

EXAMINING GRADUATE STUDENTS' OPINIONS REGARDING MARRIAGE AND PREMARITAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Yağmur Soylu

Zekavet Topçu Kabasakal
Dokuz Eylül University, Turkey
yagmur-haci@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine graduate students' opinions regarding marriage and premarital education programs. The participants of the study are 22 graduate students (12 female and 10 male) attending different programs at a public university in İzmir, Turkey. The data for the study were collected through a standardized interview form prepared by the researcher herself, which consists of open-ended questions. The data obtained in this qualitative study were analysed by using content analysis technique. The findings of the study were classified under five main themes: definition of marriage; perceptions about premarital education programs; knowledge and skills that need to be acquired prior to marriage; skills that men and women should have to maintain a healthy marriage; and positive and negative traits that the participants believe that they already have in order to maintain a marriage. Later, these findings were discussed under the light of studies and their findings available in the related literature.

Keywords: *Marriage, Premarital Education, Qualitative Study.*

INTRODUCTION

Although the traditional model has been a debatable issue due to increasing social and personal approval of living a single life, popularity of living together without getting married, changes in gender roles and increasing tendency for couples to prefer not to make a child, marriage is still a popular practice in today's social life (Soylu, 2016). Considered the keystone of society, marriage plays an important role in interpersonal relationships because family relationship is established through this structure (Larson & Holman, 1994; Yılmaz, 2001). Marriage is defined as a contract signed by two individuals to live together and share their life experiences (Özguven, 2000). According to another definition, marriage is the legal and social approval of sexual intimacy (Soylu, 2016).

Today, young people tend to get married at later ages compared to the preferences in the past (Özü, 2017). A comparison at international level reveals that people living in Scandinavian countries get married at later ages than Americans, while those living in African, Asian, Latin American and East European countries get married earlier than Americans. Although getting married at an early age or later is a matter of choice, young adulthood is the period when individuals tend to start a marriage relationship the most since one of the responsibilities of young adults is believed to get married to start a family (Uzun Özer, 2014).

When they are young, people start to be interested in individuals of the opposite sex, and flirting makes them think about marriage relationship (Spanier, 1972). People get to know each other, get on well with each other and establish the bond to live together during their premarital relationships (Şen, 2015).

A lot of factors related to society and culture where individuals live in affect their decisions to get married. Prevailing social norms in Turkey encourage people to find a suitable spouse and maintain **existing marriages (Soylu, 2016), which is an issue closely related to "marriage quality"**. Marriage quality refers to an overall evaluation that focuses on the functionality of marriages (Holman, 1981). The research dealing with marriage and marriage quality often focuses on certain concepts such as marital **adjustment, marital satisfaction, and success and happiness in marriage (Fışiloğlu, 2001; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Johnson & Booth, 1998)**. Despite the lack of clear-cut criteria for a successful marriage, the following factors are examined by researchers in various studies: family background, personality, communication prior to marriage and stressful experiences that couples face (Soylu, 2016).

The related literature suggests that the **quality of a marriage might affect individuals' lives in many ways (Yalçın & Ersever, 2015)**. The studies conducted in Turkey revealed that there are education programs addressing to married individuals, despite in limited number (Canel, 2007; Ersanlı & Kalkan, 2003; Kalkan, 2002; Kalkan & Ersanlı, 2009; Sardoğan & Karahan, 2005; Sevim, 1996) and few studies were conducted on premarital education (Duran & Hamamcı, 2010; Yılmaz & Kalkan, 2010).

It is clear that how to maintain existing marriages and quality of marriages in general are important **topics to discuss for society and its family structure. Therefore, it is essential to examine people's** opinions about how to determine the content of premarital education programs aiming to improve premarital relationship before these intervention programs are proliferated. Since it might be late to intervene problems when they occur during a marriage, premarital education is an important practice to help young people establish healthy marital relationships. When development phases of individuals are concerned, young adults tend to get married more compared to other phases (Özü, 2017). **Under the light of this information, this study aims to examine graduate students' opinions about marriage and premarital education programs.** According the aim of the study the views of the graduate students about marriage and premarital education, their thoughts about the skills and characteristics that married individuals should have are examined. In addition, it is focused on self-assessment in terms of positive and negative characteristics that they think can be effective in marital relationships.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Qualitative research method has been used to reveal the perceptions of individuals and provide in-depth information (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In qualitative research, a case or situation is tried to be explained within the framework of its own environment **and its limitations (Yıldırım, 1999)**. **Structured interview** technique was used in this qualitative research method. In this technique, standardized open-ended questions are asked to each individual in the same order (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005).

Participants of the Research

Purposive sampling method was used to determine the research group. In order to conduct research in accordance with the purpose of the study, a homogeneity sampling method was chosen from the purposive sampling methods (Palinkas et al., 2015). Since it is thought that there is a period closer to marriage, having graduate education has been taken as a criterion. The participants of the study are 22 graduate students (12 female and 10 male) attending different programs at a public university in **İzmir, Turkey. Of these participants, 20 are students in a master's degree program and 2 in PhD programs.** As for the departments they attend, 8 of the participants are students in Family Education and Counselling Department, 7 in Computer and Instructional Technologies Teaching Department, 3 in Guidance and Psychological Counselling Department, 2 in Science Teaching Department and 2 in Primary School Teaching Department. The ages of the participants range between 22 and 29. 10 participants are in a romantic relationship while 12 participants do not have any love relationships.

Data Collection Tools

In order to obtain the research data, standardized open-ended interview questions were used. In the interview form prepared by the researchers, the questions were easy to understand and open-ended. The interview form consists of seven questions:

1. What does marriage mean to you?
2. **What is your opinion about participating in a premarital education program aiming to "equip individuals with knowledge and skills related to marriage"?**
3. What skills, do you think, should individuals acquire before they get married?
4. What qualities, do you think, should women have in order to maintain their marriages?
5. What qualities, do you think, should men have in order to maintain their marriages?
6. Which positive qualities, do you think, do you have in order to maintain a marriage?
7. Which negative qualities that might complicate a marriage relationship do you think you have?

Procedure of Data Collection

The graduate students attending different departments of public university were asked the questions in the interview form prepared by the researcher, who noted down the replies provided for the questions. The interviews conducted with the participants lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analysed through content analysis method, in which frequency analysis and categorical analysis are done. The former is about how frequently ideas (words or phrases) are repeated in the content. These words are later counted and expressed in frequencies. Categorical analysis, on the other hand, refers to dividing the content into units first and later grouping these units into categories according to certain criteria. The data analysis procedure consists of the following phases: coding the data, determining the themes, organizing the codes and the themes, and interpreting the findings. **The researcher benefitted from the literature in "organizing codes and themes" phase (Bilgin, 2006; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). The findings of the study were classified under five main themes:** definition of marriage; perceptions about premarital education programs; knowledge and skills that need to be acquired prior to marriage; skills that men and women should have to maintain a healthy marriage; and positive and negative traits that the participants believe that they already have in order to maintain a marriage. In the last phase, the data of the study were grouped according to main theme and sub themes, and the findings were discussed in relation with the related literature.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In qualitative research, there are many methods associated with validity and reliability that increase **trustworthiness (Başkale, 2016)**. Before the interview form was applied to the participants, the expert opinion was taken by 5 people who had a PhD degree in the field of Psychological Counselling and Guidance. In addition to obtaining expert opinions, purposive sampling method was used. In addition, the data were collected by the researchers themselves and the participants were given the necessary explanations before the data was collected.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study are grouped into five main themes as follows:

1. Definition of Marriage

When the participants were asked about the definition of marriage in their own words, most of them (f=12) told it is between one male and one female, which is followed by *sharing* (f=8), *affection and respect* (f=7), *togetherness* (f=6), *legal* (f=5), *merging lives* (f=4), *having a child* (f=3), *living in the*

same home / under the same roof (f=3), peace (f=3), responsibility (f=2), family (f=2), trust (f=2), love (f=2), journey / companion (f=2) and social / family pressure (f=2). The ideas stated only once were as follows: order, choice, harmony, loyalty, happiness, romanticism, mingling of three families, making decisions, and procedure. All of these words and phrases stated by the participants for the definition of marriage are presented under three themes: Contextual / Conceptual Definition, Emotional Definition and Negative Sides of Marriage.

Table 1

The data regarding the definitions of marriage

Marriage	f	%	Marriage	f	%
Contextual Definition			Emotional Definition		
Two people (one female and one male)	12	54.5	Affection and respect	7	31.8
Sharing	8	36.4	Coupling	6	27.3
Legal	5	22.7	Peace	3	13.6
Merging lives	4	18.2	Responsibility	2	9.1
Having a child	3	13.6	Trust	2	9.1
The same home / under the same roof	3	13.6	Love	2	9.1
Family	2	9.1	Loyalty	1	4.5
Journey / companion	2	9.1	Romanticism	1	4.5
Order	1	4.5	Happiness	1	4.5
Choice	1	4.5	Negative sides of marriage		
Harmony	1	4.5	Social / Family Pressure	2	9.1
Mingling of three families	1	4.5	Procedure / Expenses	1	4.5
Making decisions	1	4.5			

The following extracts from the interviews conducted with the participants involve their own definitions of marriage:

"It is the permission to carry out all the actions causing social pressure from governmental point of view." (Male, 23 years old, Computer and Instructional Technologies Teaching) (example of negative sides of marriage)

"It means deciding to spend your whole life together with a person you love, trust and fall in love" (Female, 23 years old, Science Teaching) (example of emotional definition)

"The legal way to make a child. Not just one family, rather the mingling of three families" (Female, 23 years old, Primary School Teaching) (example of contextual definition)

"Marriage means two people's deciding to spend their lives together. I consider it as an intimate togetherness involving affection and understanding" (Female, 29 years old, Guidance and Psychological Counselling) (example of contextual and emotional definition)

2. Opinions About Participating in a Premarital Education Program

When graduate students' opinions about getting premarital education aiming to equip them with knowledge and skills related to marriage are examined, we can see that 86.4% (f=19) provided positive replies and 13% (f=3) negative ones. Majority of those providing positive replies (f=11) reported that such an education program might be useful in accessing accurate information, 22.7% (f=5) opined that it should be widespread, even compulsory, and 9.1% (f=2) emphasized that it might help self-evaluation of individuals. In addition, the following opinions were also stated by the participants: both sides (male and female) should participate; parents should also be given this education; and it might be a preventive approach.

The followings are some sample statements about the participants’ opinions regarding getting premarital education:

"Getting such a premarital education is very important in terms of finding solutions that are likely to occur during marriage or to prevent them from happening in advance. These types of programs should proliferate so that it is possible to raise more and more potential couples’ awareness about marital issues." (23 years old, female, Family Education and Counselling)

"I certainly believe that it is necessary when we consider the increasing divorce rates. If possible, it should be compulsory for each couple before they get married." (Male, 22 years old, Family Education and Counselling)

"Marriage cannot be restricted into standard forms and norms. Therefore, I do not think there are marriage-specific skills and knowledge. I wouldn’t participate." (Male, 26 years old, Computer and Instructional Technologies Teaching)

"I would love to get support about this issue. I believe that there are misunderstandings when it comes to the definition of marriage and its position in the society. I think these problems might be solved thanks to that." (Male, 23 years old, Computer and Instructional Technologies Teaching)

3. Knowledge and Skills That Should Be Acquired Before Marriage

Table 2 below displays the participants’ opinions about knowledge and skills that should be acquired before marriage. The data obtained were grouped under three themes: personal characteristics, communication skills and other skills.

Table 2
The opinions regarding knowledge and skills to be acquired before marriage

	F	%		f	%
Personal Characteristics			Other skills		
Respecting others’ opinions and feelings	5	22.7	Money management	3	13.6
Responsibility			Labour division	2	9.1
Awareness	4	18.2	Problem solving	2	9.1
Understanding	2	9.1	Sexual health	2	9.1
Creativity	2	9.1	Crisis management	1	4.5
Patience	1	4.5	Forgiving	1	4.5
Self-confidence	1	4.5	Raising children	1	4.5
Sensitivity	1	4.5	Stress management	1	4.5
Psychological resilience	1	4.5	Anger management	1	4.5
	1	4.5	Reconciliation	1	4.5
Communication skills	F		Communication skills	f	%
Empathy	11	50	Determining personal limits	2	9.1
Effective communication	8	36.4	Saying no	1	4.5
Listening	4	18.2	Self-expression	1	4.5

4. The Traits That Males And Females Should Have In Order To Maintain Marriages

Although some of the participants (f=13) provided the same characteristics and skills for both males and females, others reported different characteristics and skills separately for both genders. The followings are examples mentioned by the participants in the first group:

"Generally speaking, I do not believe genders should have different traits. I believe both women and men should respect each other’s private space." (Male, 22 years old, Family Education and Counselling)

"All characteristics needed to live together regardless of gender." (Male, 22 years old, Family Education and Counselling)

Table 3

The data regarding the traits that males and females should have in order to maintain marriages

Trait	f	%	Trait	f	%	Trait	f	%
Respect			Empathy			Love		
Female	7	31.8	Female	8	36.4	Female	3	13.6
Male	8	36.4	Male	8	36.4	Male	2	9.1
Understanding			Patience			Trustworthy		
Female	6	27.3	Female	4	18.2	Female	2	9.1
Male	5	22.7	Male	1	4.5	Male	3	13.6
Good listener			Order			Parenthood		
Female	4	18.2	Female	2	9.1	Female	2	9.1
Male	4	18.2	Male	1	4.5	Male	2	9.1
Support			Climb-down					
Female	1	4.5	Female	1	4.5			
Male	2	9.1	Male	2	9.1			

In addition to the traits and skills mentioned in Table 3 above, the followings were also mentioned by the participants: for females (*knowing how to cook (f=2), not being obsessed with details, sense of humour, problem solving, being strong, intellectuality and having a job*); for males (*being fair (f=3), being against violence (f=2), kindness (f=2), earning money (f=2), managing (f=2), creativity and assuming responsibilities*). As for the traits both men and women should have, the participants stated the following: self-confidence (f=2), willingness to solve problems (f=2), openness to diversities, doing housework, anger management, stress management, honesty, affection, constructive criticism, being clean, sensitivity, awareness about home economy, being open to improvement, adaptability, not being selfish, sharing and good communication skills.

The followings are two sample extracts from the data regarding the traits men and women should have in order to maintain a marriage:

"Our ancestors said that it is ok to marry a girl who knows how to cook rice. And of course, woman should be patient enough. Loyalty is important. There are many men who swear a lot. This is very offensive. In addition, a man should be clean. It is not good idea to get married with a dirty and messy man." (Female, 23 years old, Primary School Teaching)

"A woman should be a mother; I mean she should assume the responsibilities of being a mother. Also cooking is an important factor. A man should be a father, and he should be able to assume the responsibilities of being a father. Also, he should be the supporter of the house." Male 22 years old, Computer and Instructional Technologies Teaching).

5. Positive and Negative Traits That The Participants Believe That They Already Have In Order To Maintain A Marriage

When the data regarding positive traits that the participants believe they already have in order to maintain a marriage are examined, we can list the following ones as stated in the interviews: *empathy (f=8), respect for private space (f=6), understanding (f=4), patience (f=3), trustworthiness (f=3), being a good listener (f=3), effective communication (f=3), constructive criticism (f=2), sensitivity (f=2), multi-dimensional thinking (f=2), responsible (f=2), and fun (f=2)*. Also, the followings were mentioned by the participants in the interviews only once: solution-oriented, sharing, reconciling, modesty, helping with housework, calm, open to improvement, loyal, tidy, earning money, problem solving, creative, interested, organized, commitment, self-expression and romantic.

As for the negative traits which might affect a marriage negatively, the participants mentioned the followings: *individuality (f=4)*, *impatience (f=4)*, *being obsessive (f=)*, *anger management failure (f=3)*, *being a realist (f=3)*, *overrating the details (f=4)*, *obstinacy (f=3)*, *negative attitude towards marriage (f=2)*, *setting limits in relationships (f=2)*, *sentientcy (f=2)* and *intolerance (f=2)*. In addition, the participants also mentioned the followings as negative traits only once: **having difficulty in saying "no"**, being too much meticulous, being susceptibility, indifference, not being talkative, jealousy, stress and nervousness, perfectionism and focusing on negative.

The followings are two sample extracts from the data regarding positive and negative traits that the participants believe that they already have in order to maintain a marriage:

"I have reconciliation and empathy skills. Also I can establish positive and effective communication and respect my wife's private space. I am a meticulous person and like keeping my order. I can't stand people who disturbs my order. Sometimes, I want to stay alone. If I can't, I can't bear this, either. (Male, 22 years old, Family Education and Counselling)

"To be honest, I believe that I am not mature enough for marriage. My answer to this question is that I can only help with the housework. I am not mature enough because of my age. I also find it illogical to spend a whole life with one person". (Male, 22 years old, Computer and Instructional Technologies Teaching)

DISCUSSION

According to the content analysis, the findings about the definition of marriage are grouped under three main themes: contextual definition, emotional definition and negative sides of marriage. The participants emphasized both cognitive (legal, sharing, choice, order, etc.) and emotional (love, trust, happiness, affection, respect etc.) dimensions. The literature shows that both cognitive and emotional dimensions are important in marriage. Billari and Liefbroer (2016) found emotional definitions as the predominant dimension, and other studies (Rahmani, Merghati, Sadeghi, & Allahgholi, 2011; Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2010) emphasized the role of love in shaping marriage plans. One of the findings of our study is that marriage is generally perceived positively by the participants. The presence of positive attitude towards marriage is believed to have positive effects on marriage as long as emotional content continues to exist and even expands. In addition, although it was found that the effects of financial, legal and normative motives on maintaining a marriage are quite weak, they may help to maintain a marriage if supported well enough with emotional and social realities (Billari & Liefbroer, 2016; Karimi, Bakhtiyari, & Arani, 2019).

The data regarding the participants' opinions about participating in premarital education revealed that 86.4% (f=19) of the participants provided positive opinions and 13.% (f=3) negative ones. Despite an overall decrease in marriage rates (Vital Statistics Report, 2014), a considerable majority of people get married once in their lives (Settersten & Ray, 2010). This finding suggests that marriage is still an important institution, and getting education about marriage is valued to a great extent.

The studies conducted with married couples showed that premarital education is a necessary process (Ansah–Hughes, Akyina, & Oduro-Okyireh, 2015). Moreover, it was found that those receiving premarital counselling services have higher levels of marital satisfaction than others who do not (Kepler, 2015). The studies on marital satisfaction highlight that interpersonal communication and interaction factors and mental health of individuals positively affect marriage relationship. In this regard, education programs focusing on mental health and communication skills are very important before choosing one's life partner. The positive effects of such programs have been reported in many studies (Clyde, Hawkins, & Willoughby, 2019; Moodi, Miri, & Sharifirad, 2013; Rose, 2019). As for the content of premarital education, Salarvand, Bahri, Heidary, and Khadive (2011) emphasized material quality and duration, and Duncan and Rogers (2019) suggested including personality traits and interpersonal factors, and Khalesi and Simbar (2017) marital adjustment factors in this content.

The opinions regarding knowledge and skills that needs to be acquired before getting married were grouped under three themes: personality traits, communication skills and other skills. The sub themes of communication skills were mentioned as determining the limits of private space, saying no, self-expression by both female and male participants. Good communication skills are important factors for marriages that are long-lasting and with high levels of marital satisfaction (Bachand & Caron, 2001; Ibrahim & Jhanbozorgi, 2008; Pakravan, Haghayegh, Nshatdoust, & Molavi, 2014; Robinson & Blanton, 1993). The studies also revealed a positive relationship between marital satisfaction and intimacy (Mashak, 2010; Haidary & Ighbal, 2010; Zaheri, Dolatian, Shariati, Simbar, Ebadi, & Azghadi, 2016). **The current study also reported certain similar traits that might be considered under "intimacy" concept such as sensitivity and being understanding etc.**

One of the interesting findings of the study is that although some of the participants (f=13) provided the same traits and skills for both males and females, others provided different traits and skills separately for each gender. In other words, although the results of the study emphasize different traits for each gender, there are common ones for both genders. Having a job was mentioned as a quality for women and earning money for men, which might be explained by the fact that both genders have developed a more **egalitarian approach for their work and family roles in today's world (Donnelly, Twenge, Clark, Shaikh, Beiler-May, & Carter, 2016)**. In addition, the literature reports that it is necessary for men and women to have different qualities in marriage (Karimi et al., 2019), which might be due to the prevailing social gender perception. In this study, ability to cook is a quality attributed to women while earning money is an important one for men. There are many studies reporting different expectations from men and women in marriage in terms of social gender roles (Boehnke, 2011; Jaumotte, 2003; Lindsey, 2015). Finally, as for positive and negative qualities the participants believed that they already have in order to maintain a marriage, the followings were mentioned: affection, love, climb-down, support, patience and understanding. There are some studies that revealed similar findings (Bachand, & Caron, 2001; **Hatami, Esmaily, Farahbakhsh, & Borjali, 2016; Mullins, 2016; Robinson, & Blanton, 1993**). Problem solving skills (Roizblatt, Kaslow, Rivera, Fuchs, Conejero, & Zacharias, 1999), and assuming responsibilities are also the other findings of the studies.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine graduate students' opinions about marriage and premarital education. According to the content analysis, it was concluded that the majority of participants had a positive view of getting a premarital education. The findings regarding the identification of marriage have been seen to point to different dimensions of marriage.

One of the findings of the study is that although some of the participants (f=13) provided the same traits and skills for both males and females, others provided different traits and skills separately for each gender. These findings point to gender roles when assessed in terms of the larger implications of the research.

Lastly, as for positive and negative qualities the participants believed that they already have in order to maintain a marriage, the followings were mentioned: affection, love, climb-down, support, patience and understanding. Based on all these findings, the research can be seen to be important in highlighting the factors considered critical in marriage. In the light of all these information, it is revealed that there are different dimensions of marriage, that there is a need for premarital education, and that gender roles in marital relations are seen as an important factor.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are some limitations of this study. Firstly, it can be considered as a limitation in the research to work with candidates of family counselors and psychological counsellor. In addition, research data was obtained only from graduate students studying in a single institute.

In summary, the study suggests that premarital education might be an effective practice and personality traits are important in maintaining marriages. The benefits of premarital education were emphasized by single individuals in this study; however, there are studies in which these benefits were reported by married couples. The following actions might be recommended under the light of the findings in this study:

- Premarital education programs should proliferate at institutional level.
- The content of premarital education programs should have a multi-dimensional structure involving individual and interpersonal factors.
- The activities and materials to be used in the program should be determined carefully.
- The studies aiming to determine the content of premarital education programs should be conducted with participants representing wider populations.
- The number and the accessibility of specialists that might assist individuals before marriage should increase.
- Gender roles should also be taken into consideration in the pre-marriage education programs to be organized.

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