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Exploring the Normative Basis for Age at
Marriage in Thailand: An Example from
Focus Group Research

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RESEARCH REPORT

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This report is based on a paper prepared for presentation at the Conference on Marriage Determinants and Consequences to be held in Pattaya, Thailand.

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INTRODUCTION

Entry into and exit from a marital union are events of great importance to both the individual and the group to which he or she belongs. Marriage is also of considerable demographic significance since in most societies reproduction largely occurs within such unions. Because of its social importance, norms and attitudes governing marriage are typically enmeshed deeply within the culture or subcultures of the society and linked to other societal institutions. The present paper explores the normative basis of marriage timing in Thailand using focus group sessions as a way of obtaining qualitative information about attitudes and beliefs concerning the appropriate age at first marriage for men and women.

THE FOCUS GROUP TECHNIQUE

A focus group session consists of a group discussion in which a small number of participants (usually six to nine), under the guidance of a moderator, talk about topics of importance to the particular research study. The informal group situation is intended to encourage participants to elaborate on behavior and opinions to a greater extent than might be forthcoming from more formalized individual interview situations. When focus groups work properly, interactions among participants stimulate discussion of the topic at hand with one participant reacting to comments made by another. It is this group dynamic that distinguishes focus group sessions from more conventional individual in-depth interviews typical of ethnographic research.

Focus groups can be formed on the basis of different criteria to permit in-depth exploration of views of persons with different characteristics. However, free flow of discussion is facilitated when each particular group is fairly homogeneous. Thus it is generally desirable to choose participants for a given focus group session who are more or less of equal status and who share similar values relating to the topic under investigation. Under such circumstances, participants are more likely to feel comfortable and secure and talk more freely than they might in an individual interview or in a group containing persons of diverse views, values, or statuses.

Within each session, the full discussion is typically tape-recorded. A session also includes a specially assigned notetaker who later transcribes the complete session based on his notes and the tapes. These transcripts then serve as the basic data set for analysis. The technique has been widely used in private industry, especially for marketing research. Its use in social research has been limited, although some efforts have been made to employ the technique for aiding family planning programs. A special issue of Studies in Family Planning (December 1981, Vol. 12, No. 12, Part 1) recently described some of these efforts and provides a general discussion of the technique.

The intention of focus group sessions is not to provide statistically generalizable quantitative data but rather qualitative

information exposing underlying attitudes, opinions and behavior patterns. Thus it differs fundamentally from the sample survey approach, which is intended to provide information representative of a broad population but which rarely is able to probe the meaning of particular responses in great depth. The focus group and survey approaches can best be seen as being complementary rather than as alternatives to each other; the former serves as a useful source to generate new hypotheses to be tested on a broader population base by the latter. The focus group is also a way to probe findings from surveys that seem ambiguous or puzzling.

PROJECT DESIGN

The material presented in this paper on views regarding the appropriate age-at-marriage for Thai men and women is drawn from a project involving a series of focus groups conducted to explore attitudes and behavior underlying the recent rapid fertility decline in Thailand (see Knodel, Havanon, and Pramualratana, 1983). Although the emphasis of the project is on furthering our understanding of reproductive behavior, the discussion guide followed by the moderators did include questions on the age at which participants themselves married and what they thought currently was an appropriate age-at-marriage for men and women as well as the reasons why.

Given the main objective of exploring the recent transformation of reproductive behavior in Thailand, the project was designed to facilitate a comparison between the pre- and post-fertility decline generations. The pretransition generation was defined as married persons who had experienced most or all of their childbearing prior to the rapid changes in reproductive behavior that took place over the last decade and who had at least five living children. The post-transition generation was defined as young married persons, in their twenties for women and in their twenties or early thirties for men, who wanted to have two or three children. The rationale behind these designations is that in the past, most Thai couples had at least five children, while at present, recently married couples predominantly want to have only two or three children. Separate sessions were held for older men, older women, younger men, and younger women. Complete sets of four sessions have been held in one village each in the Central, North, and Northeastern Regions and in both a Buddhist and a Moslem village in the South. In addition, all but an older generation men's session have been held among construction workers in Bangkok, all of whom migrated from rural areas. All groups except the Moslems in the South were Buddhist. In the present paper we draw on material from all 23 sessions.

FINDINGS

Most participants seemed able to understand the questions about the appropriate age for men and women to marry and were able to discuss them in terms that appeared to make sense to themselves and to the other participants. Occasionally a participant initially interpreted the question as if it asked about the participant's actual age-at-marriage rather than his or her opinion about an appropriate age, but such cases were the exceptions.

The discussions indicated that there was a reasonably clear consensus that a woman should marry in her early twenties, with the age of 20 being most commonly mentioned, and that a man should marry in his mid-twenties, with 25 being most commonly mentioned. Only a few participants said it was appropriate for women to marry under 20 or over 25. Virtually no one thought a man should marry before 20 and only a few recommended that a man should be as old as 30 when marrying for the first time.

In general, the recommended ages at marriage resemble the distribution of actual ages at which men and women marry in Thailand today and the mean of the recommended ages is fairly close to the actual average age at first marriage (about 22 for women and between 24 and 25 for men during the 1970-80 decade). The participants themselves married a bit younger on the average than the ages they indicated as appropriate for others, but not by very much. There were no obvious differences in ages at marriage thought appropriate between the men's and women's groups or between the older or younger generations.

During the discussions, virtually no one indicated couples nowadays were marrying too late, but a number of participants lamented that some couples married too early. This is particularly evident from the discussions in which participants mention that they want their children to marry at a later age but that their children would probably not follow their advice.

"I want my daughter to get married at 20 but don't know whether she will follow my advice. I think that she won't and will probably get married earlier than that." (Younger man, Bangkok construction site)

"Parents would like their daughters to be able to think maturely first, be over 20, maybe 24 or 25, but they don't believe in our advice." (Older man, North)

Generally participants showed more concern about the minimum age at which marriage is thought to be appropriate than the maximum age. For women, the reasons mentioned justifying the minimum appropriate age typically concerned her maturity and ability to take responsibility, especially in connection with raising a family and handling the household. Some participants also voiced opinions about an upper limit on the appropriate age for women to marry. Their comments generally implied that if a woman waited too long she would be considered an "old maid" and be of little interest to most suitors.

"If you get married to an older woman, they will say that you have gotten an old maid." (Younger man, Northeast)

"Now at age 20, if you haven't gotten married you are considered an old maid." (Older woman, Bangkok construction site)

"If a woman is over 30, people will say that she is too old. She will not be able to find anybody in her own age group to marry. So she doesn't marry and becomes an old maid." (Older man, North)

In most sessions, the minimum age-at-marriage for men was linked to completion of military service, ordination as a Buddhist monk, and the need to be responsible and mature, all of which were viewed as desirable prerequisites for getting married. Completion of military service was spontaneously discussed by almost every group; it was clearly a highly salient consideration. Military conscription in Thailand has been compulsory for many decades, and men at the age of 20 expect to be drafted into the army for approximately two years. Group participants felt that if a man marries before completing his military service, he will have to leave all responsibilities for the family on his wife and that thus he should postpone marriage until military service was completed.

"Nobody wants a man who hasn't been in the army already. This is because they [the women] have to work in the rice fields. If the man is doing his military service, he cannot help do this work. Women are not interested in such men because they have to waste a lot of time waiting for them to complete military service." (Older woman, North)

"It is particularly difficult to have a husband who has not yet finished his military service if you have children. When your husband is a soldier, his salary will not be enough." (Younger Moslem woman, South)

"The appropriate age to marry is related to military service. If you take a wife before you are drafted, you will always be worrying about the family." (Younger man, North)

In much of Thailand, with the obvious exception of non-Buddhist communities, there is a widely-held ideal that a young man should serve as a Buddhist monk for a short period of time (typically for about a three-month period) soon after reaching age 20 but prior to marriage. Ordination is seen as a practice which gains merit not only for the person entering the monkhood but even more importantly, for his parents. While the tradition is not practiced universally, a substantial proportion of Thai men actually do serve at least for a short period as Buddhist monks (Smith, 1979, pp. 18, 32; Henderson et al., 1971, p. 72; Limanonda, 1983, p. 18). However, a number of anthropologists have noted that in the Northern region, in contrast to the rest of the country, less importance is placed on a young man's having been ordained prior to marriage (Mougne, 1982, p. 415). Indeed, Benja Yoddumnern, the resident anthropologist of the northern village in our sample, confirmed that little emphasis was placed on ordination in that area. Thus it is of interest that Buddhist participants in most of our focus group sessions, with the notable exception of those conducted in the northern village, spontaneously indicated that it was important for a man to be ordained and serve as a monk before marriage. The group participants felt that men should be ordained before marriage because becoming a monk is part of the process of becoming an adult. Moreover, a man who marries before ordination will have difficulty if he wants to enter the monkhood later, because he will have too many ties with the world and would worry too much about his family.

"Parents want you to get ordained first in order to acquire merit from their son. If you have a wife and children, you cannot get ordained." (Younger woman, Bangkok construction site)

"But normally, when you already have a wife, you don't have time to be ordained. You have children, become older, and then you end up not getting ordained." (Older woman, Central region)

"Really, you have to first get ordained so the father and mother will feel happy." (Older Buddhist woman, South)

The concern with ordination as a prerequisite for marriage for a man was reasonably high, although less so than for military service, perhaps because military service is compulsory and involves a longer time commitment. While there is an ideal in Thailand that all Buddhist men should serve at least a short period of time in the monkhood, this is of course voluntary and not enforced by the state as is the case with conscription for military service. Nevertheless, since it is generally considered necessary for a man to be at least 20 before being ordained, the practice of serving as a monk helps set a minimum age for marriage for men.

While military service and ordination are considered as important prerequisites for marriage for men only, other qualities--being sufficiently mature, having developed a sense of responsibility, and having the prospect of being economically independent--were generally mentioned as important for both sexes. However, the types of responsibility necessary for men and women differed to some extent.

Before getting married, a man should be able to provide security for his wife as well as to provide economic support in their years of marriage.

"You should prepare. When you have a wife you should know what should be done. You should know how to provide and support your wife and your children." (Older man, Northeast)

"I think 24-25 [is a good age for a man to marry] because at this age you are a full adult, you do things with reason, you can raise a family. If you are younger than this you only want to have fun and cannot take care of yourself." (Younger man, Central region)

Women, on the other hand, should be able to be responsible for the household before getting married. This includes raising the children and handling all the household activities.

"Sometimes when they are too young [17-18], they don't even know how to look after their own kids. If they are too young, they won't be good housewives." (Older man, Central region)

"When they get married, I want my daughters to be able to weave and to do everything." (Older woman, Northeast)

"If you are too young, you do not know how to raise children, but if you are older, you can do things well and also cook well. If you are too young, you cannot do anything." (Younger woman, Central region)

The discussion on responsibility indicates that both the man and the woman should be in a position to take on responsibility before they enter marriage. In a number of groups, participants expressed a concern that couples who marry at young ages are not prepared for the responsibilities of married life and are thus at high risk of early separation.

"It is true, for those who get married as teenagers, they always argue and quarrel and often get divorced." (Younger woman, North)

"In my opinion, 22 is a good age [for daughters to get married]. She will already be mature. It will be better because she has more knowledge and experience. Parents will not have to advise her at that age. If a girl marries young, she will not know much, she will still be a child, and sometimes the couple will separate before the bottom of the rice pot has gotten black. The older you are, the more experienced you are, and the more you understand the ways of the world." (Older Moslem man, South)

"At a young age, men are likely to run away and leave the family." (Older woman, North)

Participants in many groups mentioned that both men and women should have certain characteristics of maturity such as firmness, stability, and confidence; they should be able to think and act carefully and independently and to plan ahead.

"My idea is that men should be able to take responsibility. They should be mature and not apprehensive." (Younger man, Northeast)

"If he is an adult, he does things with firmness; you are not impulsive." (Younger man, North)

"A good age for a woman to marry is 21. They know how to think clearly; they are mature. If a woman is too young, family life will not go smoothly." (Younger man, North)

There was no mention in any of the sessions that married couples could depend economically on their parents, even initially, although in actual practice some couples undoubtedly do. Indeed, it is common in Thailand for newlyweds to move in with one of the couple's parents; usually, but by no means exclusively, with the bride's parents. Instead, participants stressed the expectation that sooner or later married couples need to be economically independent and should be prepared for this. Such independence can be seen in the discussion about the desire to build a new house before or shortly after marriage or about preparing or collecting household items in anticipation of a marriage.

"If you [the woman] stay single, you can save and acquire things for raising a family." (Younger woman, North)

"Everyone has to sooner or later build a house. It all depends on the money. Everything is expensive." (Younger woman, North)

"Women should be about 24 or 25, so they can earn a living first and not depend on their parents. So they can help themselves." (Older Buddhist woman, South)

Though it was not mentioned frequently, there were some participants who stated that nowadays people have to have more education and that schooling delays their marriage. They also mentioned that during their education, young women cannot find enough time to concentrate on household activities. Therefore, it was felt that if women get married at an early age, they will not be efficient enough to take responsibility for the household.

"Back in the early times, they did not go to school very much, but now they go to school a lot . . . It is appropriate for women to get married at 25. People nowadays have to have an education. When they finish, they will then work, and then they can get married. After my children finished their education, I told them to do some work first." (Older Buddhist woman, South)

"It also depends [on the parents]. Some parents want their children to study and get an education. Some who did not study get married early. For those who studied, they will get married after 20." (Younger Moslem woman, South)

"Now there is a great deal of studying at school. Before we did not have to study much. Even before we were 20, we knew a lot about housework, about being a housewife, but now they have to study and therefore they don't know very much about these things." (Older woman, Central region)

While the comments made during the sessions indicated that most participants had some opinion about what age range is appropriate for marriage, there were also numerous comments indicating considerable flexibility. This is probably in part a reflection of the fact that, in Thailand, parents rarely arrange marriages for their children but rather play only an advisory role at most. Men and women generally decide for themselves when they should marry and parents have only limited leverage over the choice of mate and the timing of the marriage. A statement which frequently appears in our discussion groups is: "It depends on the individual." This comment was stated in both younger and older generation groups. Comments indicating considerable flexibility were found even when the prerequisites of ordination, military service, responsibility and maturity were being mentioned.

"They can get married at whatever age they want to." (Younger woman, North)

"Some say it's good but some say it's bad to marry when you are young. It really depends on the individual." (Younger man, Northeast)

"It depends on whether the boy would like to be ordained or to enter the military service. If he doesn't want to wait he can get married." (Older woman, Bangkok construction site)

"At 20 years [It is good to get married]. At that age they can take good responsibility of a family. But then, it depends on the individual. I am not taking sides, you know." (Older Buddhist man, South)

In general, the discussions about the appropriate age for men and women to marry and the underlying reasons given were relatively similar across regions, between generations, between the sexes and between the two religious groups.

DISCUSSION

Age at marriage in Thailand, especially for women, has traditionally been moderately late by Third World standards. Most women marry in their early twenties and have been doing so for some decades. The results of our focus group discussions on the appropriate age at marriage provide some understanding of the normative basis underlying the ages at which men and women enter conjugal unions. While most participants seemed to have some idea of what an appropriate age at marriage should be and were able to provide reasons for their views, there was also a fair amount of flexibility shown. Many participants indicated that individual couples had considerable latitude in deciding the timing of marriage for themselves. Our results in this respect agree well with the conclusions of much of the anthropological and sociological literature on marriage in Thailand (Limanonda, 1983) and are consistent with the frequent characterization of Thai society as loosely structured (Embre, 1950; Evers, 1968).

For men, the special circumstances of compulsory military service and ordination into the Buddhist monkhood appear to be important factors setting a minimum age at which both their peers and their parents would consider it appropriate to start a marriage (sometime during the mid-twenties); thus male nuptiality is linked to two important institutions in Thai Society: the military and the Buddhist religion.

Marriage has relatively little religious significance within Buddhism proper, as indicated by the fact that the dominant Theravada Buddhist tradition includes no wedding ritual per se. The rituals that are practiced in Thailand are largely Brahministic in origin (Riley, 1972). Nevertheless, the importance of entering the Buddhist monkhood as part of attaining adulthood and as a way of honoring parents, and the fact that it is strongly preferable to do so before marrying, provides a direct link between religion and nuptiality for men.

In the northern village, as stated earlier, there was no mention of ordination as being a necessary or desirable prerequisite of marriage

for men. Our finding seems to complement the anthropological literature which also indicates that there is less importance placed on ordination in the North than elsewhere (Mougue, 1981, p. 415). Moreover, in the northern region, rather than waiting until age 20 and then directly entering the monkhood, it is more typical to first become a novice at ages around 10-15 and remain as a novice until the age at which ordination as a be ordained as a monk is possible. Often, however, boys remain novices for only a few years or even less and thus do not continue on to become monks (Suthornphesat, 1970, p. 55; Kingshill, 1960, p. 102). In addition, only a minority of male villagers in the North apparently ever become novices or monks, and in small villages, this is a very small minority (Mougue, 1981, p. 425; Kingshill, 1960, p. 102). In contrast, a recent survey found that over 80 percent of wives in a central Thai village and just over half the wives in a Bangkok slum reported their husbands had been ordained as monks (Chamrathirong, 1983). Nevertheless, since ordination typically occurs at an age several years earlier than marriage would normally take place, and because it is usually for only three months or less, in all likelihood ordination is not an important determinant of age at marriage in Thailand. The fact that the male age at marriage in the North is not unusually young compared to the rest of Thailand is consistent with this conclusion.

The link between age at marriage and completion of military service can be seen as part of a more general and very pervasive set of normative expectations about marriage in Thailand which apply to both men and women; namely, that readiness to marry is defined largely in terms of being able to shoulder the responsibilities, both economic and emotional, that go along with living together as a couple and raising a family. It is probably this norm stipulating responsibility and maturity as prerequisites of marriage that helps explain the moderately late ages at marriage for both men and women.

In part, the norm stipulating responsibility and maturity as conditions for readiness to marry is related to the prevailing patterns of postnuptial residence and household structure. The ideal held in much of Thailand, and particularly in the Northeast and North, is that a newly married couple will reside initially with the bride's parents for a period of a year or two, or until the first child is born, or until another, typically younger, daughter marries (Foster, 1975). The last daughter to marry resides permanently with the parents, taking care of them in their old age and as a reward is supposed to inherit the house and compound while any farm land is to be divided equally among the siblings. The extent to which this ideal is followed varies considerably. However, temporary residence with the bride's parents, or, to a lesser extent, with the groom's parents, is fairly common following marriage and may ease the financial burden faced by a newly married couple (Lauro, 1971, p. 79-80; Foster, 1977, p. 111-2; Mougue, 1982; Hanks and Hanks, 1963, p. 435). This typically lasts only for a short period, however, after which neo-local residence is established although often in close proximity to the bride's or groom's parents' home (Henderson et al., 1971; Limanonda, 1979; Smith, 1979).

The critical question for the present discussion is to what extent support for the newlywed couple, and later their children, falls largely on the couple themselves rather than being absorbed by a composite household economy, as may be common in countries where age at marriage is quite early (Davis, 1955). The relative economic, social and emotional independence that is expected of newly-formed families, and the anticipation that an independent household will be established before too long, may well be the crucial factors in accounting for the general avoidance of and lack of support for very early marriage in Thailand. At the same time, complete economic independence is not expected of newly-married couples who generally have some opportunity to accumulate resources during the period of initial co-residence. This may help account for why age at marriage for both women and men in Thailand is intermediate between a pattern of early marriage in many Asian populations (at least until recently), where economic dependence on the parental generation is stronger, and the traditional pattern of late marriage in Europe in the past, where more or less complete independence was expected (Hajnal, 1982).

The focus group discussions on the reasoning behind what is an appropriate age-at-marriage were notable not only for the reasons that were mentioned but also for those that were not. Based on observations as resident ethnographer in a central Thai village, Lauro (1980) has recently argued that the widely observed prevalence of brideprice payments is a contributing factor to delayed marriage. During all the focus group sessions, however, only once was the issue of brideprice payments raised, and there seemed to be no acknowledged relationship between brideprice payments and appropriate age-at-marriage for men or women. There was also no link made between the onset of menarche and age-at-marriage for women and no concern expressed about a delay of marriage increasing the danger of a woman having her virginity compromised. There was likewise no advocacy that a woman should marry early in order to maximize her reproductive potential. In fact, no mention was made about the implications of age-at-marriage for the number of children eventually born to the couple. This suggests that the link between age-at-marriage and final family size is largely unintentional, and that decisions as to when to marry are not seen as a way to deliberately control family size. Only in the sense that age-at-marriage was contingent on readiness to start childbearing and assume the responsibility of child rearing is age-at-marriage apparently linked to fertility in the conscious thoughts of the participants.

The lack of mention of these concerns does not definitively rule out their presence or their relation to the mechanisms through which age-at-marriage in Thailand is determined. Basic values and concerns are not always easily verbalized although use of the focus group approach should help maximize the chance that they would be. Mechanisms that operate in subtle or indirect ways, however, may be more difficult to detect in direct discussions of the behavior which they influence.

There are other limits to the focus group approach as well. For example, it was evident from the discussions that focus group sessions were not a good mechanism for determining gradual and not easily perceived changes such as trends in age-at-marriage. Most survey and

census evidence points to a rising age-at-marriage, especially for females, over the last few decades (Knodel et al., 1982). Comments made by a number of participants, however, indicated that they felt couples were marrying younger nowadays than in the past. This perception probably arises because young marriages attract more attention due to the greater concern about marrying too young than about marrying too old.

There is also a real danger of generalizing inappropriately from focus group results, given that they are typically based on a small, non-random sample. In the present study, we included only one Moslem village in our sample since Moslems are only a small minority in Thailand (about 5 percent of the population). There is considerable evidence from surveys and censuses that the Moslems marry at substantially earlier ages than Buddhists (Knodel et al., forthcoming). Thus we were surprised at how remarkably similar the attitudes toward age-at-marriage expressed by the Moslems were to those attitudes expressed by the Buddhist groups. In the village we selected, however, Moslems speak the predominant Southern Thai dialect rather than the Malay-related dialect typical of most Moslems in the South. As a result, those in our sample are probably more integrated into the broader Thai society than Moslems who are not native Thai speakers. We suspect we would have tapped quite different attitudes regarding marriage had we conducted our focus group sessions in a Malay-speaking Thai Moslem village.

Despite these limitations, focus group discussions can yield useful insights into attitudes and opinions affecting nuptial behavior. They appear to be a particularly appropriate means to explore the normative basis of the timing of entry into conjugal unions as we hope the present study has illustrated.

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