

Research Article

Discussing Sex in Marriage: How Married People Maintain Intimacy During Pandemic

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ORCIDWiwik Novianti: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8419-0136>**Abstract.**

Studies on sexual communication are rare in Indonesia. Talking about sex is not easy for Indonesians, especially Javanese, to do. Sex is something sacred and taboo to talk about. So for many people, sex only needs to be done but does not need to be discussed, even with their partners. Couples spend more time together during the pandemic, but data shows that divorce rates are increasing. This qualitative study aims to understand the verbal communication used by married couples when they talk about sex and the implications for intimacy among them. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews with ten married couples in Banyumas, Central Java. The data were analyzed using a phenomenological approach. Four major themes emerged: Sex as a necessity, sex as an obligation, the choice of contraceptives, and Banyumas culture as a reference in marriage. From the research, it was found that talking about sexuality in marriage increasing intimacy with the spouse and also fostered feelings of being valued by the spouse.

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1. Introduction

The increasing divorce rate year after year has become an intriguing social phenomenon to be learned by researchers from various fields of study. Lack of communication is one of the most frequently disclosed reasons many couples divorce (1). The emotion of incompatibility, constant fights, or having different goals indicates a communication problem in a relationship. Misunderstanding among couples while receiving messages may also become a conflict. A partner's disagreement on something may lead to an argument if the delivery is not appropriate.

From the perspective of communication science, the language usage of men and women is a unique study object because cross-cultural communication happens when men and women interact as the impact of different community treatment. Men and

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women become two different cultures, including the languages they use. Therefore, through language, we can see the gender relations constructed by society.

Banyumas is one of the districts in Central Java that has a high divorce rate and is increasing year after year. The number of divorce cases at the Banyumas Religious Court (Pengadilan Agama Banyumas) in 2018 reached 2047 cases (2). The high divorce rate did not only occurred in Banyumas Regency but also in Cilacap and Purbalingga Regency which makes these three districts the largest contributor to the divorce rate in Central Java (3). Moreover, the divorce rate in Cilacap Regency in 2019 was the highest in Central Java. Based on the first-degree case report received by the Cilacap Religious Court (Pengadilan Agama Cilacap), there were 1802 talaq/ repudiation divorces and 4673 judicial divorces (4). A talaq/ repudiation divorce is a divorce filed by the husband, while a judicial divorce is by the wife. According to these data, it shows that women are the most frequently claiming divorce.

Language and gender are the output of community culture. Banyumas culture geographically covers the former residence of Banyumas, i.e Banjarnegara, Purbalingga, Banyumas, Cilacap and Kebumen Regencies. One of the characteristics of the Banyumas people is vulgar people who are very open in talking about any topics, including sex issues (5). Therefore, it is interesting to study how contemporary Banyumas couples communicate verbally about sexuality as consider that this topic is a dynamic discourse that shifts along with community changes.

Men and women are seen as two different cultures because society constructed their roles based on gender. The language usage of couples referring to sexuality in Banyumas culture can provide a new approach to gender relations in the marriage that has never been studied. Hence, exploring verbal communication of sexuality among married couples in Banyumas Culture is such an intriguing issue.

Verbal communication studies about sexuality are still rarely done. Existing research has only discussed couples' interpersonal communication, not specifically discussing couples' verbal communication and its relation to gender relations in a marital relationship. This research was expected to develop a study of marital communication in Indonesia.

Research on sex verbal communication and its correlation to gender relations in marriage is crucial because some couples do not care about the language used, which may trigger quarrels or conflicts. The topic of sexuality was chosen because, in Banyumas, men tend to be open in communicating their sexuality while women feel uncomfortable. This misalignment potentially causes a broken relationship which if left unchecked, can lead to divorce.

Using inappropriate language can make a person feel uncomfortable, unappreciated, or belittled. For that reason, we need a study that can provide a pattern of gender relations in marriage based on verbal language use that places men and women in an equal position. Equal gender relations foster self-confidence and provide space for individuals to develop even in marital bonds. Freedom of expression and a sense of comfort in marriage will provide satisfaction in a relationship.

Banyumas culture as a Javanese sub-culture has typical characteristics in terms of dialect, ancient organizational forms, traditional ceremonies, and local arts (6). The uniqueness of Banyumas Javanese language, its “ngapak” dialect, is often being the subject of research. Khotimah examines the cultural identity of the Banyumas community through radio programs, while Pawestri examines the virtual community of the Banyumas community through social media (7,8). The second study shows that the characters of the Banyumas people, who are *cablaka* (as they are) and *mbanyol* (playful), become their strong self-identity. However, they feel marginalized at first because their dialect is different from the Javanese language generally.

Based on Priyadi’s research towards texts and proverbs or traditions that appear in the Banyumas community, the general characteristics of the Banyumas people include: having a high motivation to respect, having an affirmative culture, having a critical culture, socioegalitarian, rebellious, hardworking, showing honesty or frankness (*cablaka*), and vulgar in talking about sex-related matters (5).

In contrast, the results of Novianti research showed that only men are capable to talk vulgarly about sex, whereas Banyumas women feel uncomfortable (9). This situation indicates that the discourse of sexuality in Banyumas has changed. Sexuality is a tremendously dynamic discourse influenced by the gender structure in society (10).

Research on gender relations has been conducted by Puspitawati et al. (11). This study aims to analyze the effect of gender relations and family resilience on the marriage quality of farmers and fisherman families. The study result indicates that gender relations are one of the factors that influence the quality of marriage so that it needs to be improved both in public, domestic, and social activities.

Gender relations in the domestic sphere can be observed from the language usage of couples. The difference between men’s and women’s communication styles does not indicate that men communicate way better than women or vice versa. The distinction of communication style can be noticed through differences in speaking, the choice of conversation topics, interrupting ways, utilization of words or interrogative sentences, stories and jokes adoption, and other categories (12). Language skill and its similarity of the principles used to determine the success of the communication phenomena (13).

Hess and Coffelt's research showed an association between the use of sexual terms, especially slang terms, and both satisfaction and closeness of couples (14). Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate verbal communication about sexuality and link it to gender relations in Banyumas marriage culture with the expectation that this study will broaden the horizon of Banyumas people in maintaining marital harmony during pandemic.

2. Method

This study used qualitative research methods. Qualitative methods are suited to explore the significance of social or humanitarian problems. Qualitative research aims to comprehend certain situations, groups, or social interactions.

This method involves the process of asking questions and procedures, collecting specific data from participants, analyzing data inductively, and interpreting data. The final report for this research has a flexible structure. This method also employs inductive thinking, focuses on individual occurrences, and translates the complexity of a problem.

The data research were analyzed using a phenomenological approach to determine verbal sexual communication. A study with a phenomenological approach seeks to explain the meaning of several people's life experiences about a concept or symptom (15). From the verbal communication experience, we will get categories of terms about sexuality that have different meanings between men and women.

The data collection techniques used were in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviewing is required to reveal the actual intent of research participants related to verbal sexual communication.

In analyzing research data, researchers used phenomenological data analysis as described by Creswell in table 1 (16):

Data validation in this study was examined by triangulation, a data validity checking technique that utilizes external factors for inspection or benchmarking purposes to the primary data (17). The triangulation type of this research is source triangulation which comparing and integrating three different data sources collected by observations, interviews, and documentation methods (Banyumas historical documents).

3. Results and Discussion

This study involved 20 participants or ten married couples with the following criteria:

TABLE 1: Data Analysis and Representation according to Phenomenological Approach.

Data Analysis and Representation	Phenomenology
<i>Data organization</i>	<i>Create and organize files for data</i>
<i>Reading, memoing</i>	<i>Read through text, make margin notes, form initial codes</i>
<i>Describing the data into codes and themes</i>	<i>Describe personal experiences through epoche Describe the essence of the phenomenon</i>
<i>Classifying the data into codes and themes</i>	<i>Develop significant statements Group statements into meaning units</i>
<i>Interpreting the data</i>	<i>Develop a textural description “what happened” (Mem- bangun gambaran tekstural “apa yang terjadi”) Develop a structural description, “how” the phenomenon was experienced Develop the “essence”</i>
<i>Representing, visualizing the data</i>	<i>Present narration of the essence of the experience; in tables, figures, or discussion</i>

1. Banyumas people
2. In marriage, the minimum age of marriage is two years
3. Have been married for at least a year before the interview

Participants Profile

Based on the data from in-depth interviews, there are four major themes emerged: Sex as a necessity, sex as an obligation, the choice of contraceptives, and Banyumas culture as a local value as a reference for the couple in marital life.

3.1. Sex as Necessity

All of the participants admitted that the most frequently discussed topic related to sexuality with their partner was the need for sex. These needs are expressed both verbally and nonverbally.

Male participant became the initiator who started the conversation about sex. Male participants were also actively using smartphones to send their messages to their partners.

Agus and Nuri are a couple who are quite open in conveying their sexual desires. Agus often sends sexual messages to his wife via text. However, Nuri did not like this. Nuri was worried that the messages containing sexual desire were read by her children, so she immediately deleted the messages.

During the pandemic, all family members gather together at home almost all the time. This made the participants develop special codes so that the message to their partner could be conveyed to their partner without the children or other family members

TABLE 2

	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Academic Level	Employment
1	Agus (Nuri's Husband)	M	47	Bachelor	Public Servant
2	Nuri (Agus's Wife)	F	40	Bachelor	Female Businessman
3	Joki (Nita's Husband)	M	37	Bachelor	Public Servant
4	Nita (Joki's Wife)	F	38	Associate Degree DI	Housewife
5	Deni (Shanti's Husband)	M	35	Bachelor	Public Servant
6	Shanti (Deni's Wife)	F	35	High School (SMA)	Honorary employee at gov institution
7	Eko (Mira's Husband)	M	60	Bachelor	Businessman
8	Mira (Eko's Wife)	F	22	High School (SMK)	Forex Trader
9	Doni (Indah's Husband)	M	42	High School (SMK)	Businessman
10	Indah (Doni's Wife)	F	43	High School (SMA)	Housewife
11	Dewo (Sri's Husband)	M	22	Associate Degree DIII	Contract employee at gov institution
12	Sri (Dewo's Wife)	F	22	High School (SMA)	University Student and housewife
13	Hendra (Heni's Husband)	M	39	Bachelor	Businessman
14	Heni (Hendra's Wife)	F	40	Bachelor	Public Servant
15	Malik (Tari's Husband)	M	41	Middle School	Private employee
16	Tari (Malik's Wife)	F	41	Elementary School	Housewife
17	Toyib (Siska's Husband)	M	40	High School (SMK)	Marketing officer
18	Siska (Toyib's Wife)	F	33	High School (SMK)	Housewife
19	Rino (Reni's Husband)	M	40	High School (SMK)	Seller
20	Reni (Rino's Wife)	F	40	Bachelor	Seller

knowing. These codes include asking for a massage, wearing sexy clothes or inviting a partner into the room.

For the participants, discussing sexual desires or needs in front of children is a taboo subject so that conversations about these themes can only be done in the room.

3.2. Sex as an obligation

All participants were Muslims who believed that wives should serve their husbands' sexual needs. Sex is an obligation that must be fulfilled by the wife. In fact, a wife is seen as good if she doesn't refuse her husband's desire to have sex, as stated by Agus:

" In terms of religion, Nuri is a good wife because when I "asked" Nuri did not refuse even though she was sleepy. " (Agus, 47 years old).

One of the female participants, Mira, said that as a wife, she must obey her husband, protect her husband's good name and serve her husband well.

During the pandemic, as a married couple sometimes Indah and Doni kiss in front of their children. Indah and Doni convey to the children that kissing is a natural thing because Indah and Doni are muhrim. Indah and Doni advised their children that children should not kiss because it is forbidden by religion.

The belief that their partner is the best life partner makes the participants try to fulfill their rights and obligations in the household.

3.3. Choice of contraception

In choosing contraceptives, the couple Agus and Nuri discussed it first. Agus gave information to Nuri such as "if you want to get off the spiral, you have to give it an injection, if you don't, you take a pill." As for convenience, it was left to Nuri. Likewise, Nuri during the use of the contraceptive asked her husband. They will choose the most comfortable for both.

The other couple, Joki and Nita in choosing contraceptives always discussed together. According to Joki, Indah once asked about contraceptives. Initially, Joki did not agree with the intrauterine device birth control (IUD) because he thought it could be painful. But, after trying the IUD, Joki did not complain and felt comfortable.

Toyib and Siska said that the discussion about the number of children and birth control was carried out at the beginning of the marriage which was a mutual commitment. Siska stated that throughout her marriage she had the freedom to choose contraception.

3.4. Banyumas culture as a reference for marital life

All participants identified themselves as "wong Banyumas" (Banyumas people). Therefore, the values that they believe are the values of the Banyumas people are applied in their married life. Banyumas people are identical with "cablaka" which is like to be

honest and candid. Therefore, the participants admitted that they always tried to be honest with their partner as told by Joki:

“Before marriage, my father gave me the message that humans must be honest with everyone, including wives. Therefore, whenever there is a problem I will definitely tell my wife” (Joki, 37 years old).

Same with Joki, Nita, Joki’s wife was given advice before marriage by her mother. This advice became the principle she held in her married life.

“My mother said, because I was older than my husband, I had to have a sense of compassion, I had to give in and not protest much” (Nita, 38 years old)

From the discussions conducted with the participants, it was found that women are the parties who always agree with what their husbands say, including in conversations about sexuality. This becomes like a necessity for women to always follow the wishes of their husbands. The existence of these “musts” affects gender relations in marriage. Things that are considered as a norm in society have the potential to be a source of marginalization of women in marriage.

Women may admit that men are generally more powerful than women. However, this is because of the physical closeness to the loved one so that the power is given by women to men. And this is a form of male superiority in marriage.

4. Conclusion

For many people discussing sexuality is still a taboo, but apparently for couples in Banyumas, sexuality themes are often discussed. According to them, the theme of sexuality makes them close and connected to each other. In fact, for some participants, discussions about sexuality made them more confident. Openness about sexuality makes them learn to understand their partners and makes them respect each other even though they also admit that discussions about sexuality take time, conditions and certain places.

Banyumas culture which is famous for its cablaka philosophy (honest, frankly, as it is) becomes a reference for them to behave in marriage. This encourages them to create spaces for dialogue with their partner.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declares that the writing of this article does not have any conflict of interest.

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