

Chan, T.M. Simon. (2009). In the Name of Justice: The Indigenous Account for the Father-son Conflict in Asian-Chinese Families. *International Journal of Child Health and Human Development*, 2(4), 467-476.

In the name of justice:

The indigenous account for the father-son conflict in Asian-Chinese families

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Abstract

Family triangulation has been a Western family therapy concept explaining the phenomena of father-son conflict, where the son was being triangulated and attached with the mother to fight against the father. This article tries to pursue if any Chinese culture concept, which stresses on filial piety, can explain this phenomena. The concept of family justice was introduced to explain the son's behavior in Chinese family cases where father-son conflict exists. Eight families were chosen. 12 sessions with about 22 hours of videotaped sessions were selected for analysis. These cases were mainly consultation cases, with father-son conflict as one of the presenting problems. The result shows that family justice is a subtle concept in the Chinese culture. Whenever the father has committed an injustice to the mother, which witnessed by the sons, the son will fight against the father and ignore the filial piety. He would stand on the side of the mother and fight against the father. The concept is manifested in terms of psychological and/or physical abuse done by the father. In the sessions, mainly the mother disclosed the story of family injustice and the father showed regret in the process. Finally, the differentiation between the Western concept of family triangulation and Eastern concept of family justice will be discussed. Other than introducing the concept of family justice to family therapy in Chinese families, this study may prepare the ground for a new indigenous practice to be applied and tested in therapy for Asian families.

Keywords: Family justice, family triangulation, father-son conflict, filial piety, family therapy.

Introduction

A Chinese proverb reads “Wu Chou Bu Cheng Fu Zi” (hatred bonds the father and his son). This well describes many of the father-son struggles found in clinical cases among Chinese families, where the son rejects the father, who tries his best to get along with the son. The explanation for this phenomenon can be found in the field of family therapy (1-3), which states that the son is being triangulated in the marital conflict and allies with the mother. Bowen (1) defined the triangle as “the smallest stable relationship system”, and explained

that when the two-person emotional system is under stress, the system transforms into a three-person system, or a triangle. A system consisting of more than three people becomes a series of interlocking triangles.

The concept of family triangulation has been used in the Western field of family therapy (1) to explain the phenomenon of father–son conflict, where the son was being triangulated and attached with the mother to fight against the father. In fact, the concept itself is not new. It was developed from Freudian’s (4) Oedipus complex and Bowlby’s (5) attachment theory, and then further developed by Byng-Hall (6) and Stevenson-Hinde (7-8). The concept was elaborated by second-generation Bowenian therapists in the book “Working with relationship triangles” (9), which tells the story of how the notion of threesomes, triads, and eventually triangles come into family therapy and psychological thinking. The structure, process, movement, function, and clinical techniques about relationship triangles are addressed. As a matter of fact, instead of “relationship triangle”, the term “triangulation” is commonly used in the field.

Chan (10-12) is one of the earliest family therapists to capture the manifestation of family triangulation in the Chinese community. The result showed that the concept of triangulation has been addressed in Chinese culture though in different terms. His findings (12) showed that father–son conflict indeed reflects mother–son attachment and hidden father–mother conflict; on the other hand, the presented mother–son conflict reflects the intimate nature of the relationship between the twosomes. The manifestation of the father–son conflict is seen in the father–son relationship as strangers, wherein the father fails to build a close relationship with the son in the context of family triangulation. Finally, the son in the family triangulation has witnessed certain critical events in the parental conflict, a pattern that appears to encourage the son to protect his mother by engaging in intensive conflict with his father.

In this article, the author further tries to pursue if any concept in Chinese culture, which emphasizes filial piety, can explain the father–son conflict, other than the Western concept of family triangulation. Hall (13) mentioned that the cultural concept has been rather hidden and this article tries to borrow a cultural lens to investigate whether the same phenomenon can be explained in a traditional Chinese way. This gap in the research can be addressed with interviews of Chinese families in a clinical context, in which the concept of family justice can be deduced.

The concept of family justice

Among the three key Chinese concepts of loyalty, filial piety and justice (14). justice has been widely discussed in the context of the Chinese community (15-24).

The concept of justice in the Chinese culture as “public and balanced”, “public and right”, “public and rule”, or “righteousness” are behind the concept of justice in the Chinese culture. Studies have been conducted on this subject matter. However, Chiu (16-17) argued that the fulfillment of role expectation, as a part of justice, is deeply ingrained in the traditional Chinese thinking and has been institutionalized in the traditional Chinese legal system. Hence, different expectations are attached to different relations among modern Chinese (17,25). Injustice occurs when role expectations are violated in a specific context-related

relationship. Chiu (26) further elaborated that the Chinese have different justice standards for different relationships. The standard of justice is dominant in relationships, for example, between husband and wife; thus, specific behavioral expectations are attached to that relationship.

The traditional concept of yi is what Chiu refers to as Chinese justice. However, yi is not being regarded as righteousness. Yi is a traditional Chinese concept that governs relationship behavior. In fact, the order of relations in the traditional Chinese society is clearly defined by Confucian ethics: ren (humanity or benevolence), li (ritual propriety) and yi (rightness). Ren refers to love and care for one's fellowmen, li relates to the traditional ritual code that is essentially a set of formal procedures or proper behaviors, and yi is about rightness. Yi is deemed as a moral standard and is higher than the rules of renqing (favor) and mian zi (facework) (27). In other words, the concept of yi has two meanings. First, it means justice in social exchanges such as equity, equality, and the need for rules. Second, it means rightness of behavior.

Unfortunately, the differentiation of the notion of justice and yi has not been made in detail within the Chinese culture. Chiu (22) tried to redefine the concepts of justice and yi in a series of studies. His conclusion is that the notion of yi in Chinese culture can hardly be differentiated from normative expectations of proper role conduct. He further concluded that both of these notions are the principal criteria which Chinese people use in making judgments on justice. For example, there is an expectation of proper role conduct on how to be a "father" in Chinese culture, which means providing financial means, protecting the mother, and disciplining the children. The criteria of each role seem to be "built-in" in the culture and are shared among family members. Both mother and son share the expectation that the father should respect and comfort the mother as the situation arises. Hence, the concept of yi can be applied in different contexts. Even in the context of the family, role expectations are shared among all family members.

The concept of family justice in Chinese families

The meaning of the term "Da Yi Mie Qin" is based on a superior principle to kill one's kin for the course of righteousness, or one of the family members sacrifices the other kin despite being a close family member to him/her.

In Chinese culture, "Da Yi Mie Qin" (prosecuting family members in the name of justice) is an idiom, which is found in Zuo Zhuan in which a father kills his son to show loyalty to his master. The details of the story are found in The Fourth Year of Yin. Shi Que was a loyal minister anguished by the evil acts of Zhou Xu and his son Shi Hou was on the side of Zhou. He thought that it was unforgivable for his son to help Zhou Xu in killing Zhou's brother. He pretended to help his son by seeking help from the neighboring country Chen. In the country Chen, Shi Que arranged for his son Shi Hou to be killed. Because of the principle of righteousness, he could not forgive his son for helping Zhou Xu in killing Zhou's brother.

The term "Da Yi Mie Qin" originally related to a value that legitimized the act of family members killing each other for a higher common good such as national interest. In modern times, the concept has been used in a broader sense than the act of "killing" the son to fulfill a sense of justice. In this study, the author uses the concept of "family justice" as a value that might cause a son to fight his father when the father is perceived to have done injustice to the mother, or other family members.

In the absence of any exact translation in English of the Chinese concept of “Da Yi Mie Qin”, the author has chosen the term, “Family Justice”. The original meaning of “Da Yi Mie Qin” included the ultimate violence of killing a human being. In the contemporary family context, it is transformed to cover the argument against the father, but this is a stronger imperative for the son’s mere filial disobedience, rebellion, or insubordination. This usage is legitimated as it is logically included in the concept’s original meaning.

Questions have been raised on how can the concept of “justice” develops in the context of social psychology, and how the safety of the country can be used within the family to become “family justice”. Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (28) wrote in their book “Invisible Loyalties” that “justice became an emotion climate built in the family (familial justice)”. Each family member executed the concept of family justice in his or her own perspective. Hence, the concept of family justice can be validated in the family context.

In contemporary families, the principle of righteousness may be manifested in the terms of balance of power and harmony in the family. The actual behavior may, however, not be manifested through “killing” or physical harm. It may appear in the forms of disagreement, conflict, and verbal challenge. To make the term “family justice” more commonly accepted, it can be defined as “a sense of righteousness to protect a family member against another who is perceived as being unfair to the other, so much so that all other values can be overruled”. The gist of the definition is that family justice is regarded as a superior principle that overrides the “foundation of all virtues”, including filial piety.

With this framework overviewing the father–son conflict in the context of the father–mother–son triangulation, the current study examines whether the son’s fight against the father reflects a sense of injustice in the father–mother dyad relationship.

Methods

This study aims to explore those Chinese families where father–son conflict is presented and family triangulation exists. Does it have anything to do with the sense of “injustice” in the family, specifically between the father and mother, in the eyes of the child?

Since the cases seeking consultation are for problem solving, the mindset of the therapist is only based on the conceptual framework of family therapy. First, it is investigated if those cases have the manifestation of family triangulation, and then checked whether the concept of family justice is evident in those cases as well. In other words, if triangulation really existed in those cases, the author would further explore whether or not family justice can explain why the son goes against the father in the context of Chinese culture that emphasizes filial piety. Chan (10) has articulated in detail the exploration of family justice from narration and non-verbal messages in family interaction. He concluded that special attention would be given to any injustice done by the father towards the son and the mother in the eyes of the son, as well as their respective responses.

It has been remarked that the sessions are originally not for the exploration of the concept of family justice. Such features of family justice have to be captured, rather indirectly, from the

narration, such as in the participants' way of expression, interaction, and wording, as well as in non-verbal messages. In other words, based on those cases with the manifestation of family triangulation, any injustice that happened in the family would be the clues, which echo the concept of family justice that the son, with a sense of righteousness, protects a family member against another who is perceived as being unfair, so much so that all other values can be overruled.

The clinical data for the study comprise all cases in the Hong Kong University Family Institute. The clinical data are the consultation sessions of two renowned family therapists: Salvador Minuchin, the founder of structural family therapy, who visited Hong Kong in the late 1990s and Wai-yung Lee, who has been a long-term collaborator of Minuchin.

There were about 29 sessions among eight families. Some of the sessions may be presented with only an individual like the father or the mother. Couple sessions were excluded. Among those eight families, 12 sessions with about 22 hours of videotaped sessions were selected for analysis. These cases were mainly consultation cases ranging from one to nine sessions in which the ages of the son ranged from 7 to 26 years old. Of the eight families, one family is from Singapore, one is from Guangzhou, two are from Taiwan, and the other four are from Hong Kong. Among the four Hong Kong families, one mother came from Mainland China, whereas another emigrated to Canada for several years, while the father worked in Hong Kong. The last two families involve three generations with the grandparents attending the sessions as well. The father-son conflict is one of the presented problems in all cases. All sons attended the sessions, but the father from the Singaporean family was absent in the consultation session held in Singapore.

All the videotaped sessions on the father-son conflict as one of the presented problems were transcribed. In this study, the narration and non-verbal cues of family justice displayed by the son were captured in order to investigate whether the son fought against the father, for the mother, or for himself.

Results

The manifestations of family injustice exist more implicitly because a common pattern of incidents of "injustice" committed by the father towards the mother could be found in most of the eight cases. Acts of injustice were done to the mother and in the eyes of the son, the need to fight for the mother is great.

In four out of the eight cases, the sons did not express any verbal complaints that were directly related to the meaning of "justice," while the incidents of "injustice" mentioned were reinterpreted in the analysis of this study. It can be said that the manifestation of "family injustice" can be found more explicitly in two cases - cases 6th and 7th, in which the sons mentioned the word "justice" during their sessions. In comparison, the sons in three cases - cases 4th, 5th, and 8th, who are in their early adult stage could express directly those incidents of "injustice" in the family with the help of the elder sister. Since the sons in the other five cases - cases 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 6th, and 7th, are in their childhood and adolescent stages, they seldom described those incidents of "injustice" during their sessions.

The manifestations of family injustice, which can be found if the father committed any injustice towards the mother, are blurred in some of the cases, such as in cases 1st and 5th, but are clear in the others, such as in cases 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th, and 8th.

In the first case, the mother was physically abused by the father. The son had witnessed how the father threw a bowl against the mother and failed to keep his promise to take care of the mother in the hospital. However, the conflict between the father and son was not mentioned, and the son tried to hold the hands of the parents together instead. Therefore, family injustice is presented in this case.

In the second case, the mother was psychologically neglected by the father. The son had mentioned that the father did not listen to “us”, and his conflict with the father was so tense that he once shouted “Don’t touch me!” to his father. The manifestation of family injustice is clear in this case and also in the way the son rejected going to school.

In the third case, the father both physically and psychologically abused the mother. The son had witnessed all those incidents and had been scared that his mother would die. In view of the injustice done by the father and the son rejecting any connection with the father, the manifestation of family injustice is clear. It is also clear in the way that the son even played the female role so as not to identify with the father, the male figure.

In the fourth case, the mother had no voice and had been challenged by the father in most of the family decisions. The way the father put the mother down and ignored her tenderness became acts of injustice. Its manifestation of family injustice was explicit for the father–son relationship was rather distant and the son stopped having any connection with the father. The father had tried his best to listen to the voice of the son instead, but the son only followed the voice of the mother, and recognized the fact that the mother had suffered much injustice in the family.

In the fifth case, the mother was physically hurt in two incidents, while the father did not bother to take care of her. However, the father–son conflict was not obvious and the way the son gave up one-third of his life for the mother was still too complex an act to be understood. He could have done this for the sake of the father instead, and therefore, it cannot be fully said that family injustice is clearly manifested in this case.

In the sixth case, the mother had tried to commit suicide for fear of being separated from her husband. The son had witnessed how the mother had done so and was the one who persuaded the mother to divorce the father. Considering the injustice done by the father and how the son responded to the relationship with the father, it can be said that family injustice is clear, possibly the most explicit one among the eight cases.

In the seventh case, the mother was oppressed by the grandmother, but the father did not protect his wife from the blaming attitude of his own mother. The father did not protect the mother from the accusation of the grandmother, especially in the issue of boundary of the family, which then came to be regarded as an injustice in the eyes of the son. The father–son

conflict and the parental conflict were not so strong, but in consideration of the conflict towards and the injustice done by the grandmother, the mother really suffered considerably. This manifestation of family justice, which involved three generations, is rather complex.

In the final case, the father refused to connect with the mother and the grandmother-in-law in relation to the “adoption” issue. The grandmother-in-law was extremely depressed for 20 years, because her three sons drowned together in an accident. At that time, the mother promised to foster her own son to comfort the grandmother-in-law. However, the grandmother-in-law changed the surname and name of her grandson without informing the parents, thus the father was deeply hurt from that time on. He continued to blame the mother and the grandmother-in-law for about 20 years. The grandson, on the other hand, without knowing the history of the “fostering” issue, witnessed the blaming done by the father towards the mother and the grandmother-in-law and became furious towards the father. The father-son conflict was intense and they even had a violent incident towards each other. The “fostering” issue had contributed to the psychological neglect of the father towards the mother, and the son took this as an act of injustice, which prompted him to fight back. However, such “adoption” arrangement can be regarded as an “injustice” to the father done by the grandmother-in-law. Thus, the manifestation of family justice is more vivid but in a more complex way.

To conclude, six of the eight cases clearly manifested family injustice and the rest were unclear. It is thought that family injustice is still a subtle concept in Chinese culture. When the son takes up the views of the mother more, it becomes highly likely for him to think that the father has committed an injustice to the mother. As a result, he would fight against the father in the name of justice and ignore filial piety.

When the three twosomes are compared, it is found that the son in the final stage of triangulation would take on the grief of the mother and side with her more, making it more difficult for the son to undergo individuation. With the strong attachment with the mother, the son would then have a strong perception about the injustice done by the father. On the other hand, the manifestation of family justice is not strong and is even unclear in some cases, which may due to the following reasons: the son is still in the early stage of triangulation, is not in a strong position with the mother, and might have a lesser sense of family justice.

Finally, it is coincident that six out of eight cases, cases 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th, and 8th have a clear manifestation of family triangulation, and family justice means that the sons in the later stage of triangulation would totally stand by the side of the mother because, in the eyes of the son, the father’s action is easily regarded as “injustice”. That means, the more the son is being triangulated, the more he would “see” the injustice done by the father towards the mother.

Discussion

Other than the manifestation of family justice in each case and its comparison with that of family triangulation, some patterns in the family that relates to the concept of family justice can also be found.

The faces of family injustice in terms of psychological and/or physical abuse

Family injustice manifests itself in feelings of loneliness, transgenerational conflict, marital separation, physical abuse of the wife, and suicidal tendency of the mother. The first, third, and fifth cases all involved physical abuse in which the mothers were seriously hurt by the fathers. In the second, third, fourth, fifth, and seventh cases, the mothers were looked down upon by the father and they were in a subordinate position in the marriage. This means that the both the third and fifth cases involve both types of abuse. The last case involves a transgenerational “fostering” issue, which can be regarded as a form of “family secrecy” in which the mother had been insulted by the father for about 20 years already. In short, it is all about psychological and/or physical abuse, and in the eyes of the son, the principle of righteousness is violated, and there is an explicit imbalance of power and harmony in the family.

Family injustice as a process including a critical event

Family justice is defined as the sense of righteousness to protect a family member from another who is perceived to be unfair to him or her, so much so that all other values can be overruled. The definition does not account for the temporal phase of the issue. Personally, the author’s initial perception of injustice is an incident involving psychological and/or physical abuse, but when further investigated how it was seen in the eyes of the son, realized that it is a process instead of an event.

In the first case, the Mother’s Only Confidante, the son took on the role of a carer to claim family justice when he witnessed the father throw a bowl at the mother, and his father did not keep his promise to come to the hospital to take care of the mother. In the second case, the Mother’s Knight, the mother gave up her voice to maintain family harmony, which lasted for 20 years. In the third case, the Mother’s Watcher, physical and psychological abuse had also lasted for about 10 years. In the fourth case, the Mother’s Patient, the father always disagreed with the opinion of the mother for more than 10 years, especially during her length of stay in Canada. In the fifth case, the Mother’s Guardian, the injustice witnessed by the son existed in two different time periods, which add up to about 15 years. It can be argued that the son may have absorbed the affects of such experiences, and the first critical event should be counted as the reference time. However, there is no evidence from any other case to affirm such hypothesis; the concept of family justice is a process that includes the critical event mentioned in the analysis of family triangulation.

The mother as the main person to disclose family injustice

Family injustice was either expressed by the mother or the son, and the emotions of the family members became immediately heightened after such disclosure.

In the second case, Mother’s Knight, the mother stated that the father was always busy so she had to manage the family routine and the parenting of the sons. At the same time, the husband complained about her performance. She was rather lonely, helpless, and found no way to protect herself from further blames of her husband.

In the third case, the Mother's Watcher from Taiwan, the mother grieved over her long torture, both physical and psychological, from the husband. She had given up her career to bring up her son, but the father kept on teasing her for being a "pig", and at one time, it was even said in front of her sister.

In the fourth case, Mother's Patient from Hong Kong, the mother said she maintained her silence in front of her husband who always disagreed with her in most of the decision making, especially about the parenting of the children.

In the eighth case, the Grandmother's Son from Guangzhou, the mother lamented how she had been separated from her husband and how communication with him had stopped for more than 10 years because of a "fostering issue". The mother was blamed by the father for the insult he experienced on the issue of fostering.

However, it was the son who disclosed family injustice in the first and fifth cases, the Mother's Only Confidante and the Mother's Guardian. In the case of the Mother's Only Confidante, the son disclosed how the father threw a bowl at the mother and did not keep his promise to take care of the mother in the hospital. In the case of the Mother's Guardian, the son disclosed how the sister, and most probably the mother, was made to kneel on broken glass when he was a child.

The implication is that the therapist may consider that the mother, and sometimes the son, should be the key figure to explore the concept of family justice.

The son as the witness in the process of family injustice

Some of the events indicating family injustice were witnessed by the sons who could narrate vividly the details of the event. For example, the son in the first case, the Singaporean case, could recall the experience of the mother being hurt by the father, and he was the only one in the hospital to accompany the mother.

In the fifth case, the Taiwanese case, Mother's Guardian, the son described his early experience of witnessing parental conflict when the father broke all the glasses at home and his sister was made to kneel on them. He further mentioned that his mother had blisters on her hands from working at the family restaurant.

In the seventh case, Mother's Territory Fighter of Hong Kong, the son witnessed how the mother was unreasonably blamed by the grandmother during the father's stay in the hospital. However, the father was too weak to protect the mother from being blamed by the grandmother; the mother, in turn, just stopped disagreeing with the grandmother and just kept on smiling in front of others in order to hide her pain.

These echo the definition of family justice as defined through the eyes of the son who is the witness in the process of family injustice.

The injustice done by the father towards the mother and the father's regret in the disclosure of family injustice

All the instances of injustice were committed by the fathers who remained silent during the moment of disclosure, except in the Singaporean case where the father was absent. In fact, all the fathers who attended showed a sense of regret by keeping their silence when such injustice was disclosed. They had no objection about the description of the unjust event. The father from Mother's Watcher was the only one who admitted and then apologized for such injustice done to the mother.

Of the eight cases, five had shown very clear evidence that the sons are fighting the father because of the injustice that the father has committed towards the mother. However, family justice is not to be regarded as the only reason in Chinese culture that can justify the son's fight against the father and his violation of filial piety. Family justice is found to be a concept that can justify such behavior so far, but other concepts need to be further explored.

Differentiation between family triangulation and family justice

The difference between the two concepts of family triangulation and family justice is that triangulation focuses on how the parental conflict or oppression between the parents affects the children. The child becomes the ultimate concern of the culture, and according to Chiu (29), the West has a child-focused culture. On the other hand, family justice starts from the son who judges what is the proper role conduct and relationship in the parental subsystem. In other words, the son monitors the parental role relationship so that once one parent maltreats the other, it is the role of the son to execute family justice by fighting the dominant parent in order to protect the subordinate one. Chiu (29) considers the East to have a parent-focused culture in which the parent is the ultimate concern and the son has to fulfill certain obligations to safeguard the family dynamics. To conclude, justice is a Chinese concept that justifies the son's rejection of the father, while family triangulation is a Western one, which signifies the impact of the parental conflict upon the child. Chinese culture is hence considered as parent-focused, while Western culture is child-focused.

While it would be interesting to find out how and under which circumstances an originally mere triangulated case becomes one which also involves family justice, or vice versa, this question could not be tackled in this research, which had to focus on cases where these two elements already existed together. However, this is exactly one of the study's recommendations for further research, which will be discussed below.

Conclusions

In summary, the current study has made some significant contributions as follows:

Introducing family justice to family therapy in Chinese families

If triangulation is a Western concept that explains how parental relationship affects the son, then family justice is a Chinese concept that explains how a son enters the conflict with his father in a culture that validates filial piety. In order to execute a sense of righteousness and maintain the balance of power and harmony within the family, the son executes the principle of "family justice" by rebelling against the father, thereby ignoring filial piety, which is of high value among Chinese families. With the current development in family therapy highlighting the influence of culture to families and its sensitivity in clinical sessions (30-31), indigenous study becomes the concern of the field (32). This research unearthed the concept of family justice among Chinese families, which hitherto has been rather hidden (13). This

discovery and application to family therapy provides an explanation on how sons in a Chinese culture can justify their conflict with their fathers.

Cross-cultural dialogue: East meets West Father-son conflict

A Western concept always has equivalent Eastern concept, though in different terms, different manifestations, and also different idiosyncrasies. It is a mission to unearth those hidden concepts (13) in Chinese culture. The dialogue between different cultures is the horizon pursued in this study in order to have a deeper understanding of one's own culture and also that of others. Such escalating process would definitely enrich cultural and clinical studies, which in return would benefit the clients and related families.

Being a family therapist, the author has tried to make use of the concept of family justice in the clinical sessions, with father-son conflict as one of the presented problems. The families can easily grasp the implication of family justice, especially present in the native language as "Da Yi Mie Qin". The parents would immediately redefine the behavioral problem of the son as a virtue, in which the son has a sense of righteousness to maintain the balance of power and harmony in the family; such an act is highly appreciated in Chinese culture. Ignoring filial piety and rebelling against the father, the son strives to execute family justice, which becomes a respectful act.

Of course, further use of the concept of family justice should be further investigated. This article tries to provide the key in the form of the data mining process in the clinical and also cultural data.

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Submitted: May 06, 2009. *Revised:* August 02, 2009. *Accepted:* August 05, 2009.