

# Why do They “Commuter Marriage”?

## Interpersonal Communication: the Commuter Marriage Couple Cases

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**Abstract**—Living apart for spouses can be one of the causes of conflict. For the commuter marriage couples, trust, respect, and openness are the key to success in maintaining the marriage. This research analyzed eight commuter marriage couples, the established type, who have been married for more than 13 years with children. The couples are forced to stay far apart for work reasons, so the frequency of meeting can be done at least once a week. This research used effective interpersonal communication theory and conflict management to analyze commuter marriage couple in maintaining their marriages. The results showed that maintaining communication and interpersonal relationships can maintain marriage for commuter marriage couples, the established type, as a commitment to their marital goals. The majority of commuter marriage couples always maintain openness, supportive attitudes, empathy, positive attitudes and sincerity in the pursuit of marriage, although limited by time and space. Mutual trust, supportive, and openness encourages mutual understanding, mutual respect, and mutual development of interpersonal relationships. In addition, the handling of conflicts by informants is positive and constructive without breaking interpersonal relationships. The results also proved that each pair manages the conflict differently. Some of them use compromising, accommodating, collaborating, avoiding, and competing. In addition, the development of information technology also facilitates communication access to each other. Hence, time and distance differences are not an obstacle.

**Keywords**—*interpersonal communication; commuter marriage; conflict management*

### I. INTRODUCTION

No one is willing to live apart from their partner. Ideally, husband and wife live in one house and live happily with their children. But in reality, there are some married couples who are forced to stay far apart because of the demands of work and profession, such as civil servants. Being civil servant is desired by most of the Indonesian people. This is due to several factors such as getting a basic salary that rises along with economic inflation, benefits, and not pursued by the target. In fact, in addition to some of the advantages and benefits of being a civil servant, there are obligations and responsibilities that are also demanded from civil servants. They must be willing to be deployed across Indonesia, even in conflict areas.

Regarding income and benefits, working as a civil servant and a foreign worker abroad is very profitable. However,

working overseas or being a civil servant who must be willing to be placed anywhere has some risks and consequences. They must live far away from their family. Therefore, many married couples with this condition must do commuter marriage. The most frequent reason for commuter marriage couples who have to undergo long-distance relationship is due to job demands or continuing education.

Commuter marriage is a marriage condition in which married couples must live geographically separated within a certain period, which is temporary. This condition is done consciously, voluntarily without coercion from other parties, and also not because of divorce. They choose or have to go through it in order to pursue a career. In general, the wife of a marriage commuter couple takes care of the house and raise the children. Meanwhile, the husband becomes a weekend husband — works in a big city, and comes home maybe only once a week maybe more, some even meet once in six months or even ten months.

Based on the background description, this research is suitable to examine and analyze the interpersonal communication that occurs in the commuter couples. In addition, this study is also mandatory to evaluate the conflict management that occurs in commuter marriage couples, especially the established couples, who have been married for over 10 years.

### II. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses constructivist paradigm. Certain experiences, preferences, education, and social environment can be used to interpret social realities with their respective constructs. The experience of the marriage commuter wife is a social reality that has their own construction. Knowledge and experience of the informant will give meaning and add a different view, because the reality is always changing based on the activity of commuter marriage couple (the established type) which is different from each other, in this case, commuter marriage couple because of work factor.

This research was conducted using qualitative approach and phenomenology research method. According to Moleong (1995) [1], in the phenomenological view, the researchers sought to explore and understand the meaning of events and their connections to people in certain situations, not assuming

that the researchers know the meaning of something for the people being studied. This study explores the experiences, memories, and things experienced by the informants. Starting from the understanding of marriage including the commitment and purpose of marriage as the foundation of husband and wife relationship, the communication process that occurs between couples, and handling conflicts that occur between them.

Informants in this study were the wives of the commuter marriage couples (the established types) due to work factors. They were two wives of husbands who work for Indonesian National Army (TNI), two wives of sailors, two wives of civil servants, and two wives of private employees. In addition, the marriage period of the informants was over 10 years, the meeting frequency was at least once a week, and they have children. This research was conducted with interviews in Jakarta, Bandung, and Yogyakarta.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

According to Gerstel and Gross (1982) [2], the Commuter marriage is a marriage condition in which married couples must live geographically separated within a certain period of time, at least three nights per week for a minimum of three months. The same thing was also expressed by Gletzeer and Federlein, (1978: 4) [3], as follows: "Commuter marriage is a voluntary arrangement where dual-career couples maintain two residences in different geographic locations and are separated at least three nights per week for a minimum of three months".

Gerstel and Groos (1982) [2], states that marriage commuter couples who are married for less than 13 years with or without children tend to experience difficulties. Young couples have not lived long enough with their spouses, they are still in the process of building trust and knowing the advantages and disadvantages of their partners. Commuter marriage couples (the established types) are at risk when communication is not open, dishonest, and disbelieving with each other. Meanwhile, according to Anderson (1993) [4], the main factor of commuter marriage is due to economic, occupational, or educational factors.

According to Groves and Horm-Wingerd (1991) [5], the advantages of commuter marriage lifestyle includes career opportunities, professional autonomy, independence, appreciation of together, as well as reduced focus on dissent and frequency of arguments. Meanwhile, the disadvantages of commuter marriage are a financial problem, loneliness, lack of personal and professional support systems. These are due to lack of time to build and maintain relationships, negative attitudes from friends, family, colleagues, and society. In addition, it can also lead to tension in marriage and family, decreasing satisfaction in sex life, yearning for important family moments and daily experiences, as well as lack of social life, hobbies, and individual life.

Based on the results, the informants stated that marriage has its own meaning in nurturing a household. All informants choose their partners on their own choice rather than matchmaking by parents. According to informants, marriage is a process that occurs between those involved, in this case, the husband and wife. Marriage is not a sudden process. Therefore, time is needed

to understand each other. Their marriages are bonded by a commitment, both written and oral. However, not all informants have a written commitment to their marriage, but they have mutually agreed on commitment.

#### *A. Interpersonal Communication Effectiveness of Commuter Marriage Couples*

Interpersonal communication is the process of sending and receiving messages by two people who have interpersonal relationships. In this study, researchers focused on interpersonal communication that occurs in the context of marital relationships. According to Devito (Liliweri, 1997: 13) [6], an effective interpersonal communication involves openness, empathy, supportiveness, positiveness, and equality.

Stewart L. Tubbs and Sylvia Moss (1973: 9-13) [7] assert that effective communication can lead to five things. They are understanding, joy, influence on attitudes, improved relationships, and actions. However, failure in communication can also be influenced by interpersonal relationships between the communicants. Effective communication is characterized by good interpersonal relationships. The failure of secondary communication will occur when the content of our message is understood, but the relationship between the communicants become damaged. Taylor et al. (Rachmat 1996: 119) [8] states, "Effective interpersonal communication involves many elements, but perhaps the most important interpersonal relationship".

The results show that the commuter marriage wives have understood the marital commitment as a foundation for fostering and nurturing the marriage. They still want a bond with their husbands. Moreover, they also need their husbands' support and confirmation. Meanwhile, the husbands' main wish for their wives is love and devotion. The wives stand beside their husbands to support and realize their dreams, contribute a second opinion, and become a pleasant discussion partner. The wives also become the husbands' third hand that ensures the husbands' need, as well as become a warm and comfortable "home".

There are several factors that influence the effectiveness of interpersonal communication between commuting marriage partners, they are:

- Openness. The wives always wait for the news from their husbands who work outside of the town or abroad. Then, the husbands regularly send news or ask condition at home by mail, phone, text, or skype. The wives appreciate it happily and excitingly as their husbands communicate with them. Communication by phone media usually lasts 5 minutes to 90 minutes depending on their situation.

As communication goes, most of the wives tell everything, nothing is covered, and open to each other. As Mrs. SH stated, "Everything is open, Alhamdulillah nothing is hidden, I cannot do that". In line with Mrs. EH, "Everything is discussed, whether the condition of the house or future plan". Openness has also been done by Mrs. AF, "Since we decided to stay far apart, we are committed to open on the bitter and sweet things.

Everything is open, it depends on timing when to tell everything”.

- Empathy. The empathy shown by each pair varies, from support and prayer to frequent phone calls. Mrs. SY's husband's attitude always gives a feeling of empathy for the problems that face them, “My husband always gives a solution to a problem by conditioning my situation and ability, which will solve every problem”. Similarly, Mrs. EH's husband has the same attitude, “Give each other attention and help to solve the problem. So, there will be no burden. Alhamdulillah, my husband always supports me and give me the solution”.

Meanwhile, Mrs. AF's empathetic attitude is shown by being a good listener. “First, I am not a dominant talker, so I listen more and become a good listener. If he asked the solution, I will tell him. If I do not know the solution, I will just listen to him. Certainly, because we live apart, if the problem is something that I can help, I will help him. For example, there was a bill that had to be paid in Jakarta, then I will help him immediately. However, if the problem is work-related, I cannot offer my help but I will be a good listener”.

- Support. The support of wives or husbands when facing problems is shown interchangeably to reinforce each other's strength. They also discuss intensively the problems to get the best solution. The obedience as a wife of a soldier is shown by Mrs. SY, “My husband is the head of the household (although he lives apart), but he supports me to solve the problem I face”. Mrs. EH always gets full support from her spouse because of the proper communication. Mrs. EH stated, “Alhamdulillah, I am comfortable because we communicate well”. Mrs. NM stated positively about the problem that happened to her husband “Well ... I usually support him to fight and always keep positive thinking”.
- Positivity. When couples facing a problem, they try to stay positive voluntarily. They support each other and try their best to solve the problem without the interference of others. Despite the distance between the commuter marriage couples, the sense of longing, expressions of affection, or a common sense of regret, such as “sorry, thank you, I love u, miss u,” is more often spoken by husbands. Just like expressed by Mrs. EH's husband, “I Love You”. Mrs. LD's husband often expresses affection. Even in his phone, LD's ID is written with “my love”. “Frequently, if we fought, he would apologize. I was too proud to do that. He also would bring the children to apologize to him. The fight usually never last for more than a night. My husband also says the word ‘I love you’ more often”.

In addition, romanticism is also shown by Mrs. SH's husband with either words and pictures or by Skype. “Him, why? I have no idea, especially when we chat. He would be like ‘thank you for being by my side’ and he would also say ‘I love you’. I am too proud to do that, so he is the one who does that.”

- Equality. In running the household, wives share roles with their husbands despite their distant presence. The

communication has made the wives feel the presence of the husbands despite their distant residence. Another thing that is also done is to always “keep and touch” on a regular basis by calling more than three times a day or periodically. Thus, the wives will not feel playing double roles in running their households.

Communication routines make Mrs. NM always feel her husband's presence, “We feel like we always stay together. So, I am applying this to my kids. They should know that this is our decision, a joint decision. It is something we have discussed. So, we play our roles even we are apart”. It is the same with Mrs. LD's husband. “I take every role as the house keeper, phone keeper, chef, ojeg driver, I do everything. Even though my husband is apart, but I feel his presence because we keep in touch by phone every night. He is physically apart, but he is always in our heart”.

### *B. Conflict Management of Commuter Marriage Couples*

Communication and conflict cannot be separated from all aspects of domestic life. A happy marriage is not determined by the presence or absence of conflict, but on how the parties are involved in managing the conflict. This confirms that whether a conflict will be constructive or destructive is dependent on the strategy of conflict management and the resolution. The way married couples in the family manage conflict is dependent on the family system in which the couple comes from.

According to DeVito (1997: 286) [9], conflict is an emerging contradiction between interconnected individuals. It can be said that conflict will not occur if there is not a close relationship between two individuals. A conflict that is not immediately resolved will develop into a crisis that can damage a relationship, both in interpersonal communication and organizational communication. According to Budianto (2014: 154-168) [10], surviving in times of crisis more dependent on the relationships that have been built. In general, the crisis is seen as a situation or event that has more negative implications for a relationship, including the organization, than the other way around.

Meanwhile, a research conducted by Riblita Damayanti et al. (2017: 81-100) [11] found that conflict resolution has a positive and significant relationship ( $r = 0.123$ ) between social support from friends and violent behavior in a relationship in the category of the perpetrator category. In addition, conflict resolution also has a positive and significant relationship ( $r = 0.254$ ) between social support from family and violent behavior in a relationship in the category of the victim.

Most informants in this study did not have problems that tended to be a great conflict, only differences of opinion or miscommunication in order to find the best solution. All problems are solved together, excluding others, except children who sometimes act as mediators between their parents.

Robert R. Black and Jane S. Mouton (DeVito; 2013: 295-296) [12] suggest two dimensions of conflict resolution, they are;

- Cooperativeness; which relates to the size of one's effort to satisfy and fulfill the interests or desires of others.
- Assertiveness; which relates to the magnitude of one's effort to satisfy and fulfill his own interests or desires.

Moreover, There are five ways in which conflict management can be identified through both dimensions: Competing (assertive, uncooperative); Collaborating (assertive; cooperative); Avoiding (unassertive; uncooperative); Accommodating (unassertive; cooperative); and Compromising (between assertive and cooperative).

Openness, honesty, and trust make Mrs. SY's marriage avoiding a significant problem. Mrs. SY said that "we rarely got into conflict, just different opinions. Discussions or I just follow him. We do not involve other people, we solve it alone".

Meanwhile, Mrs. LD's marriage also rarely had a conflict. If there was a conflict, the children would act as a mediator to overcome the differences with her husband. This is stated by Mrs. LD, "I have never, in 18 years of marriage, I had quarrel less than my fingers could count. The kids know we rarely fight. If we fight, it is because we are discussing our kids. So, the kids come to me and say that my husband is calling me and the kids do the same to my husband. Since I do not really apologize, my husband would apologize first. There has never been a great conflict".

The results also show that the way of handling or conflict management of each pair is different. There were three informants using compromising (EH, SH, and NM), two informants using accommodating (LD and SY), as well as three others (LR, AF, and SM), using collaborating, avoiding, and competing respectively.

TABLE I. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

INFORMAN	COMPETING	COLLABORATING	AVOIDING	ACCOMMODATING	COMPROMISING
LD				Obeying a joint decision and upholding the husband as the head of the family.	
SY					
EH					Agreeing on a joint decision
LR		cooperative and assertive in making a decision.			
SM	Running away from the problem				
SH					Agreeing on a joint decision

Table I, Cont.

AF			Postponing the communication until the situation is safely under control		
NM					Agreeing on a joint decision

Source: Arranged by the Researchers

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The informants' marriages remain harmonious and the quality of communication and interpersonal relations are well preserved. They survive because they realize and understand the meaning of commitment, the purpose of marriage, loyalty, and responsibility as they promised with their wedding vows.

Five important elements in strengthening interpersonal communication as revealed by DeVito, the majority of couples constantly maintain the element in order to maintain their marriages, although limited by time and space. Mutual trust, supportive, and openness encourage mutual understanding, mutual respect, and most importantly develop mutual interpersonal relationships. A healthy interpersonal relationship will never be free of conflict, including the eight informants of this study.

During their marriage, these commuter marriage couples are not always having their marriages run smoothly. Boredom occasionally appears between them. However, they can overcome the boredom by doing activities that are useful and have positive values. They usually do some sports, recitation, hanging out with friends, sightseeing, or watching movies with their kids.

The conflict between them is relatively constructive. They stated that conflicts occur in a relationship are common and they also agree that the conflict should be resolved properly. Eight informants in this study had different ways of resolving conflicts, both positively and negatively. However, in general, the conflict can be resolved properly without having to damage the interpersonal relationship. All problems are solved together, or involving the children.

Understanding the meaning of commitment and marital purposes for commuter marriage couples make their marriage survive. The development of information technology, such as mobile phones and internet, also contributes to a better communication access. The time difference is not an obstacle in communication. The intensity of communication is high enough to build a good personal relationship. The majority of these commuter marriage couples show the harmonious, safe, and comfortable marriage. The conflict management by these commuter marriage couples is solved by interpersonal communication strategy that involves tolerance and openness.



TABLE II. INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IMPLICATIONS OF COMMUTER MARRIAGE COUPLES

INFORMANT	INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION	INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP	CONFLICT MANAGEMENT	OTHER SUPPORTS
Indonesian National Armies (TNI)	Interpersonal communication is a social process in which people influence each other.	Mutual trust, supportive, and openness encourage mutual understanding, respect, and most importantly mutual interpersonal relationships. One of the sailor couple informants does not take in their relationship, even though the marriage period has exceeded 20 years. Hence, the relationship feels bland.	The conflict between them is relatively constructive. They stated that conflicts occur in a relationship are common and they also agree that the conflict should be resolved properly. Eight informants in this study had different ways of resolving conflicts, both positively and negatively.	Understanding the meaning of commitment and marital purposes for commuter marriage couples make their marriage survive. The development of information technology, such as mobile phones and internet, also contributes to a better communication access. The time difference is not an obstacle in communication. The intensity of communication is high enough to build a good personal relationship.
Civil Servants	Seven couples are at a familiar stage even though they are separated geographically and within a certain period of time. There is no change in the attitude of the couple when reunited and it even makes their relationship more romantic. One pair of sailor is still like in the introduction stage (stage 2).			
Sailors				
Private Employees				

Source: Arranged by the Researchers

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