Attitudes to marriage of young married people in
Vietnam

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Abstract

Since the mid 1980s, Vietnam’s Doi Moi (Renovation) Policy has prompted dramatic social and cultural changes. Scholarly and mass media attention in Vietnam expressed concern with the impact of these transformations on the thoughts and lifestyles of young people, including with respect to their marital relationships. Yet, little is known about how young people in Vietnam actually think about marriage. Is it important to them? If so, why and in what ways? This paper uses data from in-depth interviews with 30 married couples in Vietnam, 15 in urban Hanoi and 15 in rural Thai Binh province, to explore young people’s thought about marriage. Their statements revealed that marriage continues to consider fundamentally important: for being human, maintaining the family, binding couple and making life better as happier and more secure. However, there are important differences in perceptions of marriage across both gender and geography that point to the complexity of contemporary youth experiences and relationships.

Key words: Family; Marriage; Gender; Spousal relationship; Youth; Newlyweds

Introduction

It has been argued that marriage in many countries is in declined, as evidence by decreasing rates of marriage, higher rates of delayed marriage, and unmarried cohabitation, larger proportions of people who have never-married, and increased in divorce (Charles et al., 2008, Lewis, 2003, Lindsay and Dempsey, 2009, Straughan, 2009, Lindsay, 1996). In contrast, in Vietnam, marriage appears to maintain its popularity. Vietnamese marriages happen at an early age (Quah, 2003), marriage rates are high and divorce rates are low (General Statistics...
Office et al., 2008). Indeed, Williams (2009: 292) argued that marriage is considered ‘a centerpiece of life’ across the generations in Vietnam. Nevertheless, marriages in Vietnam, particularly those of young people, are widely considered to face significant challenges, with young people perceived to be the highly vulnerable to the ill effects of exposure to foreign cultures (Gammeltoft, 2002). They are thought to suffer from class between the values of a market-oriented society and the expectations of older generations (Phuong, 2007). Some studies suggest that young married people in Vietnam have increasing rates of conflicts (Thi, 2009). They have suffered from the clash between the reality of a market-oriented society which formed their identity and value perceptions, and the expectations from older generations (Phuong, 2007: 288). Some studies suggest that young married people in Vietnam have increasing rates of conflict in marriage (Thi, 2009), a higher potential for divorce (Hoa, 2000), and tend to devalue the family while prioritizing the self-satisfaction of individuals (Thi, 1996). However, there have been no studies addressing how young people themselves perceive marriage.

**Methodology**

This paper is based on PhD research that examined how young people in Vietnam think about and experience marriage. It conducted face-to-face interviews with 30 married couples in early 2012, 15 in an urban ward in Hanoi capital city and 15 in a rural commune in Thai Binh province. All were aged under 30 (satisfy the definition of the youth in the Law of Youth 2005) and registered as married (thus satisfying the legal marriage defined in the Marriage and Family Law 2000 in Vietnam). The research was interested in marriage experiences of young people rather than newlyweds, so duration of marriage was not a consideration in identifying the sample group.
Two interviews were conducted with each couple. First, they participated in couple interviews comprising questions about their courtship, perceptions and expectations of marriage, and the decision to marry. Second, they participated in separate individual interviews in which I asked them about their everyday marital experience, including experiences of childcare, domestic labor, love and affection, and marriage money management. Interviews were conducted in either their home or a local café. All recordings of the interviews were transcribed and imported into Nvivo software, where interviews were coded according to interview themes and questions. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity.

**Results**

*Marriage is necessary for binding the couples and maintaining the human race and family*

Similar to the findings in William (2009), the participants’ responses reflected a common sense assumption that marriage was a principle of ‘being human’. Marriage was thought to be important because it enabled the continuation of the family. In Vietnamese tradition, a married couples provided the only legitimate social unit for creating family a new citizen for the society (Anh and Van, 2005). Today, marriage is no longer the only way to produce new citizens, and having children outside of marriage is no longer as stigmatized as in the past. However, marriage is still the most commonly accepted family form for having and raising children, as is demonstrated in the following quotes:

‘It [marriage] is a procedure to establish a family. It’s necessary to build up a family to have children and maintain the race’ (Chien, male, Thai Binh)

‘Nearly everybody has to marry, so do I. I need to have a wife and children and I think man has to do so’ (Sung, male, Thai Binh)

‘Family is the basis of a society. A child can’t grow up without either a father or a mother because then he can’t have physiological and psychological development…"
Marriage seems to be natural for human beings’ (Thu, female, Hanoi).

Because marriage is perceived as necessary for having children and maintaining family, not having children is perceived as potentially leading to marriage fragility and couples without children are said to be ‘ill-fated’. One of the Confucian told about ‘that xuat’ [seven faults of women] that might lead a husband to leave his wife is her inability to have a baby. This idea remains influential among young people. For example, Hieu and Ha, a couple in Hanoi, have been married for two years but have no children in spite of medical treatment. Ha considered her marriage vulnerable and was not sure how long it would last if they had no children.

‘It is difficult to maintain the marriage without children because we suffer from pressures caused by family members… When we visited my husband’s grandmother she insinuated that I was a dud woman [implying that she cannot have a baby]. I didn’t react but this then caused quarrels between me and my husband. Both of us put up with pressure from not having a baby’.

In addition to providing children, marriage is also important for its role in emotionally and legally binding the couples into lifelong relationships (See also Korteweg’s, 2001). While the mass media have expressed concern about an increase in cohabitation among Vietnamese young people, marriage is nevertheless still thought of as necessary for maintaining a couple’s relationship as Danh (male, Thai Binh) explained:

‘It [marriage] is very important. Trial marriage has been increasing. Some people have lived with each other for a very long time without marriage. I think marriage makes a couple tie with each other. Whether they are young or old, happy or unhappy, they still have conflicts. If they don’t marry, it will be very possible that they will separate when conflict occurs. But if they get married, they will have to think carefully about their behaviours or decisions’.
Chinh (male, Thái Bình) had a similar idea about this:

‘We should marry because marriage creates a legal tie. If not for this, it could be easy for couples to separate when they don’t like each other anymore’.

*Marriage is believed to make life better*

Marriage and family are seen as key life values of Vietnamese people (General Statistics Office et al., 2008), reflected in the fact that in this study, the young people thought marriage made their life better. Yet, there were differences between men and women and across the two regions in terms of how marriage influenced their life. For men, marriage promoted positive personal changes by creating meaningful goals for life. For example:

‘Marriage is very important. Marriage creates motivations for me to work. If not for my family, it means nothing’ (Vuong, male, Hanoi)

‘When I was single, I wasn’t interested in work and family. However, after getting married, everything has completely changed. I have more concerns about my work and family. If I didn’t get married, I wouldn’t have my family including my wife and children’ (Chu, male, Thái Bình)

Some other men found their life became better due to having a person to share life with. For example:

‘When I got married, I was able to concentrate on my work while my wife helped to solve my relationships with family members. For example, if I was concentrating on my work while there were problems with a family member, such as when my uncle’s son gave up his family and left home, I couldn’t concentrate on work anymore. But now my wife can deal with problems in the family, so this puts my mind at rest’ (Kim, male, Hanoi)
‘Actually I hadn’t thought that marriage was important before marrying. I just thought that we loved each other so we decided to marry. However, since I got married I feel there are two most important people in my life, that’s my mother and my wife. My wife is concerned about me and shares everything with me that no one else can do’ (Trung, male, Hanoi)

On the other hand, female respondents considered marriage as a means of accessing happiness and future security. This is in keeping with survey results indicating that the majority of interviewees did not agree that ‘a single man or women can have a fulfilled and satisfied life’ (Huy, 2004). Women, with less concerns outside the family and who were traditionally educated to devote themselves to the family tended to see marriage as equivalent to happiness. Although they were aware of the possibility of unhappy and broken marriages, many believed that marriage supplied them with individual happiness because marriage was associated with becoming a mother. For example:

‘I think getting married is what I should do in my life. Even if I could have a baby for myself it would be better for the baby to have both a mother and father. I think we can strive for everything, but if we still don’t have children when we are 30 years old, all of our endeavours would mean nothing. Having marriage and children is happiness’ (Minh, female, Hanoi)

‘Marriage is important because I only get married one time in my life. Some people want to have a free life without marriage but I think that isn’t happy. When I married, I became a wife and a mother, and I feel happy about this’ (Xuyen, female, Thai Binh)
For some women in Thai Binh, marriage was thought to provide greater opportunities for security when they got older or faced difficulties. However, none of the women in Hanoi mentioned this. This is possible because of the more insecure lives of women in rural areas associated with lower educational levels and lower income employment. While most of the female respondents in Hanoi was full-time employed (13 out of 15), the women in Thai Binh made no or minimal contribution to the family’s income because most of them were self-employed (5 out of 15) or stayed at home with domestic duties (7 out of 15). These women seemed to lack confidence that they would be able to live by themselves when they were older, instead recognizing they might need to rely on their husband or children – a common pattern of the elderly in the area, who usually lived with or were supported by their children. The women in Thai Binh with no or low income tended to see marriage as a pathway to future security. For example, Nguyen (a woman in Thai Binh) got married when she was 20. She worked for a factory in the south of Vietnam until she became pregnant, when she came back her countryside to do farm work, which provided her with little income. She now stays at home breast feeding her baby while the family relies on her husband’s income. She said:

‘Marriage decides 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’.

Another similar case in Thai Binh is Thuy, who has been married for three years. She stayed at home to look after her twin sons. Their family also relies on her husband’s income. Thuy said:

‘In my village people consider that everyone should get married. It’s poor for those who are single because there will be nobody looking after them when they are sick or face problems. Maybe when people are young they don’t care about whether they
should marry but when they are old they will think about this. I myself think that if I’m sick and there is nobody I can depend on, I won’t overcome difficulties. In short it’s necessary to have marriage, though we may not know how our marriage will turn out’.

In addition to providing financial security, in rural areas marriage tends to be ‘necessary’ to avoid getting bad reputations. Individuals living in small villages are concerned about other people’s comments about them and try to maintain good reputations for their own sake as well as that of their families. Since marriage is perceived as ‘natural’, those of a mature age who are not married are seen as abnormal and questionable. Tam (female, Thai Binh) said that:

‘When we’re old enough we should marry even though we don’t know whether it will be a happy marriage or not. Everyone has to marry because if we’re not married, many people will complain about us. It perhaps doesn’t matter if you stay single in cities but the mature singles in the countryside might suffer from a bad reputation. It’s better to get married if somebody loves us’.

Similarly, Thuy (female, Thai Binh) reported strong and negative ideas about those who remained unmarried:

‘People in my village usually sneered at families whose children remained single. It is considered that the parents could have done bad things in the past meaning that their children won’t be able to get married and be happy. They think it wasn’t a good family because it’s considered that people can’t be happy without marriage’.

By contrast, none of the metropolitan respondents worried about their social reputations. Rather, marriage is just one option among many. For example:

‘Socially, I think today marrying or not marrying isn’t very important because we can live independently on our own. I had some friends having a baby without
marriage and I found them alright. She could care about her life and her daughter’ (Minh, female, Hanoi)

‘I’m open-minded. I think when we are married we have to do everything for the family. But I think it doesn’t matter if some people live with each other without marriage or become single mothers’ (Vien, female, Hanoi)

**Conclusions**

This research clearly indicates that young people in Hanoi and Thai Binh continue to recognize the importance of marriage. In spite of mass media fears about increasing cohabitation and children raise outside of marriage, marriage is still perceived to play an important role in establishing an important and acceptable form for emotionally and legally binding couples and for having and raising children. Past ideas maintain particularly significant for young people in rural Thai Binh, reinforced by fears that remaining unmarried at a mature age will result in bad reputation. Vietnamese rural communities usually live in small villages where nearly every family knows each other. Hence, individuals in the communities worry about bad reputations because they influence not only themselves but also their families. Although statistics indicate that Vietnam has very high percentage of female participation in workforce (Knodel et al., 2005, Teerawichitchainan et al., 2010), the women who participated in this study in Thai Binh had very low income and relied on their husbands’ incomes. The women therefore tend to see marriage as an avenue for future security. On the other hand, employment is more available for women in the urban areas and most of them were employed full-time, able to financially support themselves. They lack of concern about supporting themselves financially was associated with more open-minded attitudes that considered marriage as option among a range of alternatives. Urban people respected private life and choice. They have little understanding of other people living around and seldom have
either comments on their lives or worries about the reputations. Additionally, their exposure to foreign values in the city might contribute to the urban young people accepting modern lifestyle in which mature singles and having children without marriage are more acceptable. This suggests avenues for further exploration of experiences of intimate relationships without marriages, including cohabitation, in metropolises in Vietnam.

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