



DATING BEHAVIOURS, VIEWS OF MARRIAGE AND MARITAL PREPARATION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN KYRGYZSTAN*

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Abstract

This study explores dating behaviours and perceptions of students on some aspects of marriage and marital preparation in Kyrgyzstan by using questionnaire data. The results indicated that the majority of students had dating experiences to date and also had a positive approach towards marriage. Almost entire sample preferred self-initiated marriage. However, less than half of them felt that they were ready for marriage. Vast majority of the individuals reported a need for preparation in relation to marriage and family life. The Most frequently cited topics for possible marital preparation courses were communication and conflict management. This study also found ethnic group and gender differences regarding dating and perceptions of marriage.

Key Words: University Students in Kyrgyzstan.

KIRGIZISTAN ÜNİVERSİTE ÖĞRENCİLERİ ARASINDAKI FLÖRT, EVLİLİĞE BAKIŞ VE EVLİLİK HAZIRLIKLARI

Özet

Bu çalışma, anket verilerini kullanarak Kırgızistan'da evlilik ve evliliğe hazırlanmada bazı algı ve davranışları araştırmaktadır. Sonuçlar, öğrencilerin çoğunun evlilik öncesi flört deneyimine ve evliliğe olumlu baktıklarını göstermektedir. Hemen hemen bütün örnekler temelde evliliğe kendi tercihleri olarak karar vermektedirler. Bununla beraber yarısından daha azı evlilik için hazır olduklarını hissetmektedirler. Tek tek yapılan görüşmelerin büyük bir çoğunluğu evlilik ve aile hayatı için bir hazırlığa gerek olduğunu bildirmişlerdir. Bu çalışma, aynı zamanda, evliliği algılama ve flörtlere dair etnik gruba ve cinsiyete göre farklılıkları da bulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Evlilik, Flört, Üniversite öğrencileri, Kırgızistan

* This study was carried out while the author was a visiting lecturer at Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University. I would like to thank for all support given by the Manas university. Also, I would like to thank to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Intimate relationships, specifically marriage, play a major role in people's lives. For example, marriage offers significant benefits to couples. Married couples are found to be physically and mentally healthier (Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldsteen, 1990; Horwitz & White, 1998; Coombs, 1991). They are also reported to be happier (Stack and Eshleman, 1998) and financially better off (Waite, 2000) compared to non married counterparts. Hence, a marriage that works well satisfies the important needs of human beings, and contributes to their overall well-being.

As an ultimate expression of intimate relationships (Brehm, 1992) marriage is still a dominant institution even in the individualistic western societies. For example, Cherlin (1992) stated that marriage continues to be at the centre of Americans' lives. Most cohabiting couples either marry or end their relationships within two or three years of the start of their relationships. Most divorced remarry and most people marry in the end. In a 1987 study by Jowell and his friends with a representative sample of 1,416 British adults, 67 per cent reported that they were married and lived with them (cited in Cramer, 1998).

With the prospect that divorce is becoming a common phenomenon for most societies, marriage preparation has been considered as an important preventative measure to divorce (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Williams, Riley, & Dyke, 1999). Since 1980, there have been many diverse marriage preparation programs depicted in the literature. These programs are provided by governmental, religious or private organizations. Some programs concentrate on skill development and some of them on knowledge and awareness building (see, Halford and Simons, 2005). Although diverse in target groups, providers, and application methods, their general aim is to assist individuals in establishing well-working marriage or family relationships (Parker, 2005). In general, these programs have been found effective in preventing later relationship problems (Hahlweg and Markman, 1988). In addition, individuals who received marriage preparation courses reported that their courses were useful for their marital relationships (Williams, Riley, & Dyke, 1999). However, to be able to design any help for youth we should have knowledge of their understanding of the issue underhand.

To date, although the literature on dating and marriage is abundant in the Western societies, our knowledge on views of youth from other parts of the world and relatively small populations, such as Kyrgyzstan is limited. One could say that the perceptions of marriage may differ from one culture to another. Therefore, the vastly western originated findings may have little applicability to the other cultural settings. In addition, large scale changes in societies may affect relational behaviours of people (Goodwin, 1999). Since the collapse of socialist system, rapid socioeconomic changes have had an impact on marital behaviours of individuals living in the former Soviet Republics. For example, in post soviet Russia, rates of registered marriages and fertility decreased between 1990 and 2001 (cited in White, 2005). However, relatively little is known about close relationships living in former Soviet Union republics (Goodwin et al, 1999; Agadjanian, 1999). Among the former Soviet Union countries, central Asian countries have been studied less compared to Post soviet Russia and Central European countries as far as we are concerned.

In the 1990s, the number of the registered marriages has gone strongly down and divorce rates increased in Kyrgyzstan (Denissenko, 2005). Therefore, studying close relationship in Kyrgyzstan, that is a small country in Central Asia, gains importance. There appears to be only a few studies regarding close relationships in Kyrgyzstan as far

as I am concerned (e.g., Denissenko, 2005; Kleinbach, Ablezova, & Aitieva, 2005). For example, Denissenko studied changes in nuptiality in Kyrgyzstan for the last hundred years and conclude that it has changed significantly. According to this study, socialist transformation has altered traditional forms of lifestyles and modernized the matrimonial behavior of indigenous nations of the republic. As a result, marriage age of females increased drastically, male marriage age decreased slightly, and also divorce rates increased significantly. Crude (per 1000 population) marriage rate for Kyrgyzstan is 6.3 in 2002 which is relatively high compared to European rates, 5.1 in 1999¹. This is 8.3 for United States of America and 7.1 for China (in 1998). At that time, Marriage patterns corresponded to that of whole territory of USSR. On the other hand, Kleinbach et al. studied Bride kidnapping as a form of family formation in Kyrgyzstan. They concluded that more than a third of ethnic Kyrgyz women have been married by non-consensual kidnapping and that the practice has been increasing in recent years

However, given that relatively little is known about intimate relationships in Kyrgyzstan this study attempts to fill the gap by focusing on dating and cohabiting behaviours, and views about marriage by using questionnaire data from Universities in Bishkek.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 384 undergraduates most of whom were from Kyrgyz-Turk Manas University. Data were also collected at Slavonic, Kyrgyz National University, Arabayeva University, and Humanities University. Of the participants, 279 were female, and 105 were male. The mean age of the sample was 20.5 (SD = 1.78). Married students were excluded from the analysis. The majority was from Kyrgyz background (207), this was followed by Russian origin (128) and the rest (49) was mixed, namely, Kazakh, Uighur, Korean, Ahiska Turk, Tatar, Uzbek. (Please see Table 1).

Table 1: Background information

	<i>Total</i> (<i>N= 384</i>)
Gender	
Male	105
Female	279
Age (18-26)	
Mean	20.58
SD	1.78
Ethnic group	
Kyrgyz	207
Russian	128
Other (Kazakh, Ahiska Turk, Korean, Uighur, Uzbek, Tatar)	49

¹ See <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/dyb/dyb2002/Table23.pdf> for the European rates.

Instruments

As a part of a larger questionnaire related to mate preferences, the participants completed a section regarding views on marriage, marriage preparation; behaviours on dating and sharing a flat with a dating partner. The questionnaire included both open-ended (*e.g.*, how many children would you like to have, if you get married?) and closed-ended questions (*e.g.*, If you are dating, are you sharing the same flat with your dating partner? *Yes / No*). The issues to be discussed in this paper are demographics; dating experience; sharing a flat with dating partner; views on desire for marriage, readiness for marriage, preferred age of marriage and marital type, preferred number of children; and views in preparation for marriage and desired topics for marriage preparation courses.

Procedure

In the various universities in Bishkek, the questionnaire was distributed in class under unanimous and voluntary conditions. The participants were told that any information they provided will be treated carefully and used for only the purpose of this study. The respondents were also informed that they could refuse to answer any questions that they felt uncomfortable with. The application of the questionnaire took approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The questionnaire was first prepared in Turkish and then translated into Russian by a candidate of Doctorate who studies Turkish Language and a person who has a Degree in psychology from Turkey. Once, the translation of Russian was completed, two professionals, who were fluent in both Turkish and Russian, reviewed and checked the translation for accuracy and clarity of language. Regarding open-ended questions, a reliability check was carried out. For this, randomly chosen answers were recoded by the researcher and the kappa reliability between two codings were .93, which is highly acceptable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined dating and cohabiting behaviours and views of marriage among university students in Bishkek. First of all, we documented percentage scores and mean scores for all the sample (see Table 2 for the details). Furthermore, in order to identify factors and interactions among factors which influenced students' relational behaviours and views, the statistical approach was to conduct hierarchical log-linear analyses using a backward elimination. Other than preferred number of marriage and accepted average marital age, variables in this study are mainly categorical. Therefore, as Knoke and Burke (1980) indicate, hierarchical log linear analysis can be used for analyzing the effects of categorical variables in multiple frequency tables. Thus, in order to see the relationships among the gender, ethnic origin, and relational behaviours and views, a series of hierarchical log linear analyses and variance analyses where applicable were carried out.

Dating and sharing a flat with dating partner

As well as western or contemporary values, Asian values have been changing (Uba 1994). For example, Hortaçsu, Baştuğ, and Muhammetberdiev (2001) reported that there was a change towards modernity regarding marriage in three Turkic cultures, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Turkey. Therefore, it is expected that the results of this study may well have some similarities with western studies regarding views of marriage

and behaviours of dating. Table 2 gives the information about the behaviours of dating and cohabiting and about the views of some aspects of marriage.

Table 2 Dating and views on marriage among total sample, Kyrgyz, and Russian ethnic origin

<i>Domains (%)</i>	<i>Total sample⁺</i> <i>N=384</i> <i>%</i>	<i>Kyrgyz</i>		<i>Russian</i>	
		<i>Females</i> <i>n=141</i> <i>%</i>	<i>Males</i> <i>n=66</i> <i>%</i>	<i>Females</i> <i>n=102</i> <i>%</i>	<i>Males</i> <i>n=26</i> <i>%</i>
Dating experience to date					
Yes	77.2	75.4	68.8	81.4	88.0
No	22.8	24.6	31.3	18.6	12.0
Ongoing dating					
Yes	43.6	33.8	25.4	62.1	48.0
No	56.4	66.2	74.6	37.9	52.0
Sharing a flat with the dating partner					
Yes	10.3	9.6	7.7	16.5	11.5
No	89.7	90.4	92.3	83.5	88.5
Desire for marriage at least once in lifetime					
Yes	67.2	59.8	64.1	81.2	54.2
Indifferent	25.2	30.3	32.8	11.9	37.5
No	7.6	9.8	3.1	6.9	8.3
Preferred marital type					
Self initiated	96.5	96.3	90.8	100	100
Arranged	2.5	2.2	6.2	-	-
Other	1.5	1.5	1.3	-	-
Readiness for marriage					
Yes	40.5	66.9	54.8	49.0	26.9
No	59.5	33.1	45.2	51.0	73.1
Desire for marriage preparation courses					
Yes	61.0	66.9	54.8	65.3	42.3
No	39.0	33.1	45.2	34.7	57.7
Preferred marital age					
Mean	24.1	24.07	25.60	23.37	24.77
SD	2.9	2.57	2.38	2.43	3.70
Preferred number of children					
Mean	3.0	3.31	3.79	2.24	2.58
SD	1.2	1.04	1.58	.82	1.02

+ Tüm respondents are included (from Kyrgyz, Russian, and other backgrounds)

Dating and cohabiting are seen to be prelude to successful marriages by the youth in the west. For example, in a recent study with college students, Tang and Zuo (2000) demonstrated that 63% of American and 32% of Chinese students had ongoing dating relationships. Also, another study by Thornton (1990) showed that approximately 90% of male and 88% of females from Detroit metropolitan area in America had first dating experience by the age of 16. As the Table 2 shows, in the present study, a total of 76.5% of undergraduates reported at least one dating partner to date with respect to dating experience. Moreover, 45 % of all students stated that they had ongoing dating relationships. This finding lies between Chinese and American rates of present dating (see Tang and Zuo, 2000).

To analyze gender and ethnic origin effects on dating behaviours, a Gender X Ethnic Origin X Dating experience to date and Gender X Ethnic origin X Ongoing Dating hierarchical log linear analyses were performed. Both analyses revealed significant two way interactions, Ethnic Origin X Dating Experience to Date, $\chi^2(1)=3.99$, $p < .05$; Ethnic Origin X Ongoing Dating, $\chi^2(1)=24.02$, $p < .001$. In comparison to students from Kyrgyz background, more students from Russian background reported dating experiences (for now and in the past). This finding may indicate more liberal behaviours among the students from Russian background. Likewise, in a study comparing individuals from three cultures, collectivistic (Japanese), mixed (Russian), and individualistic (American), Sprecher et al. (1994) concluded that among individuals from these three cultures Russians were the most inclined to say they were in love.

Martin, Specter, Martin, & Martin (2003) reported that Cohabitation before marriage has increased in the past three decades in the U.S. Young people seem to be more liberal in their relational behaviours. According to Knox et al., 15% of American college students were currently cohabitating. It was reported that, by the age of thirty, almost half of American adults lived with someone (Noch, 1995). In the current study, 10 % of the undergraduates reported that they were currently sharing a flat with a dating partner. Interestingly, this rate is highly close to American college students' (see Knox, Zusman, Snell, & Kooper, 1999). Smock (2000) reviewed cohabitation in America and reported that it had risen sharply in America together with industrialized western countries in the last two decades. According to this review cohabiting individuals had been found to be more liberal, less religious, and supportive of non-traditional family roles. Given that the Kyrgyz are known to be traditionally marriage oriented, cohabitation figures in the current study may be considered as high. However, Denissenko (2005) reported that consensual matrimonial unions (unregistered) has increased partly as a result of a part of population's changing attitudes towards registration of marriages. Our finding may be considered in line with Denissenko's conclusion. Although cohabitation can universally be seen part of a broader trend toward a more liberal stand in intimate relationships, It may fulfil diverse needs of individuals across cultures, for example, housing opportunities may affect cohabitation in some places (see Batalova & Cohen, 2002). Therefore, there is a need for more exploratory studies in the subject to understand the dynamics of cohabiting in Kyrgyzstan.

To examine relationship among gender, ethnic origin and sharing a flat with a dating partner, a hierarchical log linear analysis was run. This analysis revealed no significant interaction effects. In both ethnic origin, more females than males reported that they were sharing a flat with their dating partners. But separate chi square analyses for each ethnic background to examine gender and cohabiting were not significant.

Desire for marriage, marriage type, preferred age at first marriage, desired number of children

On the basis of current literature, it can be expected that majority of individuals express accepting views toward marriage. For example, 65.3 % percent of adolescents in America expressed positive attitudes toward marriage (Martin, Specter, Martin, & Martin, 2003). The results of the current study (see Table 2) are in line with this point of view. Almost two thirds of the sample (67.2%) reported that they would prefer to be married at least ones in lifetime. Twenty-five percent were indifferent and the rest (7.6%) was not thinking of marriage. A Gender X Ethnic Origin X Desire for marriage (yes/indifferent/no) hierarchical log linear analysis performed in order to see the effect of gender and ethnic origin on desire for marriage at least ones in a life time. A significant three way interaction, Gender X Ethnic Origin X desire for marriage, was revealed, $\chi^2(2)=7.34$, $p < .05$. Although most of the respondents prefer marriage at least once in lifetime in both ethnic origin and gender, examination of gender X desire for marriage separately for each ethnic origin revealed that interaction was significant only for Russian origin, $\chi^2(1)=8.45$, $p < .05$. Females from Russian origin were significantly more likely to express desire for marriage than male from the same origin. In this age, for females from Russian origin, marriage is more likely to consider compared to males from the same ethnic group. As Agadjanian reported (1999) women from European origin were marrying significantly earlier than Kazakhs in Kazakhstan due to cultural reasons. Also, marriage might be more important as a social and economic support resource to Russian women than men under transition period. Furthermore, after independence and consequent socioeconomical hardships, some individuals from European origin have left the country for better life opportunities abroad. During migration process staying single may be more preferred position for males than females (see Agadjanian, 1999).

Emerging individualistic values stress the importance of love and intimacy in marriage in the modernizing world (see, for example, Levinger, 1990). Hence, individuals prefer self initiated (or love match) marriage to traditional arranged ones. Arranged marriage may be more common for Kyrgyz background than Russian background since it is considered as primary in non-western countries than western countries (Goodwin, 1999). However, in our study, almost entire sample expressed their preference for self-initiated type of marriages, 96.5 %. All respondents from Russian background expressed preference for self initiated marriages. Due to lack of differentiations in responses, no further analysis was carried out. The finding of high preference for self initiated marriage, 95.5 %, in current study is consistent with the assertion made by Levinger (1990) and the findings of Hortaçsu et al. (2001). Hortaçsu et al. study indicated to a general trend from traditional to modern forms of marriage in Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. Particularly, education plays an important role in choosing modern ways of marriage.

For total sample, preferred appropriate mean age for marriage was 24.1 (SD 2.9). With respect to preferred marital age, the mean was 24.13. These results are not surprising as education plays an important role in preferring the marriage type and choosing the appropriate age among the youth (see Hortaçsu et al, 2001; Atalay, Konaş, Beyazit and Madenoğlu, 1992). A Gender X ethnic origin ANOVA was carried out where the most appropriate average age for marriage served as a dependent measure. This analysis revealed significant effects of gender and ethnic origin $F(1, 305)=16.79$, $p < .001$; $F(1, 305)=4.57$, $p < .05$. The most appropriate average age for marriage was higher for males than females. It is also higher for Kyrgyz ethnic origin than the Russian. For the gender

effect, current findings are consistent with existing literature. Males marry in later ages than females in both cultures (See Denissenko, 2005; Zakharov, 2005. Traditionally, in Russia (White, 2005), and Kyrgyzstan (Denissenko, 2005) females marry earlier than males. Therefore, social pressure against spinsterhood after certain ages is more pronounced for females than males. On the other hand, regarding ethnic group differences, current finding is surprising since in 1999 official records, age at first marriage is higher for individuals from Russian origin than Kyrgyz (see Denissenko, 2005). However, in line with our study, Agadjanian (1999) reported that the ethnic Kazakh's median age of entry into first marriage was higher than Russians. He explained this partly by outmigration process.

Regarding expected number of children, the mean is 3.06 for the total sample. This is highly correlated to actual rate of fertility in Kyrgyzstan, 3.12. This rate is 1.33 in Russia and 2.03 in Turkey (2003, the World Factbook). Various reasons might effect the number of children individuals would like to have. For example, Kağıtcıbası (1982) asserted that families who valued children psychologically had less children than the families who valued children economically. Likewise, traditional societies or individuals are likely to have more children than relatively less traditional individuals or societies.

An ANOVA where preferred number of children served as a dependent variable, and gender and ethnic origin served as independent variables revealed no significant interaction effects but revealed significant gender and ethnic origin main effects, $F(1, 305)=7.18, p<.01$; $F(1, 305)=57.01, p<.001$ respectively. According to these results, male college students prefer more children than the females. Students from Kyrgyz background want more children than the students from Russian background. This findings are in line with the study by Agadjanian (1999). According to him, fertility rates were traditionally lower among individuals from European background than native Central Asians in Kazakhstan. Also, according to the findings of a survey carried out with newly married couples in Moscow, women and men alike relatively less valued childbearing among the reasons for marriage compared to love; mutual understanding, caring, and support (Sisenko, 1986, cited in Agadjanian, 1999). In relation to gender differences, traditional gender role orientation entails females being more pronatalistic than males. On the contrary, in the current study it was found that males prefer more children than females. This finding is consistent with a study carried out in America with a representative sample of newlywed childless couples (Seccombe, 1991). According to this study, overall, husbands rated having children more important than wives. In above mentioned, while gender role orientation did not have any effect on female pronatalism, males with traditional role orientation wanted children more than males with non traditional gender orientation. In relation to current study, females in higher education may be less traditional compared to opposite sex counterparts. This need further exploration. Furthermore, having children and the large number of children might have been more costly for females than males since child rearing is considered primarily for female family obligation (see also White, 2005).

Readiness and preparation for marriage

Although majority of the respondents opt for marriage at least ones in lifetime, 59.5% of all undergraduates felt they were not ready for marriage (Please see Table 2). A Gender X Ethnic Origin (Kyrgyz, Russian) X Readiness for Marriage (Yes/No) Hierarchical Loglinear Analysis was performed to analyze gender and Ethnic origin

effect on feeling ready for marriage. This analysis revealed only significant Gender X Readiness for Marriage interaction effect, $\chi^2(1)=16.24$, $p < .001$. This result indicates that compared to female respondents, male respondents were less likely to feel ready for marriage. This result is not surprising since, at this age, male individuals are rather young to consider marriage since males and females marry in different socially accepted ages.

More than half of the graduates stated that they would have a preference for marriage preparation courses, if there is any available. A Gender X Ethnic Origin X Desire for Marriage Preparation Courses hierarchical loglinear analysis was conducted to analyze the effects of gender and ethnic group on need for marriage preparation courses. A significant Gender X Desire for Marriage Preparation Courses effect, $\chi^2(1)=6.15$, $p < .05$, was revealed. According to this result, female respondents were in favour of marriage preparation courses more than their male friends, (Table 2). Preventive approaches have been proved to be useful in reducing marital distress. They come in various forms such as psycho-education and premarital preparation courses to date (Halford & Simons, 2005).

Open ended question of ‘what three topics would you like to be included in marriage preparation courses?’ asked to the respondents. Content analysis was carried out on the responses. The most cited topics were listed in the Table 3. According to the Table 3, the most highly favoured domain was communication and conflict resolution skills (63%). This is followed by parenting (61.6%), home running skills (28.7%), learning about opposite sex (19%) and sex life (10.5%). The majority of undergraduate respondents consider that the communication and conflict management matters for a successful marriage. This finding is in line with the existing studies carried out western cultures. For example, in a study carried out with 5 to 8 year married American individuals who had experience with marriage preparation programs, conflict resolution and communication was rated among the most useful aspect of marriage preparation programs (Williams, Riley, & Dyke, 1999). It has also been known that ailing marriages mostly suffer from communication problems and conflict resolution styles (Gottman, 1994; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Stanley, Markman, Peters, & Leber, 1995).

Table 3. The most cited five domains for marriage preparation courses

<i>The domains</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
Communication and conflict management	63
Parenting (child baring, child raring)	61.6
Home running (food preparation, house chores, economy)	28.7
Learning about opposite sex (about future spouse)	19
Sex life	10.5

CONCLUSION

This study provides descriptive results from a non random sample on dating, cohabiting behaviours and views on marriage. The findings of current study may not be over generalized to the whole Kyrgyz population because of the sampling characteristics,

which is gathered mainly from Bishkek. Furthermore, the numbers of male and female students are imbalanced favouring the females. This should be kept in mind during interpretation of the results. Kyrgyzstan has a multiethnic composition with majority of its population being Kyrgyz (61.2%) and Russian (14.9%) origin (Elebayeva, Omuraliev, & Abazov, 2000). In this study we only compared individuals from Kyrgyz and Russian backgrounds. Future research should take account of individuals of other ethnic backgrounds.

Marriage is a social phenomenon which is shaped by cultural values surrounding individuals. Cultural values change. In Kyrgyzstan, various ethnic groups lived together for years under the same political system. People from different religious and cultural backgrounds have affected and have been affected from each other. That is why, together with dissimilarities, at the same time similarities exist in the relational behaviours of individuals.

Given that, post communist era put considerable burden on close relationships as well as individuals' mental health (Goodwin, Allen, Nizharadze, Emelyanova, Dedkova, Saenko, & Bugrova, 2002) this study may have some implication by drawing attention to needs of young people in Kyrgyzstan regarding marital life. The results of the study indicated that most individuals were in favour of a marriage with a number of children. However, they would like to have some preparation early to marriage. Particularly, they expressed needs for learning about effective communication in marital life, learning about parenting, and home running.

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