Desire and Attitude to Marriage Among Unmarried Iranian Youth: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Objectives: Due to the importance of marriage in providing the society structure, foundation for family formation, and continuity of the generation, as well as considering the decline of marriage rate in Iran, this study was designed to explore desire and attitude to marriage among Iranian youth.

Materials and Methods: Participants were 22 unmarried Iranian youth who were selected by purposive and snowball sampling from the capital of Iran, Tehran. Interviews were carefully recorded and concurrent with data collection, analysis was done using directed content analysis technique. After securing the data saturation, interviews were finished and data were categorized.

Results: A total of 4 main categories and 12 sub-categories were derived from the results of the current study in terms of attitude to marriage among Iranian youth. Main categories included sense of excellence, achievement of calm, achieving stability, and the necessity of marriage.

Conclusions: The concept of marriage from the viewpoint of Iranian youth is an essential element that can help to create a sense of stability, achieve calm in life, and ultimately achieve excellence. On the whole, the attitude to marriage was positive among unmarried Iranian youth, but marriage rate was definitely falling in Iran. Identification of the factors affecting marriage rate can be addressed in future national research.

Keywords: Desire, Attitude, Marriage, Iranian youth

Introduction

Marriage is the most common custom in all societies, which is recognized as the most important and fundamental form of communication and intimate affiliation (1). From William Good's perspective, the global revolution and the process of modernization, as well as social factors affect the family, marriage, and individuals (2).

Over the past decades, due to cultural and social transformations, including urbanization and globalization, significant changes have occurred in the process of marriage throughout most developing countries (3). Iran as a developing country, in transition from tradition to modernity, has faced changes in all aspects of social subjects such as marriage and mate selection. Nowadays, marriage is one of the particular challenging issues in Iran (4). Statistics recorded in the center of Iranian statistics indicate a decrease in marriage rate, to such a degree that the number of registered marriages decreased from 874 792 in 2011 to 704 716 in 2016 (5). Between the years 1986-2011, the percentages of unmarried women and men increased from 9.4 to 26.2 and from 18.5 to 40.5, respectively (4). Following a youth bulge in Iran, one third of Iran's population was made up of people 15-29 years of age. Undoubtedly, changes in the number of young people have been followed by changes in social and cultural

conditions (4). In Iran, in a poll conducted by experts from the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, it was determined that before marriage, young people had other priorities such as employment and education, so the marriage was in the seventh priority of Iranian youth. In recent years, the age of marriage has significantly increased in Iran, with an average increase of about six years in small cities and 10 years in Tehran city. At present, more than 11 000 000 women and men are on the brink of marriage, from which a significant proportion are now getting out of the appropriate age for marriage and fertility (6).

Attitudes and decisions about relationships particularly marriage as a long relationship are important, because it can have consequences for one's happiness, life-satisfaction, health and psychological well-being (7). In the context of attitude and marital pattern, quantitative studies have been conducted (8-13), though the number of qualitative studies have been very limited. The validity and reliability of the translated English version of attitude to marriage was examined in a quantitative study. It was reported that it was impossible to generalize the results, as a weakness of study, to other people of community. Given the structural impact of the socio-economic situation on the attitude to marriage, it has been recommended that interview should be used along with a validated

questionnaire (8). Only in one qualitative study, it was clarified the process of experience and formation of the attitude toward marriage in 18 Iranian married students at the counseling center of psychological Faculty, Shahid Chamran University, Ahvaz, Iran (14). Considering the importance of attitude toward marriage as one of the key mechanisms for predicting actual behavior in marriage (8), conducting a qualitative research on unmarried people is worthwhile.

Marriage is an important issue during human social life, and attitude towards it affects the success or failure in this field, therefore explanation of desire and attitude of unmarried young people towards marriage was taken into consideration in this study. Tehran as the capital and the largest city in Iran with massive population, diverse ethnicities, cultures and the combination of families, social and political values was a good environment for research and review of different views. This study aimed to explain the desire and attitude of unmarried young people towards marriage in great Tehran, Iran.

Materials and Methods

This qualitative study was conducted between October 2016 and September 2017 through purposive and snowball sampling. The study area was Tehran, the capital city of Iran. Interviews were conducted in workplaces, at recreation centers, parks and universities, based on an agreement between the researcher and the participants. It was tried the participation of unmarried young people with the greatest diversity in terms of age, education, economic level, occupation, and ethnicity. For better access, the first interview was done with a student from the School of Nursing and Midwifery, Tehran University of Medical Sciences (TUMS), who was eligible to enter the study. In some cases, the friends or colleagues of ours introduced some people to have the mentioned variation; so, two methods of purposeful and snowball sampling were used.

Semi-structured interviews and then qualitative content analysis method were used to clarify the desire and attitude of Iranian youth to marriage. Interview questions were asked by auxiliary questions and subsequent questions were based on the initial responses of the individuals. Furthermore, if needed, probing questions such as: "what do you mean by that?" or "if you can please explain more" were used. These were auxiliary questions for interview: Do you want to get married? What is marriage from your point of view and what is that concept for you? In your opinion, what is the difference between married people and others? These questions were merely a guide to the interview and based on the contributions of participants, so exploratory inquiries were used to deepen the interviews. Each interview was recorded after obtaining consent and permission from the participant, then the interview was transcribed, typed, and imported to MAXQDA 10 software.

Participants

Participants were unmarried Iranian women and men, aged 18-29 years, who were resident in Tehran, and had no history of temporary or permanent marriage, drug addiction, psychotropic drugs, and mental illnesses (according to the personal report). Their dominant language was also Persian.

Twenty-two Iranian subjects (11 girls and 11 boys) with different ethnicities including Lor, Kurd, Fars, Turk, Bakhtiari, and with different occupations as worker, vendor, clerk, dentist, lawyer, and university student participated in this study. The included participants had also different education levels, from less than diploma to PhD. Four of them were economically poor, three were rich, and the rest of them were economically desirable. Because of the need for more questions, second interview was arranged with 3 contributors: one girl (participant 13) and 2 boys (participants 18 and 8). The duration of the interview varied from 30 to 70 minutes and the average interview time was 44 minutes. We did not get a new code from the 18th and 19th interviewers; however, interviews were continued with 22 people and 25 interviews. After ensuring that the new information was not received, qualitative analysis was done.

Data Analysis

A directed content analysis was used in which the start of coding was based on a theory or on explicit exploratory findings. The purpose of this technique is usually to validate or expand a conceptual framework or theory. The framework or the theory chosen in this kind of approach can help focus the research question or predict relationships between variables (15,16). In the current qualitative study, the main framework and research questions were based on the existence of two main themes: desire and attitude to marriage. Data analysis was also performed by Elo and Kyngäs, simultaneous with data collection (17). In the preparation phase, the analytical unit was the transcribed interview. The text of interviews were coded during the process of frequent reading, immersion, and the search for meanings of them (18).

In the organization step, the concepts of the codes were created based on the explicit or hidden content in each semantic unit. The sub-categories were created by collecting the similar codes. In choosing these sub-categories, two dimensions of convergence and divergence were simultaneously considered. Therefore, there was significant similarity among sub-categories, also significant difference was between two different sub-categories. Subsequently, the main categories were formed by placing some sub-categories together with a more abstract notion.

Trustworthiness

We tried to improve the credibility of the data by establishing appropriate communication with the

participants and attracting their attention, also long-term engagement in the research process, full immersion in the data, checking with interviewees and review by experts. In selecting the participants, the maximum diversity was considered in terms of age, ethnicity, level of education, and economic status. In order to examine the integrity of the participants' experiences, some of the participants were provided with some of the interview texts, along with the extracted codes. In order to improve the level of questions and process of interview as well as the accuracy of the encryption process and the classification of the data, the raw text as well as the encoded interviews were presented to the participants. To evaluate the data stability, the code and classification of the data were reviewed by two other qualitative researchers, who were not related to the research. Moreover, to compare the data, the data was further encrypted by the researcher two weeks later (15,16).

Results
All participants were unmarried, within the age range of 18-29 years, and the average age of 24 years, with a variety in level of education, and from different Iranian ethnicities. All of them were from married parents, were Muslim and resident in Tehran.

One of the dimensions of this study was to explore the desire to marry in young people. Inclination refers to a desire toward a particular attribute or behavior, so desire for marriage means a person's tendency to marry and form a family (19). Given that the response to the desire to marry was limited to positive, negative or providing the conditions, there was impossible to form classes and subclasses for it. A total of 4 main categories and 12 sub-categories were the result of the youth attitude toward marriage (Table 1).

1. Sense of Excellence
This category included four sub-categories including prosperity in ethics and spirituality, advance in emotional

Table 1. Main Categories and Sub-categories of the Youth's Attitude Toward Marriage

Main Categories	Sub-categories
Sense of excellence	Prosperity in ethics and spirituality Advance in emotional and intellectual status Being social Flourishing and internal transformation
Achievement of calm	Sense of happiness Fixing concerns
Achieving stability	Sense of immortality and continuity of the generation Sense of being accepted in the community Commitment and accepting responsibility
The necessity of marriage	Growth and completion of half of religion Negative attitude of society to unmarried people Inherent desire for marriage

and intellectual status, being social, as well as flourishing and internal transformation.

1.1. Prosperity in Ethics and Spirituality
Some participants believed that marriage was a sacred act and married people shared all things. A 24-year–old female participant: '*marriage means sharing everything, in fact, they share their life together. That is, everything I have is for him and whatever belongs to him, is mine. It is as if life is shared and enjoyable. Marriage in the true sense of my opinion means sharing*'.

A 26-year–old male participant: '*in my opinion, someone who wants to be my wife, as if she gives me the spirit and life*'.

1.2. Advance in Emotional and Intellectual Status
Some participants stated that marriage means male and female integration.

A 21-year–old male participant: '*marriage means coupling and merging men and women, to decide to be completed and to be united*'.

The experience of new feelings is another point.

A 19-year–old female participant: '*when you get marry, you experience new feelings. For example, you and your friends go to a lot of places, but these are really repetitive. After marriage, you like to experience new feelings with your spouse*'.

A sense of belonging to each other and having someone for own was stated by one participant.

A 25-year–old female participant: '*when I see a couple, I say: how good that they are together. If I had been married, I would have had this good feeling. The feeling that you think, you have someone*'.

From the viewpoint of a female participant, it was beautiful that sexual intercourse was starting with a permanent partner.

A 2-year–old female participant: '*when two people marry, they form a family. This is a good sense and marriage means start of sexual relations*'.

1.3. Being social
The opinion of some participants about marriage was forming a family and secure place, which establishes a dynamic community. They believed married people have more social responsibility than unmarried people.

A 23-year–old female participant: '*it's in our minds, when two people come to marry, they form a family. It seems they enter in to community*'.

A 21-year–old male participant: '*The person who gets married becomes more dynamic and can take on more social responsibilities*'.

1.4. Flourishing and Internal Transformation
Participants believed that marriage would lead to self-knowledge and perfectionism, as well as a change in the perspective, insight, and mood of individuals.

An 18-year–old male participant: '*a person who gets married will completely change his life. When I get marry, I will have a more positive view of life*'.

A 21-year–old male participant: '*the people who get married, their moods suddenly change. Sometimes it changes so much that, for example, it's becoming a new person.*

A 26-year–old male participant: '*marriage changes person in terms of inner feelings*'.

2. Achievement of Calm
From the participants' point of view, marriage would make people calm through the achievement of a sense of happiness, fulfillment of individual needs, and attainment of positive feelings, as well as addressing childhood concerns, compensating the gaps and eliminating loneliness.

2.1. Sense of Happiness
Some participants stated the fulfillment of emotional and psychological needs.

A 28-year–old male participant: '*I feel that marriage and the formation of a family provides psychological safety, and this psychological security can provide a calm life*'. A 19-year–old female participant: '*marriage means obviating a set of needs that parents cannot, like love and emotional needs that is different from that of mother or father to the child*'.

Other comments from the participants about the creation of positive feelings were as follows: An 18-year–old male participant: '*marriage makes me happy. I know my life will be happier with my spouse*'.

A 21-year–old female participant: '*a good feeling that a couple can give to each other, certainly could not be created in unmarried person*'.

2.2. Fixing Concerns
From the viewpoint of one participant, marriage was a way to ease childhood shortages.

A 22-year-old male participant: '*when I marry and have a child in the future, I will rear my child as I want. The complexities in my childhood makes me to provide the things for my child that I did not have in my childhood*'.

Some participants considered marriage as an important aspect of human life. In their viewpoint, marriage was a way for escaping from loneliness in the future and people who do not get married, feel a gap in their lives.

A 29-year-old female participant: '*when I see an unmarried person, I feel sorry. When a person gets married, in fact, this is a kind of escaping from loneliness.*

A 24-year-old male participant: '*marriage is part of life. If a person does not marry for whatever reason, he/she will feel an emotional vacuum in life*'.

3. Achieving Stability
Sense of immortality and continuity of the generation,

feeling of being accepted in the community, as well as commitment and accepting responsibility in common life create the imagination of stability.

3.1. Sense of Immortality and Continuity of the Generation
Marriage is still the most common way to form a family and have children which was demonstrated in the following quotes:

A 23-year-old male participant: '*God has created men and women as two different genders, goal is to continue the human generation*'. This was similar to the viewpoint of one participant in the study of Vu: '*nearly everybody has to marry, so do I. I need to have a wife and children and I think man has to do so*'(20).

This was the other viewpoint of one participant in the current study.

A 28-year-old male participant: '*I look at marriage as a concept of reproduction. In my opinion, marriage is only for survival. The sense of immortality in people makes it possible to marry. Maybe they do not understand that they marry for this feeling. People like to have kids*'. This was similar to the viewpoint of another participant in the study of Vu who said: '*marriage in principle is continuing the human generation*'(20).

3.2. Feeling of Being Accepted in the Community
From the viewpoint of some of the participants, marriage stabilizes the social status of individuals.

An 18-year-old male participant: '*human wants to continue his social life, so he/she marries. This is what society wants from us. In fact, by marrying and forming a family, people feel that they are accepted by the community*'.

A 21-year-old female participant: '*in my opinion, the important features of a couple are that the society accepts them more.*

3.3. Commitment and Accepting Responsibility
Some participants believed marriage makes a person to be committed to the spouse. Responsibility and commitment make a kind of continuity and stability in marital life. A 20-year-old male participant: '*when somebody wants to get married, he/she should not think just about his/herself. He/she is in a way responsible and committed to the spouse and the children*'.

A 24-year–old female participant: '*I ask myself, am I now ready to take responsibility for a life? I have no readiness to accept responsibility*'.

A 29-year–old male participant: '*couple, at the start of communication and acquaintance of each other, have no expectations, but they are committed and responsible as soon as they accept a common life*'.

4. Necessity of Marriage
Participants believed that marriage was necessary in terms of religious, cultural, and intrinsic points.

4.1. Growth and Completion of half of religion

Some of the participants considered necessity of marriage in terms of religious recommendations.

A 29-year–old male participant: '*if someone does not marry, would not be completed in own religion and in thought, keeping religion is too hard. Islam says that the one who gets married his religion will be completed*'.

A 22-year–old male participant: '*marriage is a complete subject and should be done, especially in Islam, it is obligatory. According to the prophet, religion will not be completed without marriage*'. In one Iranian qualitative study, one participant said: '*I had some problems, but it was no way except faith to God. When I decided to marry, I was a student without any income, but I did my decision by faith to God*" (14).

4.2. Negative Attitude of Society to Unmarried People

Many young people believed there is pressure and coercion of the community on unmarried people especially unmarried women.

A 29-year–old female participant: '*in our culture, being single is not acceptable. Even if someone does not decide to get married, the pressure of people around him or her, will force him or her or her to get married. I do not feel good about being single. Maybe other people think that I did not have a good option for marriage*'.

A 22-year–old male participant: '*when a woman gets older she cannot marry anymore, but a 50-year-old man can marry with a girl of much less than his age*'.

A 28-year–old male participant: '*in our community, it is believed that everyone should marry. Because of this feeling that has inflicted us since childhood, maybe I'll have to marry one day. But I really do not decide to marry*'. This part was similar to the phrase of a married person in an Iranian qualitative study who said about social pressure in marriage: "*in first I preferred not to marry below 30, but people say about you as much as possible, so you are under pressure to hurry up about it. If I didn't do it, in your opinion, don't people tag me as major flaws? Didn't they say maybe he has many faults* (14)?

4.3. Inherent Desire for Marriage

Marriage as a social tradition is connected with human history and has always been in human societies; this is due to the fact that marriage is an instinctive thing.

A 29-year–old male participant: '*marriage mostly is an innate need. When I ask my friends "why you are going to get married", I get a common answer: "we should get married. It is a need.*

Discussion

Young people believed that marriage can develop spiritual and intellectual emotions, also sense of independence, being accepted by society, perfectionism, change in thinking and mood state. In their opinion, they can feel happy with marriage and solve their concerns. Their attitude toward marriage was noticeable in having child, continuity of the generation, the acceptance of commitment and adherence to common life, necessity of marriage in the concept of religion, and cultural aspects.

In the current study, some of the participants considered marriage as the experience of a new sense, as well as the notion of the beginning of sexual relations. The concept of the beginning of sexual relations as an attitude to marriage is worthwhile. Islamic values emphasizes the prevention of any kind of sexual practice before marriage and people are encouraged to marry (21). In Iran, there is no definite information on how many young people start sexual relationship before marriage. Azimi Hashemi et al aimed to answer the question "Is there a significant difference between the intergenerational attitudes regarding the ways of marriage and premarital relationships?" He carried out a qualitative study and gathered data from 1400 students from several cities of Khorasan Razavi as a big and religious province in Iran. He reported intergenerational differences in the values of marriage and the pre-marital relationship with the opposite sex. Most of students tended to choose their own spouse. Two-thirds of them accepted pre-marital relationship which was about twice as much as their parents. The results showed a gap and a significant difference between the generations. Forty percent of the students in the mentioned study, in addition to the positive attitude toward friendship with the opposite sex, had experienced this friendship in practice (11). However, modernization and cultural changes can affect the onset of sexual activity, but in the context of traditional beliefs, the initiation of sexual relations outside the context of marriage is condemned (21). Traditional and religious beliefs in Iranian people do not accept any relationship without religious approval. On the other hand, sexual freedom is very limited in Iran and there are legal restrictions in this regard (11). Higher religiosity is also associated with greater expectations for being get married (22,23). In Iran, Niazi in a survey on the relationship between social, cultural, and economic factors causing negative attitude toward marriage found poor religious beliefs as the strongest predictor of negative attitudes toward marriage (24). For young adults, high religiosity was positively associated with agreeing that marriage is a lifetime relationship and an important goal (25).

In the current study, some participants expressed marriage as a religious necessity and a factor involved in the spiritual growth and completion of religion. According to the instructions and recommendations from Islam, the person who marries seems to have completed half of his religion. Regarding the decrease in marriage rate, higher rate of divorce and childbearing outside of marriage, Wilcox and Marquardt advised that strengthening the religion and civil constitution can lend meaningful life (26), and marital satisfaction (27). In some studies, it was reported that people who cohabited before wedding were

less religious than those who married directly (24).

The real meaning of marriage is the acceptance of a new status, and a greater moral and structural commitment (24, 28). In some studies, it has been reported that emotional and psychological problems in individuals is the result of not being responsible and committed in the relationship outside of marriage (29,30). In the present study, young people believed that married people have commitment and responsibility in their life, and marriage was a kind of commitment to one another. They believed that the marital relationship outside the framework of marriage would bring no responsibility and loyalty to the partners, and some of them believed marriage stabilizes the social status. This was similar to the result of a qualitative study in which married people believed their motivation for marriage was commitment, responsibility, perfection and enhancement, as well as acquiring identity and credibility in community (14).

Some of the participants stated that society had a negative attitude to being single and the pressure of those around them is the reason for them to be married. In countries with the traditional customs, where from single people ask, "why do you no marry"?, there are more problems for unmarried people especially for girls. In this way, beliefs, customs, and traditions in societies create a set of criteria, according to which everything is divided into holy and non-holy. Therefore, living in an environment where marriage is sacred, any delay in marriage is confronted with blame and social exclusion. This concept was similar to a concept in one Iranian study in which the negative pressure of society and negative labels on married students was effective in their decision on marriage (14).

In the current study, some participants believed, marriage would create a sense of support and confidence in the future, form positive emotions and mental imagery, cause the creation of a sense of happiness and satisfaction, and resolve concerns through removing the loneliness. In a qualitative study in Vietnam, one participant said: '*marriage determines our future. When I'm married, I have my husband and children. They will worry about me. When I'm old, I will have my children looking after me. If I was single, I would be alone when I got old and there would be nobody looking after me when I was sick*' (20). This suggests that marriage in other cultures is somehow a reassurance of the future and the elimination of some of the individual's concerns.

Given that the response to the desire to marry was limited to positive, negative or conditional response, it was not possible to consider classes and sub-classes for it. Many contributors believed that the conditions for their marriage were not ready. The Iranian society, with a basis of religious beliefs, has been affected by social and economic changes, internet revolution and cyberspace, concurrent with changes across the world. It seems that conducting qualitative research, not only in Iranian society but also in many countries with similar context, is necessary to find expectations, the barriers, and problems in the context of marriage.

In the new generation, although the marriage rate has reduced, it is yet the essential element for the anthropological understanding in social life (31). However, the attitude to marriage is one of the key mechanisms for predicting actual behavior in marriage, though it is affected by many social, cultural, and economic factors (19,32). There is a definite paucity of anthropological studies concerned with understanding of decline in the rate of marriage, interference between religious and cultural beliefs, as well as structural and cultural changes. The transition from traditional society to a modern one is a challenge in the Iranian society; so the qualitative studies on expectations, as well as barriers and problems of Iranian youth in the context of marriage are recommended. Undoubtedly, this is a key focus of future research.

Conclusions

In young societies, social issues are considered as the subjects related to youth people. In societies which the young population play an important role in the formation of families, childbearing, and the increase of generations, the reduction of marriage is not a matter of personal conduct but a social issue. In Iran, where marriage is the only way for continuity of generation, pregnancy and childbearing outside of marriage is forbidden. It should be kept in mind that any change in marriage and the formation of the family and related issues can be studied in the context of the challenges in society. It seems that youth's attitude has not affected the reduction of marriage rates, but attention to social and economic changes can play an important role in scrutinizing the causes of the decline in marriage, especially among Iranian young people. Undoubtedly doing research and spending any amount of capital can have a positive impact on the social structure and population growth, not only in Iran but also in other countries with similar cultural, religious, and social backgrounds..

Conflict of Interests
Authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Ethical Issues
The ethical approval for conducting this qualitative study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of School of Nursing and Midwifery, Tehran University of Medical Sciences. Prior to the interview, informed consent was obtained from the participants. Participants were reassured of maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the interview content and possibility to exclude from the study at any time.

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