Marriage readiness criteria among young adults of Isfahan:
A qualitative study
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Abstract
Purpose: Marriage readiness in one of the main variables in the decision to marry and a significant predictor of later marital satisfaction, yet it remains substantially under examined. We sought to gain a better understanding of the criteria young people endorse as necessary for being ready to marry.
Methods: In a qualitative approach, we conducted and analyzed interviews with 21 young unmarried subjects from Isfahan. We asked interviewees what criteria they perceived as important and necessary for marriage readiness.
Principal results: In this sample of young single adults, we found the formation of a unique culture of marriage readiness criteria compared with those living in industrialized western societies. Subjects reported nine major categories they endorsed important for marriage readiness: Age readiness, Physical readiness, Mental readiness, Financial readiness, Moral readiness, Emotional readiness, Contextual-social readiness, Interpersonal readiness, and Marital life skills. Young adults in the present study focused primarily on becoming financially ready for marriage and afterwards on moral readiness.
Major conclusion: Marriage counselors, parents, and policy makers can use our findings to develop initiatives to enhance readiness for marriage in young persons.
KEYWORDS: MARRIAGE READINESS, CRITERIA, YOUNG ADULTS, ISFAHAN

Introduction
Marriage is an important institution in almost all societies (Myers, Madathil & Tingle, 2005). It is the best and most important way to respond to belonging and kindness stimuli and also the basic structure for establishing a family and raising the next generation. However, nowadays one of the ill-sorted social events around the world is delaying marriage and decreasing rates of it. In Iran, in recent decades, we have faced with an increasing rate of this event in the way that the number of marriage has been for 1% and the average age at which young people first marry has risen about 3/6 years during lost 20 years. (Iran. Bureau of census, 2009).

Given above facts it seems necessary for marriage and family scholars to be mindful of why young adult delay their marriage. One of the main variables in the decision to marry and a significant predictor of later marital satisfaction is readiness for marriage (Holman, Larson & Harmer, 1994, Badger, 2005). Marriage readiness is important to study because it forms the basis for the decision of whom to marry, when to marry, why to marry and later marital behavior (Larson & Lamont, 2005).

The state of “readiness” as mentioned by Holman and Lee (1997) is a state of preparation beyond action which forms and directs action. Therefore, readiness can be used to explain and estimate a special kind of action. In addition, knowing one’s readiness helps to predict the type of behavior that would happen if readiness were activated. (Holman & Lee, 1997). Marriage readiness as Larson (1988) defined is a subjective evaluation of

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person’s own readiness to take on the responsibilities and challenges of marriage. In other words, marriage readiness is one’s ability to develop mate selection process (Holman & Lee, 1997). Thus, marriage readiness is a key indicator for marriage behavior and the timing of the transition into marriage.

There are meager empirical research about marriage readiness, variables affecting it, and its criteria. Most of the studies have only focused on personal attribution, qualities and contextual experiences that are related to one’s ability to establish and maintain a long successful marriage. (Carroll, et al, 2009). As an example, we can refer to Stinett’s study (1969) who found that readiness for marriage is positively related to happiness in parent-child relationship and a democratic authority pattern in the family. Also, those whose mothers stayed at home versus worked outside the home, and engaged individual versus dating ones had higher readiness for marriage. In addition, the greater the amount of emotional stability, the higher the degree of marital readiness. In his study, marriage readiness was not related to family sibling position, degree of dating and personality characteristics.

Larson (1988) in his study on college students identified three variables related to readiness for marriage: the variables included gender, romanticism, and completion of a marriage and family course. Women, highly romantic individuals and students who completed a marriage preparation course reported significantly higher readiness, but participant’s age and marital status were not related to marital readiness. Holman & Lee (1997) added to this literature by developing a theoretical model based on the relationship between premarital factors and perceived readiness for marriage. Their study showed that personal readiness for marriage is strongly related to contextual experiences (Socio-demographic characteristics such as income, age and education and significant other support) and quality of couple interactions.

Larson & Thyne (1988) comparing young adult children of Alcholics and Non-alcholics found that children with alcholic parents perceive themselves significantly less ready for marriage and wanted to wait for marriage about seven months or more comparing to their peers. But in Delape’s (2000) study, there was no significant difference between two groups. Larson and Lamont (2005) in their study on single young women of three universities in U.S.A found that childhood sexual abuse is related to less marital readiness and a longer waiting period before marriage. In Mosko and Carole Pistole’s (2010) study, more serious attachment relation status, low attachment avoidance and intrinsic religious motivation contributed to marital readiness. Carroll, Badger and Young (2006) offered a multi dimensional model of “marital competence” using developmental theory of inter personal ability. The results of their study showed that family context, personal security, other-centeredness, conflict resolution behavior, self worthiness and negative emotion regulation explained later marital relationship quality.

As to criteria for marriage readiness, we can only refer to Badger’s (2006) research. She found that compared with two past generations, there is a unique culture of marriage readiness in current young adults, in a way that the criteria for marriage readiness in young adults reflect a tendency toward divorce avoidance rather than marriage readiness and they believe that they should experience a longer period of singlehood before marriage to be able to establish a high quality relationship later.

Although the mentioned studies provide partly a good understanding of marriage readiness, it is of great attention that all the studies have been conducted in western industrialized societies (such as united states). and, the criteria and instruments used for measuring marriage readiness have been developed based on the cultural-social context of those societies hence not valid for other cultures. In addition, most research are dated and their results are not valid for millennia young people with different social, familial, and personal conditions. Furthermore, there is no information about marriage readiness, its variables and criteria in present research’s population. Therefore it seemed necessary to evaluate marriage readiness and the criteria of it conducting a study in the present community.

The first step to access such a purpose was to obtain young adult’s criteria for marriage readiness. With regard to the lack of any suitable native instruments for evaluating marital readiness, we conducted a qualitative approach. We chose a qualitative approach because of the limited extent of information in this area and to be open to unexpected findings. In this study, we report results of qualitative analyses of interviews with young single adults about their criteria of readiness for marriage. This approach is oriented toward understanding rather than measuring phenomena.

1- Methods
1.1 Participant Recruitment
As part of a larger 3-phase sequential study employing qualitative methods, we wanted to collect and analyze qualitative data on three samples of young single adults, parents of young single adults and marriage scholars to provide the native criteria for marriage readiness in Isfahan. During the first phase of the study- the focus of the present article - we sought to understand what the criteria for marriage readiness are among the young adults. In this study we conducted semi-structured interviews with young adults from 5 various regions in Isfahan. We used “purposeful” sampling, the goal of which is to sample cases for in-depth analyses that have experience in that
phenomenon (Daly, 2006) and can best help the investigator understand the central question of the study: Rather than “representative” sampling, the goal of which is to generalize from study samples to populations (Patton, 2002). Therefore, we intentionally sample young adults who were single, were adults with ages above 19, and did not have prior marriages.

1.2 Data collection
We conducted 21 semi structured, qualitative interviews lasting 30 to 60 minutes with 21 young single girls and boys. Semi structured interviews produce rich data conveyed in the interviewee’s own words through the use of open-ended questions; the interviewer is able to tailor the interview to each respondent while still covering the specified domains (Daly, 2006). Interviews were conducted between April 2, 2012 and June 5, 2012, and were audio recorded and transcribed by researchers. Interviews were conducted by one of study members.

We used an interview guide, developed with input from literature review and marriage scholar’s view to ask interviewees what are their perceived dimensions of readiness for marriage (figure 1). To access more participants to interview, we also used a “snow ball” sampling technique, asking each interviewee to recommend other potential respondents (amongst his/her friends, relatives or class-mates); who had not married yet and were above the age 19.

1.3 Analytic Approach
Analysis was conducted using qualitative procedures; we conducted data analyses concurrently with data collection. It is essential in qualitative studies that researchers be engaged in the analysis process throughout the study so they can progressively focus ongoing data collection on emerging topics and on elaborating developing themes (Patton, 2002). To that end, interviewer produced interviews summaries after each interview to identify emerging themes. Furthermore, to examine the data systematically we developed a qualitative code book. An initial set of codes was established on the basis of our study’s conceptual model, and these codes were refined and supplemented with categories derived from the interview transcripts.

Given our a priori descriptive goals, we did not seek to generate new theories about marital readiness; rather, we focused on describing common experiences and identifying dimensions of those experiences in young adults.

2. Results
The 21 participants ranged in age from 19 to 35 years, with about half under 26 years, and were evenly split between males and females. Six participants reported college or graduate degrees, and 8 reported some college education and 7 reported lower levels of education. Five subjects were employed and the rest were unemployed. All subjects reported having some concerns about their later marriages, and decided to marry in future.

Only a minority of the participants indicated that they had sufficient information about their future marriages from their families and social contexts. None reported having marriage preparation courses. Our interviews highlight some key categories of marital readiness in young adults of Isfahan which included: age readiness; physical readiness; mental readiness; financial readiness; moral readiness; emotional readiness; contextual-social readiness; interpersonal readiness and marital life skills. Each of the categories included codes derived from concepts and data of the study. (table 1). All categories can be integrated into three major themes: personal, interpersonal, and social readiness.

3. Discussion
Because marriage readiness is a key variable in the decision to marry, and a predictor of later marital satisfaction, studying it can explain some aspects of marriage and successful marital relationships. This study explored what young men and women believe to be the important criteria for marriage readiness. Study results revealed nine categories emerged from data collected regarding young single adults attitudes about marriage and family life. Each categories discussed in more detail below.

Theme 1: Personal readiness
3.1 Age readiness for marriage
Young adults in this study referred to criteria such as reaching a maturity age to get a perception of being ready for marriage. Most participants believed they should have reached a minimum of 20 years before they start to marry. The desired age for marriage can be effective on young adults perception of marital readiness and behaviors; those who desire to marry in lower ages would prepare themselves for marriage sooner (Carroll et al, 2006). One of the female participants stated, “A young woman should have reached to an age that can bear and raise children” she continued, “this maturity age differs in individuals but it is at least above 20 years” The fact that respondents believed in having a minimum of 20 years for being ready for marriage may seem contradictory with young adult’s postponing marriage to late 20’s or 30’s; nevertheless, we may explain it by contextual factors. For example some
participants mentioned that they desired to marry soon but they have to wait because of some family or economic barriers.

3.2: Physical readiness for marriage

Sexual ability and the ability to bear children were examples of physical readiness for several respondentsspecially male ones who emphasized on sexual readiness as an important indicator of marital readiness. This finding was in consensus with results of Larson (1998) and Holman & Lee (1997)’s study. Participants meanwhile noted that there was no clear definition for this type of readiness because it was a social taboo. In fact, although physical readiness was emphasized by our respondents in consensus with their peers in industrial societies (Badger, 2005), there was no obvious description of how this type of readiness is obtained and what are the signs of physical readiness in young people.

3.3: Mental readiness for marriage

Young single adults also stated that a young man or woman should be mentally prepared for marriage. For example, one man addressed the issue of mental readiness to the ability to plan for future life. Another one stressed on having logical expectations and a positive attitude toward marriage. A notable finding in this category was that participants did not view academic education as a main factor of mental maturation; rather, most of them emphasized on some kind of cognitive development. This may be an indicator of changing life values or marital values among the current generation of young people in a way that they prefer social realistic values to mere scientific ones.

3.4: Financial readiness for marriage

All participants stated that financial readiness is particularly an important criterion for readiness for marriage. They refer to qualities such as earning enough money, settled into a long-term career, financial independence (from parents and others) as necessary for entering marital relationship. There seemed to be a great concern (in better words “worry”) about economic issues in young people. We observed some uncertainty about economic aspects of marital life in future: “I don’t feel ready enough for marriage because I don’t earn much money and … I wonder if I could support a family financially, I’m really anxious…about my future life “ one of the male participants said. We can conclude that readiness for marriage is to a large extent dependent on contextual factors including income (Holman & Lee, 1991) as well as individual marital self-efficacy.

3.5: Moral readiness for marriage

Moral readiness was an emerging theme in the present study. We put concepts such as commitment, adherence to moral principles, patience, forgiveness in this sub category. The mentioned qualities were of great importance for both young men and women in the study. We may attribute this theme to religious values and the cultural backgrounds of the research society. Also, it seems that moral criteria for marriage is to some extent the result of the notion that young persons are wary of marital failure and anxious to achieve criteria they believe will prepare them for successful marriage and family life (Badger, 2005) and prevent divorce in their later marital relationships. In fact, they stress on those criteria that help them establish a stable marriage. They seemingly thought that they could prevent their later marriage from dissolution by commitment to some moral principles. Perhaps this is some kind of being wary about uncertain statue of marital relationships in present society.

3.6: Emotional readiness for marriage

“To have good control of his/her emotions”, “to avoid aggressive and violent behavior”, and “to be able to express feelings in close relationships” were some statements of participants that were supplemental into emotional reading category. This finding was in consensus with Stinett’s (1996) study of main variables for being ready for marriage. It seems that having stable emotions plays an important role in developing and maintaining a successful marital relationship.

3.7: Contextual-social readiness

Subjects reported that they must develop a variety of capacities for forming and maintaining marriage. For example they believed that it was needed for a young man to complete military service before act of marriage. Besides, the society should provide them a career to be capable of supporting future family. According to sociologic theories economic stagnation, high costs, unemployment and increasing levels of young people’s expectations in developing countries may result in postponing marriage and decreasing rates of marriage (Ardalan, 2002). It seems that respondents in this study experience a time of economic problems in their society as well as a desire to be independent of parents; these situation makes them to wait more for marriage until a proper time in which they perceive themselves more ready to marry.
3.8-Interpersonal readiness.
Marriage readiness criteria associated with interpersonal competency in relationships were among the most widely endorsed by participants. Most of them believed that it is necessary for a person to listen to others in an understanding way, discuss personal problems with partner, and be respectful of others when dealing with differences and conflicts in order to be ready for marriage. These findings are in accordant with marriage scholar opinions about factors influencing marital success or break up. As Carroll et al (2006) posed the ability to negotiate is the cornerstone of interpersonal readiness. Negotiation is the ability to bargain, problem-solve and make decisions and ideas with interacting with others in a way that consensus can be reached while respecting the rights of each individual. This includes capacities such as conflict resolution, problem solving and, communication skills. In his study on couples' interactions, Gottman(1998)found that a set of marital interactional processes, referred to "four horsemen of the apocalypse", is strongly related to the cascade toward divorce. These four horsemen of the apocalypse were: negative behavioral processes that he labeled criticism, contempt, defensiveness and withdrawal.

3.9-Marital life skills
In order to feel ready for marriage young adults reported that they must develop a variety of capacities for fulfilling specific roles in a family, such as running a house hold, cooking, caring and nurturing children. Of course,marital roles differed in males and females according to cultural assumptions. Most young people in the study believed in some gender differentiation in marital role issue: for example, they referred to cooking and caring children mainly as female responsibilities and running household expenses as a male duty.

In summary, although the findings of this study do not support generalizations, they do provide some preliminary insight in important criteria of marital readiness. Also, they generally reflect the formation of a unique culture of marriage preparation among young people in comparison to the one experienced by their peers in industrialized countries as well as their parents and previous generations. It seems that single individuals stress on those criteria which implies marital satisfaction and preventing divorce. Moreover, while they still have some traditional marital attitudes, but it seems that they desire to form a marriage by which they experience moreself-confidence, personal independence and, specially a security feeling toward stability of later marital relationship.

Our findings should be interpreted in the context of the following limitations. We conducted a qualitative study to understand what young men and women consideras needed for being ready to marry. Accordingly, our goal was not to generalize findings from a study sample to a population or to provide precise estimates of effect size and statistical significance, as is common with quantitative evaluation. Although our sample is relatively large for a qualitative evaluation, it would be inappropriate to generalize these findings to all young adults in Isfahan. Our intent was to provide information that could not be produced through a quantitative study. In addition, the participants may have responded in ways that reflect regional views, or reported in socially desirable ways. Finally, as with most research, our findings and conclusions are subject to potential bias from our preconceptions and prejudices.

The results of this study may be used by marriage counselors in the way that they may want to address these findings in premarital counseling or with clients who have distress related to their readiness for marriage or in educational programming directed at young unmarried adults.. Marriage counselors, parents,and policy makers can use our findings to develop initiatives to enhance readiness for marriage in young persons.We believe additional quantitative research is merited
Table 1: Codes and categories and of data collected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Coding of information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age readiness</td>
<td>Reached age 20; reached age of physical maturity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical readiness</td>
<td>Become biologically capable of bearing children, capable of sexual relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental readiness</td>
<td>Accept responsibility for his/her life, planning for future, logical expectation of life, marriage, and partner; have a positive outlook on marriage and family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>For a man, become capable of supporting a family financially; be independent from parents financially; be able to pay for own house, own wedding; become capable of running a household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral readiness</td>
<td>Committed to a long-term marital relationship; have come to terms with any love experiences; committed to some moral or religious believes; being patience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional readiness</td>
<td>Be able to express feelings, be able to have control on emotions particularly anger; not tied to parents emotionally; Avoid illegal drugs or smoking cigarettes;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual readiness</td>
<td>Be employed full-time or settled into a long-term career; for a man, completed military service;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal readiness</td>
<td>Become less self-oriented; be able to care for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital life skills</td>
<td>For a woman, become capable of caring for and nurturing children; cooking;</td>
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FIGURE 1. Main questions used in the semi-structured interviews

1. What do you understand from the term "Marriage readiness"?
2. What are the dimensions of marriage readiness?
3. What do you think about the needed criteria for being ready to marry, for example: age, education, career, income or…?
4. What is your opinion about the capacities that makes somebody ready for marriage?
5. Which responsibilities and challenges are needed in future marriage?
6. What skills are necessary in order to get ready for marriage?
7. Are there other important things about the issue?
References

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