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**FAMILY SOCIAL CAPITAL: ROLE OF FAMILY NETWORKS IN THE
CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROCESS OF RECONCILED COUPLES OF
LAHORE, PAKISTAN**

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Abstract

Marital relations are neither created nor operated in isolation. They sprout and flourish within the warmth of family networks. Considering that joint family system is the most prominent family arrangement in Pakistan, the role and position of families cannot be ignored in the marital relation of spouses. They remain active throughout the main stages of the married life including wedding arrangements, marital adjustment phase and completion of marriage. Therefore, the role of families cannot be undermined in conflict management of the spouses. There is a glaring gap in the existing literature regarding the role of family as third party reconciliators in the conflict resolution among spouses. Therefore, the current paper aims to understand the role of family as reconciliator in the conflict resolution process of reconciled couples of Lahore. Using interpretive research paradigm, ten union councils were selected using purposive sampling having highest number of reconciled couples during the years 2018-2021. The researchers used the records of the union council to contact the reconciliators. 10 reconciled cases were randomly selected from the records and accordingly 20 reconciliators, one from each side, were recruited in the study. The data was collected using in-depth interviews and the technique of thematic

analysis was used to draw conclusion. The findings of the study suggest that the family social capital play a positive role in terms of its function in the conflict resolution of the spouses.

Introduction

Difference of opinion leading to conflict in marital interaction is inevitable. Sometimes this conflict aggravates to a point where the relation itself becomes endangered. For the survival and persistence of the relation it is pertinent to resolve these conflicts amicably. There can be various methods used for the resolution of the conflict among spouses from negotiation and accommodation to confrontation. In a joint family system of Pakistani society, the conflict resolution of spouses is not just limited to the spouses only. Family networks are engaged actively to resolve conflict among spouses. There is a glaring gap in the existing literature regarding the role of family as third party reconciliators in the conflict resolution among spouses. Therefore, the current paper aims to understand the role of family as reconciliator in the conflict resolution process of reconciled couples of Lahore.

The role and position of families cannot be undermined in the marital relation of spouses as, in Pakistani society, marriage is not just an association between spouses but it is the source of linking two families together (McDonald, 1981). The families play active role in the spousal relationship because of their family arrangement i.e. joint family system which is the most predominant family system comprising of married children and their spouses living with their parents (Widmer et al., 2010). The most common reason of such family arrangement is considering parents as vital responsibility of the son in their older ages (Dayton et al., 1996). Leaving a joint family system to build a nuclear family system is considered disloyalty towards parents and a male son may face informal sanctions, for instance, labelling as 'disobedient' son or 'Joru ka Gulam (Henpecked)' which is disapproved by the society and is considered a threat to the culturally accepted hegemonic masculinity (Lewis, 1973; Connell, 1995). Therefore, despite all the conflicts that occur in a marital relationship, male spouses prefer staying in a joint family system. On the contrary, female spouses consider living in a joint family system as interference in their personal life with additional share of responsibilities with the belief that their marital life can improve in nuclear family system (Cherlin, 2004). The loyalty pull of spouses towards their natal families shows lack of trust for their respective in-laws which can be hampering for the access and mobilization of family social capital to resolve spousal conflicts.

Living in a joint family system makes the family an active agent and agency in the marital relation of the spouses. They remain active throughout the main stages of married life including; wedding arrangements, marital adjustment phase and completion of marriage (Felmlee & Faris, 2013). Therefore, role of families cannot be undermined in conflict management of spouses.

Reconciliation strategy and reconciliation stages

The family members as reconciliators can be using multiple strategies to resolve conflict among spouses. The reconciliators are chosen by both the parties in the conflict. They may be head of the family, the elders of the family, the person with reconciliation history or the close kin member of the disputed parties.

As discussed by Bogacz (2020), the reconciliators can provide a confidential vent to the family members by dealing with anger of the disputant spouses. The spouses can share their grievance with the reconciliators and in furtherance, the reconciliators, while conveying these grievances to

the other party can replace the harsh words used by a spouse in high emotional intensity. Their focus remains on the issues and not on the words or the people. They neutralize the emotional burst of the spouses. Another vital strategy of the reconciliators is to resolve the impasses by showing broader solutions of the issues. They can provide choices to the disputants and can change confrontational situation into cooperative and conducive environment of dialogue and reconciliation. Considering the hostilities of the parties to the dispute, the reconciliators also opt for private sessions with the disputants independently to make them realize the gravity of scenarios and their consequences. Last and most important strategy of the reconciliators is to restore the trust and respect of the spouses for each other. They attempt to highlight the hard times that spouses shared and successfully overcame due to the strength of their relationship. They also try to point out the cordial traces of their marital relationship to revive the warmth of their relationship. As discussed by Payne (1999) the reconciliation begins with setting the stage by listening to the disputant parties and knowing the cause of the conflict. The next stage is defining the issue and at this particular stage the reconciliator identifies the demand and the issues of agreement and disagreement of the spouses to this demand. The third step includes processing the issue. At this stage reconciliators encourage spouses to brainstorm about the available solutions for the reconciliation. They attempt to revive the trust among the spouses so the dialogue among them and their relevant family members could be initiated. Last stage is the resolving stage. At this stage, the spouses have explored all the possible solutions of their conflict. They either completely or partially agree with the condition. If they don't agree to any of the available solutions, the resolution process is terminated.

Family social capital and reconciliation of spouses

Family social capital is a multidimensional approach with the purpose to provide mutual benefits to the network members (Lin, 1999). The hierarchical structure of the networks defines the access and mobilization of family social capital by the members of the network. Therefore, the access and mobilization of family social capital is not equal for all individuals and this inequality may be manifested in the strategies and stages of conflict resolution opted by the reconciliators.

The most vital component of family social capital is trust and reciprocity. These two are also important for the successful role of reconciliator. Usually in spousal conflicts, the reconciliators are the family members or close friends who are more like a family (Yuan, 2019). Therefore, it can be said that reconciliators access and actively mobilize their family social capital in reconciliation of spouses. The three main dimensions of family social capital include; cognitive social capital, structural social capital and relational social capital (Claridge, 2018). The structural social capital is tangible and is a manifestation of the network ties. The roles of the network's actors are defined through structural social capital. This helps establishing the position of the reconciliator in the network and his/her power to influence or bring spouses on the negotiation platform. The second dimension of the family social capital is referred to as cognitive social capital. The cognitive social capital provides the environment of shared understanding through collective norms, values and beliefs (Donati & Tronca, 2008). Being the insider of the family, this dimension of family social capital helps reconciliators in developing the understanding of the spousal conflict in a better way. They can clearly understand the dynamics and magnitude of the issue due to tacit understanding of the culture. Resultantly, they can provide culturally relevant and acceptable solutions for all the disputants. The relational dimension of the family social capital is also very critical for the role of reconciliators as it nurtures the trust, reciprocity, obligations and expectation of the family actors in the network. All

three dimensions of family social capital are interrelated and interconnected. The defined position of the reconciliator in the family networks defines the access and mobilization of family social capital (Prandini, 2007). The reconciliator uses family social capital to bargain and negotiate the solutions and conditions of reconciliation between spouses. However, the normative orientation is an active guiding factor in proposing and accepting the reconciliation conditions (Donati, 2014).

Methodology

The current study lays its foundation on the interpretive research paradigm. Ten union councils were selected using purposive sampling having highest number of reconciled couples during the years 2018-2021. As per the Muslim Family Law Ordinance 1961, the chairman of the union council is bound to constitute an arbitration council and refer the matter of divorce to it within 30 days of receipt of notice. This arbitration council consists of three members i.e. the chairman / administrator of the union council and one representative of each party to the divorce as nominated by the party upon notice by the chairman union council. It was due to this reason that the participants were recruited from the data of union councils where there were formally declared arbitration councils in each dispute case. Reconciled couples were taken as baseline to recruit reconciliators because reconciled couples were helpful in identifying the occurrence of conflict which led them to file divorce. Moreover, the reconciliation between the couples was also an indication that a family member has played a role in reconciliation. Hence by selecting couples who filed divorce but later reconciled, provided the opportunity of contextual generalization of the study.

The union councils and other local bodies are governed by the Local Government and Community Development Department. The Assistant Director Local Government and Community Development acted as gatekeeper to provide access to the data at the Union Councils. He tasked the secretaries and Chairmen of the selected Union Councils to provide the data of reconciled couples which was compiled and provided to the researcher. The researcher used the records of the union council to contact the reconciliators. 10 reconciled cases were randomly selected from the records and accordingly 20 reconciliators, one from each side were recruited in the study. Reconciliators of couples who had filed divorce notice within the first five years of their marriage and were living in a joint family system with at least one kid. The data was collected using in-depth interviews.

The steps followed for analysis of data included familiarization, verbatim transcriptions, translations and data anonymization. All in-depth interviews were transcribed and were later translated into English. While, transcription and translation, the colloquial phrases were focused and were not translated into English in order to keep their true essence and meaning in the study so that the true feelings of the interviewee could be depicted. Lastly, the structural categories emerged with similar and thick descriptions. It helped to develop the themes of the study. In this manner, the thematic analysis helped in bringing all-inclusive and coherent picture about the phenomenon of the study. The technique of thematic analysis was used to analyze the data and draw conclusion.

Findings

To explore the role of reconciliators, it is vital to understand the organization of families within the family social networks. Positioning of the actors of the family networks determines the structural, cognitive and relational dimensions of family social capital. Resultantly, the access and mobilization of family social capital will be obtained and utilized by the actors of the networks to initiate and negotiate the reconciliation process of spouses. The marital interaction of spouses cannot be determined and explained without positioning them in the families as families remain active in their lives and they cannot take decisions independently. The families can play vital role in bridging the relationship of spouses together. In order to understand the marital interaction of spouses, it is vital to understand the dynamics and power negotiations of the natal families of the spouses. Therefore, the findings of the study categorized in the major themes of conflict resolution approaches and strategies used by the families to mediate the reconciliation process of spouses.

Conflict resolution approach of spouses' natal families

In Pakistani social setup, the status and power of a mother is defined by the gender of her child. While she is in the position of a mother of a son, she is considered more powerful, controlling and in a dominating position. Whereas, while the same woman, in the position of a mother of a daughter, is more vulnerable, docile and in a compromising position. As stated by the mother of daughter:

Parents of daughters can never say that their daughter was right if they want to protect her marital relation. However, I feel that girls should adjust and follow the norms of the in-laws. Daughter's parents have to accept all the intentional or unintentional actions of their daughters and accept that son-in-law is right in all aspects. Any complaint about son-in-law or his family may aggravate the fights (Samina, 50).

Whereas, the family of the male spouses showed dominance towards the families of their daughters-in-law while discussing the family issues. They were unwelcoming as reflected in the statement of the mother of the male spouse:

Her parents used to contact me for non-issues. I didn't know what their daughter kept telling them and rather making her mend her ways 'amma khat phone uthate or mujhe ker detein' (Mother makes a phone call to me on her daughter's complain) every girl works at home 'in ke beti kon se toup chala rahe ha?' (What special her daughter is doing?) Therefore, I did not pay attention to their call (Kubra Bibi, 58).

Therefore, it can be said that the negotiation power of issues is not same for all families. Being in a dominating position in family networks, the family of the male spouse has the authority to steer the relations and conditions of reconciliation in their own favor.

Trust, obligations and expectations among family members

Trust is the underlying and implicit functionary of the family social capital; especially in relational dimension of family social capital. There is never a blind trust kind of agency which operates among the families of in-laws. At the time of proposal finalization stage, people have more trust on their own assessment and evaluation which guides them to accept or reject a

certain proposal. The evaluation criterion of proposal may vary from family to family and may include; income of the male spouse and family status, efficiency of female spouse in domestic tasks and her beauty, reputation of families and the marital success of already married kids of in-laws. Later the development and strengthening of the trust depends upon how the child of one family is being treated by his or her in-laws. As stated:

We were finding a family who had similar normative system as our family for adjustment to be easy and conflict free. But later my daughter-in-law proved unkind towards my other children. How could I accept her if she was not ready to accept us. I assumed that her family was sensible but rather making her understand, they encouraged her to keep her focus on husband while ignoring others (Zainab Bibi, 60).

Another family shared their mistrust as:

They wanted to keep a control over my son. I had a feeling that they must have casted some spell over my son. Therefore, he always listened to what they used to say and acted accordingly. I always felt scared that they would snatch my son from me (Shumaila, 59).

The family of females usually didn't experience bad behavior of in-laws directly. Rather they built their opinions, expectations and relationship on the reporting of their daughters' interaction with her in-laws. As confirmed by a participant:

They had never done anything bad with us directly. Our daughter kept discussing the problems with me. But if they were not able to keep our daughter happy then how could have we been able to trust them and base of relationship got weak and now even we can never be contented and risk-free from the married life of our daughter (Fareeha, 56).

This reflected the trust deficit among family members from both sides. Family of female spouses believed that all the hurdles faced by their daughters were due to her in-laws. In the same manner, the family of the male spouse shared insecurity of losing their son to his wife and his in-laws. It is obvious as in Pakistan, the residence system after marriage is patrilocal. Female spouse leaves her natal family house so she has high expectation from her in-laws to have a complete ownership of the new family. Whereas, the parents of the male are also aware that their son developed a new relationship, so when the son becomes father, he would be inclined towards his children and would be ready to give preference to his own children over his parents by making compromises for the continuity of his marital relation. Therefore, the insecurity of the parents of the male that their son may leave the house for the betterment of his children, is natural. To overcome this fear, both families use the family social capital in a negative way in order to overcome their insecurities. As a consequence of this negative use, conflicts arise in the family. Hence family social capital, when used in a negative way, increases the cost of maintaining a relationship.

The negative overuse of family social capital can escalate the matters to the extent of breaking points of relations. It was observed that it was at this point when the families did not want the

conflict to continue and the negative role of family social capital was suddenly converted to a positive role and it was utilized for reconciliation. As stated:

Father of my daughter-in-law called me and to inform about the divorce notice. We both have been in a good relation so knows the nature of each other. He said that he was sure that this notice was sent without my which I confirmed. I immediately went to his place with my wife and apologized for the action of our son to bring our daughter-in-law back (Subhan, 61).

It was also learnt during the research that the family of the female spouse believed that the conflict in the marital relation of their daughter was due to the undue interference of her in-laws but at the same time, they admitted that the reconciliation in the marital relation of their daughter would not have been possible if it had been against the aspiration of her in-laws. As stated:

The undue interference of her in-laws made the situation worst. Roz roz ke khich khich se koe bhe tang a jae (anyone can be disturbed with the regular conflicts). It is difficult to leave parents so ultimately, males decide to leave their wives and the same happened with my son-in-law. kher jo bhe howa, mamla sambhala bhe unhon ne he (whatever happened, ultimately, the in-laws of the daughter resolved the issue). They didn't let their son divorce my daughter and played active role in reconciliation (Sardaran, 55).

Role of reconciliators in conflict management of spouses

In addition to the direct involvement of the parents of the spouses, the presence of third party/reconciliators was found and highlighted by the respondents. It was noted that the reconciliators used their wisdom and power positions to bring about positive results in a conflict. The reconciliators tend to be neutral to resolve the issue in favour of larger interest of the family that lays in reconciliation of the spouses rather fulfilling the current demands and achieve lowest level of satisfaction. As quoted by the reconciliator, Irtaza (56), "I tried to listen both parties to come-up with the solution agreeable by both parties. I can easily judge the mistakes but blaming is not the solution." It was found during the research that the reconciliators did not tilt towards any one party but played the role of a mediator, who was listening to both parties and trying that the demands of any one party were fulfilled in such a way that the other party would also not feel pressed against the wall in adherence to such demands.

Normative understanding of reconciliators about spousal roles

The general understanding of reconciliators about the marriage and the responsibilities and privileges of both the spouses was noted to be very clear. It was noted that all the reconciliators were well equipped with the understanding of the roles of both spouses that it is the wife who had to take care of the domestic and household chores and it was the husband who had to play his part in financial matters and major decision making which aligned with the broader gender values of the patriarchal society of Pakistan. In cases where these roles were overlapping, for example when a female spouse was also a working lady, the reconciliators believed that the minor role of an earning female should be compromised over the major role of a female addressing the household chores. If her domestic duties were being affected by her job and her

husband is not happy with her job, she should quit the same and address her prime duties. As narrated by a reconciliator of the female spouse:

I personally believe that girls should be allowed to do job if they want to and can manage domestic chores also. But if it is causing conflict as the husband of my niece put a condition that either she has to leave job or marriage, then she should be quit job immediately. Khali sukhi naukri sir p marni ha. Aurat ke asal hakomat us ka ghar ha (what she will do with earning if she has to leave the house? A real woman should be ruling her house) (Irtaza, 56).

Continuity of marital relationship

The continuity of marital relationship was also considered very important by the reconciliators who believed that a marital relation should continue in any way possible. The continuation of marriage was believed to be important as the protection of marriage would result in protection of the children. It was also important because religiously, divorce was only halal act which was considered unwanted. The reconciliators were also noted to believe that divorce was considered a taboo in the society for the partners as well as their families. A divorced female would never get the respect that she would get while her husband is on her side. From a male point of view, the reconciliators believed that the female in his life was instinctively specialized to take care of the children and domestic chores in a better way than a male, hence males lagged behind in this segment, therefore, it was also important for the male that this relation should continue. As narrated by a reconciliator:

It is matter of our family repute. People consider that remarriage is difficult for wife but it is equally difficult for males. Especially when it comes taking care of their kid. Step-mother or step-father cannot take care of the kids as their own parents can do. The worst effect of divorce takes place on kids and we don't want that (Sajjad, 63).

Strategies of reconciliation

During the process of reconciliation, the mediators were contacted by the families and conveyed the situation they were facing. It was at this time that the reconciliators acted with prudence and used their minds to resolve the matter amicably. It was noted that reconciliators, out of the will to settle the matters, did not communicate the grievances of one party to the other. They acted with vigilance and toned down the complaints of one party while communicating to the other party in order to create a settlement environment between the two. As quoted by a reconciliator:

She was being very aggressive and used foul language even and asked me to convey it to my nephew, but I avoided it and toned it down, I did convey him her intention but not in exact words as this could have further aggravated the matter which could never have resulted in a reconciliation (Waqas, 53).

It was also noted during the research that the reconciliators believed that the family of the male spouse were in a power position and were using their dominating position at times to show unwanted attitude and were more demanding at times. As quoted by the reconciliator from female side:

Initially they were hesitant and unwelcoming. They were showing arrogance and power of being the parents of the son. They said that we have not asked your daughter to leave the house. She left it by her choice. Our son is very capable. We can find any girl for him (Irfan, 56).

To resolve the impasses, the reconciliators also tried to cut down the demands of one party to a level that the other party would not feel that the reconciliators were taking sides with the first party in asking them to accept these demands. It was noted that the most common demand for reconciliation, especially from the girl's parents' side, was to get a separate home. The reconciliators used their negotiation skills, private counselling and brought these demands to a separate portion in the same house rather than a separate house which could have resulted in a financial burden on the parents of the son. The reconciliators were observed to believe that even otherwise, staying in the same house with minimal interaction would keep the family fabric strong rather than staying in separate houses. The reconciliators were seen using their convincing qualities rather than influencing qualities in getting the matters settled which appeared to reflect long term results. As narrated:

She had a firm demand of a separate house. My brother was not agreeing to this demand. I convinced my brother to give his son a separate portion in the same house and then convinced her that a separate portion was as good as an independent house. Now they are living a happy life. Wese bhe roz ke laae se behter ha 2 din baad milain per achay se milain (It is better to live separately and meet happily after every two days rather living together and fighting on daily basis) (Jibran, 50).

The reconciliators believed that as a result of their mediation, things turned for good. They were found to believe that when they played their part and both the families showed flexibility, it resulted in a better marital relation and a sustainable overall family. They were found to state that initially, the conflicts started because of families noting even the minute details and the conflicts got exaggerated and situation reached to divorce. But at the same time, these reconciliators believed that it was the flexibility shown by both families that the things did not get to the point of no return. As stated:

In a divorce, a single person is not responsible. It is a collective wrong that results in such incidents. Some people have big role and some have a small role in such incidents. It is important to ignore the mistakes of children and give them freedom to make things work in their own style (Hassan, 55).

Therefore, it can be said that family members play vital and active role resolving the conflict of the spouses used techniques including; anger management of spouse, resolving impasses, providing personal counselling and restoring trust among spouses and their families through discussions.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore the role of family as reconciliators in the dispute resolution process of reconciled couples by using family social capital.

The findings of the study showed that the positioning, quality and utility of the family relations influences the functionality of family social capital (Chan et al., 2008). Family social capital was found to play a positive role in terms of its function in the conflict resolution of the spouses. The trust deficit among families of the spouses is alarming as it may hamper the functioning of the family social capital by restricting individuals from sharing information and helping each other in the family (Monemi, Naved, & Persson, 2008). The cognitive social capital was found to be active in terms of defining the roles of the spouses and their families. This study reflects the normative orientation of our family networks which defines the role of spouses within the distinctive gender roles as private domains are for female and public domain is for male. Therefore, during the reconciliation process, the reconciliators preferred the spouses to comply with the defined traditional roles (Dempsey, 2005). The gender and hierarchy of actors defines the role expectations of the individuals as a mother of a son, she guides her son to keep control over his wife, be the man and not to perform domestic tasks and not to involve his wife in decision making. On the other hand, while the same actor, i.e. the mother, is guiding her daughter, she tells her to be more submissive towards her husband, to compromise over any misdoings of her husband etc. so that the family life of the daughter does not get disturbed (Greif, & Woolley, 2019). The position of individuals in any network is guided by their role as givers or takers. In the marital arrangement, the male spouses and their families were considered superior than female spouses and their families which does not keep exchanges at mutual and balance level. It was considered that it was a favour of the family of the male spouse on females and their families that they are providing her the opportunity to stay with their earning and well settled son. The expected return is service of daughter-in-law. The giving and taking in any relation defines the power relations. Therefore, the daughter-in-law is treated with authority by her in-laws, whereas, the son-in-law is treated with respect and his all due and undue actions are expected to be accepted by his in-laws as he is taking care of their daughter in financial matters and her name is because of the name of her husband. This shows the positional advantages to few actors in the network (Partanen et al., 2008) With such imbalances in the exchanges, the negotiation of spouses also become difficult and affects the process and outcomes of the negotiations.

Family unit has a prime position and breakage of the family unit is not acceptable to all the actors. Therefore, despite problems in the married life, reconciliation, sorting out issues or waiting of good times with the patience is expected (Umubyeyi & Mtapuri, 2021). It was found that divorce was considered taboo and breakage of family network which could be disruptive for the family system (Konstam et al., 2016). This provides a baseline to the reconciliators who used this argument as vital to encourage families for make necessary adjustments for reconciliation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reconciliation process of spousal conflicts is not a linear process and multiple actors play their role in it. The hierarchical structure of family networks creates power, access and mobilization of family social capital among the actors of the networks. However, its role for reconciliation is positive. The structural functional social capital defines that the reconciliators are usually, heads of the family or the elders who play their role in reconciliation. The cognitive structural dimension provides shared understanding of family norms which makes them a reconciled couple on a condition of extension of a main family unit. Whereas, the relational dimension of social capital strengthens the trust and reciprocity among the families of the spouses for the restoration of the relations.

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