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Meanings of Marriage to Young People in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Vietnam's deepening sociocultural exchanges with foreign countries over recent decades have influenced the thoughts, lifestyles, and marital expectations of young people, who grew up in a rapidly changing social context. The opening of Vietnam's borders, both economically and culturally, has given rise to concerns that the sanctity of the institution of marriage in Vietnam as well as the longevity of individual marriages may be weakened as a result of the detraditionalization and/or modernization of marriage in Vietnam. This article investigates the meaning of marriage to young people in Vietnam, by drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with 60 married people aged not over 30. It addresses the questions: What do young people in Vietnam think about marriage? Is it important to them? If so, why and in what ways? The findings reflect two main facets in the young people's thinking about marriage. The first identifies marriage as an essential institution, one that is supported by social norms of family and marriage in Vietnam. The second emphasizes the rewards that marriage potentially provides to individuals. While there was general consensus regarding these two claims, there were nevertheless some differences of opinion between men and women, and across rural and urban contexts.

Introduction

Vietnam has undergone rapid transformation since the liberalization of its economy and society following the introduction of *Doi Moi* ("Renovation"). Declared at the sixth congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1986, *Doi Moi* is an "open door" policy promoting greater social, economic, and cultural exchanges with other countries around the world. This has contributed to dramatic socioeconomic and cultural changes in Vietnam, which it is argued have transformed values and lifestyles (Do & Hongyun, 2010; Phuong, 2006). People are said to have "more freedom to make their own choice," and to have "more contacts with Western cultural influences" (Hoa & Liamputtong, 2007, p. 63).

These recent socioeconomic and cultural changes have also been accompanied by a sense of anxiety in Vietnam, particularly in relation to

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the continued centrality of the institution of the family. There have been concerns over apparently simultaneous changes in Vietnamese attitudes related to marriage, including the increasing acceptance of unmarried cohabitation, divorce, premarital sexual relationships and having children outside of marriage as well as increasing numbers of people remaining unmarried (Huy, 2004; Phuong, 2007). Several commentators also have cautioned that the rapid and recent changes to the institution of the family, and in particular the new emphasis on the nuclear family household, may lead to a breakdown in extended family bonds, resulting in weakening intergenerational ties and inadequate care of the elderly and of children (Hoa, 2000; Huong, 2009).

The transformed economic context is accompanied by a shift in people's experience of gender, family, and relationships, particularly that of young people who were born in the 1980s. They are the ones who have grown up living through Vietnam's transformation from a predominantly rural and agricultural-based society, in which ties to extended kin and the commune prevailed, to an urbanized and industrial society, in which people enjoy greater freedoms of individual expression and movement. Under the previous centrally planned economy, the state subsidized the cost of living by providing jobs, affordable house and land packages, and social welfare. However, since the shift to a market economy, the state has eliminated many welfare subsidies. As a result, young people face pressures that their parents did not experience and can no longer rely on the state to provide housing, jobs, and other benefits (Phinney, 2008; Phuong, 2007).

Young people are arguably at the intersections of, on the one hand, the social norms and ideas of family and gender roles held by their parents and, on the other hand, contemporary ideas focusing on gender equality. Thus, young people are required to consider "the potential costs and bene-fits of less traditional partnerships and a more independent life-style against the expectation of family and society" (Williams, 2009, p.297). The result is a renegotiation of norms of gender and sexuality, even when there is an ongoing idealization of the importance of family by policymakers and poli-ticians. One aspect of this is a significant change in relationship practices and expectations among young couples in Vietnam. For example, young people are apparently becoming more argumentative (Thi, 2009) and are increasingly choosing divorce to resolve serious conflicts (Hoa, 2000). In research by Hoa and Pranee Liamputtong (2007, p.68), interviews with young unmarried people demonstrate that they more accepting than older generations of alternatives to marriage such as cohabitation, premarital sex, single mothers, and remaining unmarried (Phuong, 2007; Williams, 2009). In their analysis of statistics from the 2006 Nationwide Survey on Family and the 2009 Survey and Assessment on Vietnamese Young, Minh and Hong (2011, pp. 5–10) showed an increase in the acceptance of

alternatives to marriage. For example, the acceptance of unmarried cohabitation has more than tripled, from 6% (in 2006) to 21.2% (in 2009), and acceptance of single mothers increased from 25.7% (in 2006) to 35.6% (in 2009) within the 18–21 age group; the percentage who accepted remaining unmarried increased from 26% (in 2006) to 47.8% (in 2009) among the 22 to 25-year-old age group.

Given all of the recent public, policy, and research attention to changes in marriage and family, it is surprising that young people are seldom the focus of research on marriage and family in Vietnam. The aforementioned studies on the attitudes of young people toward marriage and relationships have not yet been accompanied by an in-depth investigation of how young people now think about marriage. This article seeks to address this gap in knowledge by investigating the meaning of marriage for young married people in Vietnam. The data were collected from in-depth interviews with 60 young married people in Vietnam in 2012. The criteria for choosing participants for the research were based on the official definitions of young. The Law of Youth 2005 of Vietnam defines youth as those aged from 16 to 30 (National Assembly of Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2005). Thus in the current research, the participants chosen were those who married and aged up to 30.

This research supports a more comprehensive description of the meaning of marriage in Vietnam by choosing participants in both rural and urban areas. Many studies of family-related issues in Vietnam, including the national survey on family in Vietnam (Ministry of Cultures, Sports and Tourism, General Statistics Office, Institute for Family and Gender Studies, & UNICEF, 2008) indicate several differences in marriage and family relationships between urban and rural areas. For example, the age at first marriage of rural residents is lower than that of urban residents (p.41); the rate of divorce in rural areas is also somewhat lower than that in metropolitan areas (p.47); the division of domestic labor in urban families seems to be more egalitarian than rural families (p.77). Meanwhile, a study of domestic violence against women conducted by Tong cuc Thong ke (the General Statistics Office, 2010, p.52) in 2010 indicates that the percentage of women in rural areas who have experienced physical violence is higher than that of women in urban areas. For these reasons, it was decided to include both urban and rural samples for this study. The urban area chosen for this research was Hanoi, which is Vietnam's political, economic, and cultural center. The rural area selected for the study was Thai Binh province. This is a coastal province in the southeast of the Red River Delta famous for its long history of agricultural production, particularly rice. There were 60 married persons who participated in this research, including 15 men and 15 women in Hanoi, and 15 men and 15 women in Thai Binh province. The ages of the participants ranged between 18 and 30 with an average age of 27.7, SD = 1.93.

Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

	Hanoi		Thai Binh	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Occupation				
– Home duties		2		4
– Employed	15	13	6	1
– Self-employed[1]			8	9
– Unemployed			1	1
Educational levels				
– Postgraduate	2	5		
– Graduate	10	9	3	5
– Completed senior high school	3	1	9	6
– Completed junior high school			3	3
– Completed primary school				1

Transformations in marriage

I began this article with reference to assertions that the meaning of marriage has changed. It is generally accepted that marriage in the West has transformed from an institutional form into something that is more companionate and individualized (Amato, 2004; Cherlin, 2004). This is often linked to arguments regarding the rise of individualization and deinstitutionalization in Western marriage, with a new emphasis on self-development, personal choice, and satisfaction in relationships as well as the loss of past controls associated with the so-called "traditional" marriage, which seems to have lost its meaning (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Cherlin, 2004; Lindsay & Dempsey, 2009). Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim suggests a two-fold process of individualization. First, the traditional social relationships, bonds, and belief systems governing people's lives had to loosen their hold over people. Second, key institutions in society, such as the welfare state, the education system, and the law, together with their regulations, increasingly addressed the individual rather than the family (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. ix). Deinstitutionalization is a related process, one where taken for granted social norms in relation to institutions such as marriage have been weakened by social change. According to Andrew Cherlin (2004), the consequences of deinstitutionalization include the fragility of marriages and the increasing legitimacy of other forms of marriage and alternatives to marriage, as individual choice increases. In a similar vein, Lindsay and Dempsey (2009) report the increasing fragility of intimate relationships resulting from pressures preventing couples from sustaining emotional commitment. Individuals expect to fulfill their individual needs and lack commitment to long-term relationships (Charles, Davies, & Harris, 2008) or leave long-term relationships that are seen as barriers to their self-fulfillment (Cheal, 2002). However, this does not lead to the demise of marriage or intimate relationships, as individuals continue to believe that

intimate partnerships are vehicles for meeting their individual needs and desires. Studies in Western countries display increased incidences of alternatives to marriage such as unmarried cohabitation, remaining single, divorce, same-sex marriage and having children without marriage (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; United Nations, 2011). For others, such as Andrew Cherlin, although marriage retains its symbolic significance as a marker of prestige, it no longer bestows practical advantages on couples in nations such as the United States due to women's increasing work outside of the home and the legal recognition of the rights of cohabiting couples and children born outside of marriage (Cherlin, 2004, pp.854–855).

While these transformations are primarily associated with modern Western nations, dramatic changes are also suggested to be occurring in marriage and family in non-Western countries, albeit with variations arising from cultural differences. These changes are said to occur in changes from familism to individualism, from parental control to youthful independence, from arranged marriage to love matches, and from younger to older ages at first marriage as well as changes associated with the rise of feminism and varying degrees of emphasis on women's rights and gender equality (Thornton, Binstock, & Ghimire, 2012, p.20). It has been suggested that the individualism characterizing Western societies also influences Asian societies (Allan & Crow, 2001), thus explaining similar marriage patterns observed in high-income countries in Asia. For example, the age at first marriage and crude divorce rate has increased in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore in recent decades (Dommaraju & Jones, 2011; Quah, 2003).

Marriage has also undergone transformation in Vietnam. However, the analyses and explanations that have been developed to account for the transformation of marriage in the West are not entirely appropriate to interpreting the transformation of Vietnamese marriage. Individualization and deinstitutionalization do not adequately explain changes in attitudes on and practices in marriage in Vietnam. Arguments suggesting that Vietnamese ideas about marriage and family have been strongly influenced by the introduction of Western cultural norms need to be placed in Vietnam's specific historical and cultural contexts. Here, studies suggest that marriage retains its importance across the generations in Vietnam as the "centerpiece of family life" and "a long-term objective," and that alternatives to marriage (including cohabitation or remaining unmarried)—although increasing in acceptability—are not popular options (Williams, 2009, pp.291–297). Barbieri and Bélanger (2009, p.10) further document how the institution of the family has retained its status as "being central to individual's lives and the foundations for society." Vietnam retains both high marriage rates and low divorce rates. Statistics indicates that the percentage of people in Vietnam aged over 15 who currently have a spouse is 66.9% (General statistics Office, 2012, p.9). Yet, like other nations around the world, the age at first marriage in Vietnam is rising, from 21.1 for women and

23.3 for men in 1976–1986, to 22.3 for women and 25.6 for men in 2000–2006 (Ministry of Cultures, Sports and Tourism, General Statistics Office, Institute for Family and Gender Studies, & UNICEF, 2008, p. 9). According to statistics of General Statistics Office (Tong Cuc Thong ke, 2016, p.37), the age at first marriage of women and men in Vietnam in 2015 increased to 22.8 and 26.9, respectively. Nevertheless, the age of marriage of Vietnam is still lower than in some other Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, and Singapore (see Quah, 2003, Tokuhiro, 2010, United Nations, 2011) The rate of divorce in Vietnam is also, like other nations, increasing. However, the rates remain extremely low compared to other countries, rising from 1.1% in 1999 (General Statistics Office, 2002, p. 20) to 2.6% in 2006 (Ministry of Cultures, Sports and Tourism, General Statistics Office, Institute for Family and Gender Studies, & UNICEF, 2008, p. 47). Lindy Williams (2009) suggests that marriage in Vietnam is unlikely to decline in popularity in the short term, because marriage remains significant and the alternatives are not popular options.

However, studies also indicate that rapid social changes in Vietnam, usually attributed to modernization, have resulted in significant alterations to family structures (Thi, 1996) and changes in perceptions of marriage, family, and life partner (Huy, 2004; Thi, 2009; Williams, 2009); including greater acceptance of premarital and extramarital sex, and marital dissolution (Ghuman, 2005; Hoa & Liamputtong, 2007). It has been suggested that these shifts are a part of a larger context of change in which considerable sociocultural exchanges with the West, including improvements in the status of women and gender equality (Van, 2004), and that they might lead to further transformation of marriage among younger generations, challenging Vietnamese norms of marriage and family and replacing them with more contemporary Western-style assumptions and attitudes (Phuong, 2007; Williams, 2009). This article evaluates such claims by drawing on youth people's testimonies of their own marriages and the institution of marriage in general. Competing social norms are reflected in the thinking of young people about the personal meaning and wider social importance of marriage.

Marriage as an essential institution

When talking about the meaning of marriage, many young people viewed marriage as a crucial institution based on natural human principles. They suggested that marriage promotes the continuity of family lineage as well as providing a necessary sense of commitment for a couple that provides a foundation for the family.

Marriage as necessary for maintaining the family

In Vietnamese society, marriage is the foundation of the family, which continues to be recognized as a very important social unit (Bich, 1999). In

the past, a married couple provided the only legitimate social unit for creating a new citizen in society (Anh & Van, 2005), giving marriage crucial importance. For young people in this research, these ideas continue to have salience, and marriage is still the preferred and most commonly accepted family form for having and raising children. This is in spite of the fact that alternatives to marriage, such as cohabitation, are becoming increasingly recognized as a possibility.

When explaining why marriage was important, many male participants associated it with having children, which is essential to ensuring the maintenance of family. This might reflect the hierarchal ideology emphasizing the role of men in maintaining the family. As a man in Thai Binh said: "Marriage is a procedure to establish a family. It's necessary to build up a family to have children and maintain family lineage" (Chien). Indeed, the association between marriage and having children is so strong that a childless marriage is seen as potentially fragile and meaningless (see also Blagojevic, 1989). This is illustrated by Hieu and Ha, a couple in Hanoi. Despite medical treatment, they still had no children. Hieu was sad that their expectations were unfulfilled. His wife felt the same. She thought their marriage was vulnerable because of the absence of a baby. Having children is highly valued and couples without children in Vietnam are said to be *Vo Phuc* [ill-fated]. The blame is typically placed on the wife, with childlessness named as one of the *That Xuat* or "Seven Faults of women" (along with the failure to have a son, lasciviousness, not worshipping her parents-in-law, gossiping, stealing, jealousy, and disease) that allow a husband to leave his wife according to Confucian ethics. These ideas remain influential among young people and are reinforced by older kin. Ha gave an example of the pressure that she experienced: "When we visited my husband's grandmother, she insinuated that I was a flawed woman [implying an inability to have a baby]. Both of us have to put up with pressure from not having a baby." Ha told that she used to talk about divorce to her husband because she wanted to save her husband from the consequences of a childless marriage. She was not sure how long it would last if they had no children.

Marriage is seen to be a natural principle for human beings

Marriage and the family appear to remain a key for Vietnamese people. The importance of marriage was so taken for granted that it required no explanation—it was a common sense that men and women would get married. This was evident in statements such as "It [marriage] is obviously important. Every adult man and woman gets married. So do I" (Hao, man, Thai Binh) and "Last night I told my husband that I didn't understand why some of my friends hadn't married. I didn't understand their thinking. Although marriage is not necessary, it seems to be natural for human beings"

(Thu, female, Hanoi). This is also evident in a common Vietnamese proverb, which states "*trai lon lay vo, gai lon ga chong*" [men and women will get married when they are mature], implying the naturalness of getting married.

As marriage is assumed to be natural, those who remain unmarried are assumed to be abnormal and are suspected to suffer from illness or social depravity (Williams, 2009). Unmarried people are also assumed to be unhappy, evidenced in a survey reporting that 65% of participants did not agree that "A single man or woman can have a fulfilled and satisfied life" (Huy, 2004, p. 82). These assumptions were reinforced by participants, who recognized that people of a mature age who remained unmarried were considered abnormal and questionable. Many, particularly rural youth, viewed marriage as necessary to avoid a bad reputation. In Vietnam, rural communities usually live in small villages, where people usually have close relations and nearly every family knows each other. There is typically a high level of concern about what other people say and think, which contributes to efforts to maintain a good reputation not only for one's own sake but for the sake of the family. In rural areas, unmarried adults were thought to attract a bad reputation. It was assumed that the individuals themselves or their family had problems resulting in their failure to marry. As Tam (female, Thai Binh) said:

When we're old enough we should marry, even though we don't know whether it will be a happy marriage or not. If we're not married, many people will complain about us. In the city it perhaps doesn't matter if you stay single, but in the village our social reputation will suffer, so it's better to marry if somebody loves us.

Another woman in Thai Binh, Thuy, recognized the persistence of conventional social ideas about those who were unmarried. She reported:

I wouldn't worry if I didn't get married and lived alone. I left my hometown a long time ago and changed my thinking about marriage. I met many people from other places. Many of them had unhappy families because of violence, gambling or a drunken husband. I thought I'd rather live alone than have such husbands … But when I came back to live in the village, I realized that people sneer at families whose children remain single. It is considered that the parents might have done bad things in the past that mean that their children won't be able to get married and be happy. They then think it is not a good family, because it is believed that people can't be happy without marriage.

Even when people are reluctant to marry, some still do so for the sake of their family's reputation, as in the case of Hang, a woman in Thai Binh. Her husband hit her just before their wedding but she continued with her decision to marry him. She explained:

One day, when we were going out from his house, I cycled behind him and I accidentally hit his leg. He suddenly came back and slapped my face. I thought he was a hot-tempered person and he could be violent and I wanted

to cancel our wedding but then I changed my mind because I thought of my parents. When you live in a city, it can be normal if you want to cancel a wedding. But we live in a rural village. If we cancel the wedding, we might get bad reputations. I didn't want to make my parents sad about this so I still decided to marry.

In contrast, none of the metropolitan participants expressed concern about marriage affecting their social reputations. This likely reflects a social environment in which there is greater respect for the increased individualization of personal life choices. They have busy lives with little time to be concerned about the comments of other people around them. It is also likely that greater exposure to Western lifestyles and values provide urban residents with increasingly open-minded values regarding marriage and its alternatives. Vien—a woman living in Hanoi, said: "I'm open-minded. I think it doesn't matter if some people live with each other without marriage or someone becomes a single mother." Minh, another woman living in Hanoi, added: "Socially I think today marrying or not marrying isn't very important, because we can live independently on our own." Minh gave an example of her friend who had a baby without marriage and seemed to be alright, even though she also considered her friend to be "brave" for facing the difficulties of being a single mother.

For urban men, while there was no particular concern about reputation, it was clear that marriage was significant for their social status at work, something that was not expressed by rural participants. This may be because the rural respondents were more likely to be self-employed or manual workers, which did not require assertions of social status at work outside of their reputation in the community. In contrast, most of the urban respondents were full-time employed in highly skilled occupations, which invoked particular social status demands (24 out of 30 rural participants were self-employed, whereas 28 out of 30 urban participants were in paid employment). Urban participants were primarily in skilled or intellectual jobs, for example, as lecturers, accountants, engineers, and receptionists that provided them with incomes affording their lifestyles. Hai, a man in Hanoi, explained the importance of marriage as follows:

I think when they are old enough they will think that marriage is necessary. Marriage helps to solve many things. For example, when I meet somebody at work, it is more dignified to introduce them to my wife rather than to my girlfriend, or when I visit my colleagues or boss I think it's better to go with a wife than a girlfriend.

Marriage thus has a strong association as a symbol of maturity, which might help to further a young man's career. Tung, also in Hanoi, reported that marriage is also assumed to provide individuals with a stable life so that they "can influence and help other people in the family." On the other hand, although urban women were full-time employed, none of them report

marriage as enhancing their social status. It could be that women may not be as concerned about promoting their social status at work as much as men, or that they did not consider marriage as a symbol of prestige that might contribute to their social status at work.

Marriage as an essential institution for creating commitment between couples

Some people identified marriage as important for binding a couple, reinforcing the understanding that marriage plays a role in the process of building lifelong relationships (see also Korteweg, 2001, p.521). The young couples in this research thought marriage was essential for binding couples emotionally and legally. As Chinh, a man in Thai Binh said: "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. It shouldn't be so."

The mass media have recently expressed concern about the increase in cohabitation among Vietnamese youth. Yet, although unmarried cohabitation is more common than ever before, it is still not widely accepted (Minh & Hong, 2011; Thi, 2009). Despite recognition of the growing occurrence of unmarried cohabitation, most young people continue to value marriage for its capacity to create a heightened level of commitment in a couple's relationship. For example, Trong, a man in Thai Binh, said:

Unmarried cohabitation has been increasing but I think marriage is necessary because it ties a couple with each other. If a couple doesn'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.

The requirement to "think carefully" about whether to separate or remain together is associated with a more mature approach to relationships that is based on commitment, even during periods of conflict or dissatisfaction.

Marriage as a source of rewards

Quah (2008, p.20) identified two main purposes of marriage common across Asia: the first is personal, to "secure a keel for the emotional life of the individual"; the second is social, to "ensure the socio-economic stability and progress of family, kin and community." The above discussion have explored the second, social purpose of marriage by reporting what young people say about the importance of marriage for binding a couple and continuing family and humanity, and for improving social status and good reputation. On the other hand, young people also acknowledged the importance of marriage as providing them with personal rewards. The following discussion describes

how people expected that marriage would provide individuals with self-fulfillment. Differences are found in the way men and women described these expectations. While women focused on marriage as a source of happiness and security, men emphasized practical benefits.

Marriage as a source of happiness and security for women

Women often described marriage as a source of, or even equivalent to, happiness. Although women expressed awareness of the possibility of unhappy and broken marriages, they also believed that marriage supplied them with happiness because marriage was associated with becoming a mother. For example, Xuyen (female, Thai Binh) said: "Some people want to have a free life without marriage but I think that isn't happiness. When I married, I became a wife and a mother and I felt happy about this." For most women, marriage was of particular importance because family members are believed to provide people with more concern and care than alternative social relationships. As Ha, a woman in Hanoi, explained:

For me, marriage is important. Everybody hopes to have a happy family. My friends got married and had their own family, and I thought that I should have my own happy family. I can't live alone because I would feel sad if I lived alone.

Van, a woman in Thai Binh, agreed, saying:

When we get married and have a family, we will be cared for and cared about. I lived with my uncle instead of my parents from an early age and I sometimes felt a lack of love and concern … I like to have a family so I can care for everybody on my own and they will care for me.

Some rural women said that marriage provided greater security when they got older or faced difficulties. However, none of the women in Hanoi mentioned this, many of whom were university graduates and employed full-time (13 out of 15). This difference is possibly due to the more economically insecure lives of women in rural areas as a result of their lower educational levels and lower paid forms of work. The female participants in Thai Binh typically had completed senior high school and among the 15 rural female participants, five were unemployed and/or only performed home duties and nine of them were self-employed in activities that provided them with small incomes, such as farm work on their own land or managing a small business, and there only one woman with full-time employment. The rural female participants usually made either no or minimal contribution to the family's income. They 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. Thus, some women considered marriage as a source of support and a form of protection for their future. They may have observed the difficulties single women face, perhaps affecting their emphasis

on marriage. In her study of the lives of single women (including those who are widows, separated, and divorced as well as never married), Thi (2002) indicates they face numerous challenges, including occupational and economic difficulties, a low living standard, and poor physical and psychological health.

The interviews revealed that women without incomes or with low incomes tended to see marriage as a pathway to relative future security. For example, Nguyen (a woman in Thai Binh) got married when she was 20. She worked at a factory in the south of Vietnam until she became pregnant, when her family advised her to come back to live in her hometown. She now stays at home breast-feeding her 2-month-old baby and relies on her husband's income. She said:

Marriage decides our future. My husband and children 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.

Thuy, also from Thai Binh, presents a similar case. She worked in Ho Chi Minh City (in the south of Vietnam) for many years. She also came back to her hometown after getting married. At the moment, she stays at home to look after twin sons. She has now been unemployed for a few years and is looking for a job. Her family depends entirely on her husband's income. She 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… I myself think that if I'm sick and there is nobody I can depend on, I won't overcome difficulties.

The economic dependence of rural women on their husbands tends to promote the importance of marriage. On the other hand, marriage as future economic security was seldom reported by urban female participants, who were usually employed and can financially provide for themselves.

Men believe marriage makes their life better

Many considered the family, built from marriage, as their life goal. Marriage, therefore, is not only essential but also something that requires constant and devoted attention. Some male participants, in particular, reported that marriage provided them with a purpose in life that had been lacking before marriage. After marriage, they said they had become more motivated in their endeavors at work and in accumulating money for the family. For example, Tung, a man in Hanoi, said: "After I got married, I had a purpose and a focus for development such as earning money instead of only socializing with friends or thinking of my own personal interests."

Similarly, Vuong, a man in Hanoi, suggested that "Marriage is very important. When I do anything, it's for my family. Marriage motivates me

to work. If not for my family, it [work] would mean nothing." Chu, a man from Thai Binh added, "When I was single, I wasn't interested in work and family. However, after getting married, everything completely changed. I have more consideration for my work and my family." Marriage seems to give purpose and meaning to men's lives.

Some men in Thai Binh acknowledged other ways in which marriage promoted a positive transformation in their life, in particular by motivating more responsible and mature lifestyles. For example, Hiep explained:

When I were single, I usually went out and had drinks with my friends. However, now that I'm married I have to care for my family, my children. I avoid trivial meetings because it takes my time and money for nothing. Now I mainly think of how to work and earn money to care for the family.

Do agreed, saying:

When I were single, I came home at midnight or even stayed out overnight. But since I got married, I usually come home before 10 pm. It helps to ensure my health. I gave up indulging in pleasure or dawdling. Instead, I spend time on my business.

On the other hand, male participants in Hanoi reported that marriage made life better because they now had a person to share their life with. Everything could be shared with a spouse. As Tung explained: "Marriage makes a wife and husband closer. They can help and share everything with each other in the family." Others appreciated marriage because couples could solve life problems together. Kim, a man in Hanoi, said:

When I got married, I was able to concentrate on my work while my wife helped with my relationships with family members. If I was concentrating on my work while there were problems with a family member, 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.

Marriage in Vietnam retains both symbolic and practical meaning for young people. Marriage is believed to make life better not only because it legitimates their social status as mature adults but also because of the symbolic and practical rewards it provides the individual. These include confirming normalness and avoiding a bad reputation, creating happiness, security and motives in life, and promoting positive personal changes.

Conclusion

What has become clear through this study is that among people in contemporary Vietnam, the meaning of marriage is complex and varied. The respondents in Hanoi and Thai Binh continue to recognize the importance of marriage as an essential institution. In spite of mass media fears about the implications of increasing acceptability and incidence of cohabitation and children being raised outside of marriage, marriage is still perceived by young

married people as playing an essential role in establishing an important and acceptable institution for emotionally and legally binding couples, and for having and raising children. This is consistent with the findings in some other Asian countries. For example, Jamiah Manap et al. (2013, pp.114–115) indicates three main purposes of marriage in Malaysia, including religious motives (marriage as contributing to perfection), biological motives (building a family), and sociopsychological motives (love and commitment).

Marriage in Vietnam retains practical significance, reflecting the socioeconomic context of Vietnam in which economic insecurity is a key reason for emphasizing the necessity of marriage. Women consider marriage to be associated with the happiness of motherhood. While marriage in the United States is said to lose its practical significant partly resulting from women's increasing employment (Cherlin, 2004, p.854), marriage retained real significance to women in Vietnam. Notably, concerns about economic insecurity are particularly prevalent among rural women. Although Vietnam has a very high percentage of female participation in the workforce (Knodel, Loi, Jayakody, & Huy, 2005; Teerawichitchainan, Knodel, Loi, & Huy, 2010), the rural women who participated in this study usually had little income, and many of them relied on their husband's incomes. They therefore tended to see marriage as an avenue for future security. This is further supported by the absence of social welfare safety nets for divorced women and their children, and for single women or men in old age. Little support is given to elderly single people except in some very special circumstances, for example, if they are considered too poor or weak to live on their own. Aged care homes are not common or popular in Vietnam. Many rural wives therefore believe that their husband and children are the only people they can rely on when old. The rural women's thinking of marriage as future security can also be explained by the influence of traditional model of masculinity in which a husband's role is identified as protecting wife and financially supporting the family. Hence, the women sometimes tend to rely on their husband and consider marriage as the protection for their life. On the other hand, employment is more readily available for women in the urban areas and most of them were employed full-time and able to financially support themselves. Their economic independence was associated with more open-minded attitudes that considered marriage as option among a range of alternatives. While women recognize the rewards of marriage as providing happiness and security, men acknowledged practical benefits, for example, positive changes in their personal lifestyle. Marriage is considered by some men as an avenue to assert their maturity. Male participants in both areas reported marriage as an important part of establishing their personal life and positively changing their lifestyle, encouraging them to make greater efforts at work and to save money. Urban men sometimes associated marriage with a higher social status at work. The men's ideas about the meaning of marriage reflect an ideology of masculinity

that emphasizes their role as breadwinner. Marriage seems to be an important milestone for men, as it signals a transition in which they assume the responsibility of supporting a family, one that requires them to work harder and save money. Hence, the practitioners potentially engaging with young Vietnamese people should pay more attention to their reasons for getting marriage, and reflecting on their expectations from their marriage to ensure that those expectations shared within the marriage. The practitioners also should consider how the expectations and assumptions about marriage contribute to or protect against marital conflicts in the marriage of young Vietnamese people.

At the same time, marriage also retains cultural and symbolic significance. A possible explanation for the significance of marriage lies in the social norms and Confucian ethics of Vietnamese society. Although public debate sometimes suggests that traditional norms of marriage in Vietnam are losing currency, it is clear from this research that the social values and controls that shape marriage still have a substantial influence on young married people. Many of the young people expressed highly conventional perceptions of marriage, for example, stating that marriage and having children are a social duty that is necessary for maintaining the family lineage. Having children is also believed to provide women with happiness associated with motherhood.

There were differences in ideas about marriage across rural and urban contexts. The rural communities in Vietnam usually live in small villages where families know each other and there is a clear sense of the need to develop and maintain a good reputation. Hence, individuals in the rural communities worry about their reputations, which affect not only themselves but also their families. In this context, marriage is not only a choice of the individual but is also seen as a symbol of maturity and normality. In contrast, the relatively independent life led by urban residents means that they are less concerned about social reputation, although the men did recognize a link between marriage, maturity, and their social status at work. Their heightened exposure to modern values of marriage and family (possibly also related to their higher educational and professional status) also lead urban participants to have more open-minded attitudes. Some of them considered remaining single or becoming single mothers as acceptable individual choices. They also see divorce as potentially an acceptable alternative to an unhappy marriage.

It can be seen from the meaning of marriage reflected by the young married people in Vietnam that the rise of individualization and deinstitutionalization characterized for marital transformation in the West might not account for those in Eastern countries like Vietnam. This brings about the demand for further development of theoretical perspectives that could interpret the shifts in marriage in Vietnam—a changing society influenced by both traditional social norms as well as the exposures to Western culture. The findings of the research also suggest the need for further studies providing deeper

understanding of changes in femininity and masculinity in rural and urban areas in Vietnam focusing on young people's new ideas about the role of men and women in marriage.

Note

1. Self-employed: implied those who managed the work on their own. These included those doing agricultural cultivation on in their land or operating a business or service.

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