for the correspondent population. However, the validity of concepts or constructions developed in White culture is still questionable when used in Chinese culture. These constructions have to be revised to become “usable” in Chinese culture (Lewinshon & Werner, 1997; Philips, 1993).

#### Problems in Using Translated Western Instruments in Chinese Culture

There are some obvious limitations on the applicability of these marital instruments developed in different cultures. For example, religion is theorized to play an important role in Western couples' marital lives. In Olson's Marital Quality Questionnaire (ENRICH), one of the major factors consists of 10 questions about religion beliefs and activities (Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1986). Several items regarding religion are included in this instrument's global satisfaction of marriage,



too. However, to most couples from mainland China, religion became a less emphasized aspect after the Cultural Revolution. Therefore usefulness of directly translated Chinese version of the ENRICH instrument in practice and research is limited. Factor analysis may not detect the inappropriateness of some questions in a translated questionnaire. And new norms based on a sample of Chinese population may not remove or correct the problems lying in the construction and concept produced by culture differences.

At a deeper level, the validity of items for constructs developed in the Western culture may be still questionable for application in the Chinese culture. For example, self-disclosure and talking about self-feelings and opinions, valued as openness in families in the White culture, might not be considered as good manners. This might cause confrontation in Chinese cultures and become a stress source in family or marital life. In a study (Xia, Xia, & Ding, 2000), it was found that among investigated Chinese couples the group of couples who had the highest score on the Communication Satisfaction subscale of Olson's ENRICH-Chinese version (Li, 1993) showed the lowest score of self-reported health status as measured by SCL-90C (Wang, 1984). One of the possible explanations for this result is that the score obtained by a Western questionnaire might not accurately reflect the true picture of marriages in the Chinese culture. The valued marital communication style in the white culture may not be a healthy style for Chinese persons and may be related to a worse perception of their health status (Xia, Xia, & Ding, 2000).

Phillips and colleagues found that some items in the Family Environment Scales (FES) were clearly inappropriate because of the religious differences between Western couples and Chinese couples. While translation and counter-translation were used to guarantee accuracy in translation, it turned out that Chinese couples had difficulties in understanding some items translated from English, not only the religion related items. Some linguistic expressions translated from English could not be understood in the way the writers expected although the translated expressions were believed to reflect the original meanings most accurately (Phillips, Shen, Zhen, Wang, Wang, & Jian, 1991).

In some qualitative interviews using the Chinese versions of the FACES-II (Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales) and FES (Family Environment Scale), the researchers found Chinese respondents interpreted some items in a way different from the Western respondents. For example, an item about morality in Western culture was thought to reflect the level of conflict (disagreement) by Chinese couples. Another item, "In our family everyone goes his/her own way," is negatively correlated with overall family cohesion when used on Western sample. However, it is not the case when it was used in Chinese couples. Many Chinese respondents felt that the item reflects allowed freedom, a positive attribute of family (Phillips, 1993). Here even the face validity, which was not questioned before by the experts in revising the instrument, became questioned. A similar problem was also noticed when this instrument was used in ethnic minority groups in the U.S.; several

of its items “may mean something in the Anglo American culture and something very different among certain minority families” (Conoley & Bryant, 1995, p116).

On the other hand, some important family values, such as courtesy and harmony, in oriental cultures were not presented in these scales. This researcher believes that the most appropriate approach for the evaluation of non-White families is to base instruments directly on the first hand data from investigations of non-White families themselves. Using qualitative research method, some concepts and construction that reflect the reality more accurately might first be developed to describe healthy versus dysfunctional families or marriage in a specific culture. Then, appropriate instruments or scales may be developed to evaluate the functions and problems in families or marriage of that certain culture. A problematic practice in a culture may not be an issue of concern at all in another culture.

#### Approach to a Cultural Specific Instrument

Generally, the contents of a scale should be developed from observation derived from research and practice in a certain cultural environment. What questions should be used in the scales, which area or function of marriage should be covered in evaluation, should come from some pilot field studies. Then new constructs should be established based on the data collected through further study based on the developed pilot instrument from the previous study. So, to develop an instrument to evaluate marriage in another culture, the contents of the instrument should come from a field study in that specific culture, here for this study, the Chinese culture.

**This study was designed to develop a conceptual basis for a pilot instrument to evaluate the quality of marriage of Chinese couples. It will mainly be a qualitative study although some quantitative data will be used in this study. The first goal is aimed at finding the basic concepts and components of strength and problems in Chinese couples' marriages. The second goal will aim at checking and analyzing how well translated Western instruments can be used for collecting data to assess Chinese couples' marriages.**

**The field of professional psychology is quickly developing in China to respond to the need of a huge population for professional help in dealing with marriage and family problems. This development is demanding a reliable instrument for this culturally specific group to more accurately evaluate the quality of marriage of Chinese couples.**

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER TWO

### CONCEPTUALIZATION OF MARITAL QUALITY—FROM REVIEW TO HYPOTHESES

Marital quality has been a topic for scientific assessment for a long time. The Locke-Wallace Marriage Adjustment Test was believed to be one of the earliest and most widely used marital quality assessment devices (Locke & Wallace, 1959). During 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, research on the measurement of marital quality bloomed in the United States and other major English-speaking Western cultures (Glenn, 1990; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Sabatelli, 1988; Spanier and Lewis, 1980). A large number of instruments were developed before a clear definition of the assessed construct was formulated. Therefore, many problems emerged. Several reviewers have addressed the development and concerns in marital measurement from different perspectives (Glenn, 1990; Sabatelli, 1988). This chapter reviews the conceptualization and theory development associated with assessing marital quality, focusing on the developments of the 90s.

So far, there is not a widely accepted, clear definition of the quality of marriage. In a literature review, Spanier and Lewis (1980) defined quality of marriage as “the subjective evaluation of a married couple’s relationship on a number of dimensions and evaluations.” In their review, the quality of marriage refers to a collection of perceived characteristics or traits that mark how good a marital relationship is or how well a marriage functions. The quality of marriage may include multiple variables or dimensions that depend on the observers’ points of

view. Marital satisfaction, marital adjustment, marital happiness, marital stability, commitment, conflicts, etc. are all constructs that have been studied as indicators of marital quality (Sabatelli, 1988).

From the large number of publications about this subject, the following standard was used for selection and exclusion of articles. Before 1990, only articles that directly addressed assessment issues were included, as well as any reviews on this topic. For publications in 1990 and there after, any available articles that discussed the constructs, theories, and associated issues in the assessment of marriage quality were included. For cross-cultural studies, any English articles published in major cited journals associated with marital quality assessment were included. Some unpublished dissertations and conference presentations directly related to Chinese couples' marital quality were also used.

### **Marital Quality Assessment, Constructs, and Theories**

In the last several decades, a significant amount of research has been conducted in the area of assessment of marriage and family. Many instruments were developed to assess the functions of marriage and family in the Western culture. Besides the literature reviews mentioned above, many published books discussed a wider collection of the instruments used in research and practice of marriage and family professionals (e.g., Conoley & Bryant, 1996; L'Abate & Bagarozzi, 1993; McCubbin, Thompson, & McCubbin, 1996; O'Leary, 1987). Variable approaches were utilized in these instances: from insiders' self-report questionnaires to outsiders' observing rating scales; from evaluating global function to evaluating specific aspect

of marriage life; from simple one-item questionnaires to very complex multi-method evaluation systems. These approaches were well described in the mentioned books and reviews. This chapter focuses on the construct and theory development in assessing marital quality by self-report questionnaires. However, to help the reader better understand the context, Table 1-1 summarizes basic information about the instruments discussed in this review. The review in this chapter is chronologically organized by decade and mainly addresses the developments in the 1990s after a brief review of studies of the earlier decades in this section.

#### Studies Before 1990

Study of marital quality started with marital happiness (Hicks & Platt, 1970). Other constructs associated with the marriage quality include marital satisfaction, marital adjustment, etc. Most of these constructs do not have clear definitions that were widely accepted by researchers. In the literature search process for this study, at least one review was found associated with the study of marital quality in each decade after the 1960s (Glenn, 1990; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Sabatelli, 1988; Spanier and Lewis, 1980). By briefly summarizing the associated contents of these reviews, the following section will introduce the studies associated with development of construct, theory, and measurement before the 1980s.

Research in the Sixties. In their review of research in the sixties, Hicks and Platt (1970) indicated that most early studies of marital happiness and stability were not theoretically orientated and had few specific hypotheses. Most studies were searching for empirical referents of marital happiness and stability among different

variables that accounted for the variance in marital happiness and stability. These studies found that higher occupational statuses, incomes, and educational levels for husbands; husband-wife similarities; affective rewards; and age at marriage are all positively correlated with marital happiness and durability. Having children tends to detract from marital happiness.

Research in the Seventies. During the seventies, more research was conducted on marital quality and the associated conceptualization and theory. Spanier and Lewis (1980) summarized studies done during the 1970s on marital quality and related concepts. They noted the increased inclusion of husbands in the studied sample, more attention to couples and joint assessment of both husbands and wives, more utilization of observational data collecting techniques, greater attention to methodological and measurement issues, effort to build up theories, more interest in “dyads” as a general form of marital relationships, and more research on an international scope compared to the research in the 1960s.

In Spanier and Lewis' view (1980), one of the significant developments in marital research in the seventies is the implicit recognition that the quality of marriage involves multidimensional phenomena. They also believed that the marital quality does not fit in discrete categories but is a continuum from high to low. In conceptualization, they also mentioned other writers' contributions to conceptual clarifications. Some examples include the effort made by Burr (1973) and Rollins and Galligan (1978) to define marital satisfaction, the study done by Spanier and