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TALKING ABOUT AGE AT MARRIAGE:

An Example from Focus Group Research in 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. They are also of considerable demographic significance since in most societies reproduction is largely limited to 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 study of marriage patterns is thus an area of research which can involve many lines of inquiry and can benefit from a variety of methodological approaches. The present paper discusses the potential for using focus group sessions as a way of obtaining qualitative information about issues of interest in the broader study of nuptiality behaviour. It draws on our experience in conducting focus group sessions in Thailand and uses for illustrative purposes the results of discussions 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 6 to 9) 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 behaviour and opinions to an extent that might be difficult to obtain in 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 indepth interviews typical of ethnographic research. The technique has been widely used in private industry, especially for marketing research. Its use in social research has been limited although some efforts to employ the technique for aiding family planning programs have been made.^{1/}

^{1/} A special issue of Studies in Family Planning (December 1981, vol. 12, number 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 behaviour 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 with the former serving as a useful source to generate new hypotheses to be tested on a broader population base by the latter or as a way to probe findings from surveys that seem ambiguous or puzzling.

It is generally desirable to choose participants that 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 sharply opposing views, values or statuses. For example in an individual interview, the interviewer often comes from an urban background and is of considerably higher social, economic and educational status than the respondent. This may lead to a "courtesy bias" and inhibit frank disclosure of opinions, attitudes and behaviour. In a focus group setting, participants are surrounded by others of their own status and, even if the moderator is better educated and from a higher socio-economic stratum, this may well be a less salient feature in the interaction. Moreover, a group situation may facilitate open discussion of some types of sensitive topics if other participants are perceived to share the same perspective. For example, divorced or separated participants may be more likely to reveal the circumstances and consequences of their marital break-up in the presence of others like themselves than to an individual interviewer. On the other hand, a group situation could inhibit discussion if others in the group are perceived to be unsympathetic to a participant's views. Separate sessions with groups of quite different characteristics permit a range of views to be explored in depth but the

homogeneity of each particular group is thought to facilitate the free flow of discussion. 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.

As with any research methodology, there are a variety of limitations and potential problems associated with the focus group approach. Some have already been alluded to and are inherent in the technique. For example, the qualitative nature of the data, the small size of the total sample, and the intentionally purposive manner in which participants are selected all intrigate against results which would permit statistical generalizations. Other potential problems can be reduced considerably by having a skilled moderator and by careful selection of group participants. For example, if a particular participant tries to dominate the discussion, a skilled moderator can steer the conversation towards others by asking their opinions. Likewise reluctant or shy participants can be effectively drawn into the discussion through supportive statements and encouragement by the moderator. Moreover by conveying a permissive attitude, the moderator can create an atmosphere in which a range of opinions can be expressed and any tendency to simply agree with others for the sake of conformity reduced. Given the qualitative nature of the data and the analysis, there is a considerable amount of subjective judgement involved in interpreting what was said or even in determining what views appear to be pervasive among the many views expressed. We have therefore found it useful to have several persons read through all the transcripts and collaborate on the analysis. This reduces the chances that the subjective nature of the analysis process will lead to incorrect emphasis or invalid conclusions. When transcripts are translated into another language it is also essential to have at least one member of the team who can check on the translation during the analysis stage.

PROJECT DESIGN

The illustrative material presented in the present 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 that have been conducted to explore attitudes and behaviour underlying the recent rapid fertility decline in Thailand. The focus of the project is thus on furthering our understanding of reproductive behaviour. The discussion guide followed by the moderators, however, did include questions on what age the participants themselves married and what they thought was an appropriate age at marriage for men and for women currently as well as the reasons why. In several sessions we also tried to probe how sure participants were about recalling their age at first marriage and their date of marriage. We later dropped this part of the discussion because of time constraints. These questions related to marriage made up only a very small part of the topics covered in each session and were not of central importance to the main purpose of the project. Thus the results presented in the present study are intended to be only illustrative of the substantial amount and the type of information that could be obtained from focus groups sessions specially devoted to the study of marriage. Moreover, had the questions been considered of more central importance to the project, they would probably have been more consistently and systematically probed than was the actual case.

Given the main objective of exploring the recent transformation of reproductive behaviour 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 behaviour that took place over the last decade and who had at least 5 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 5 children while at present recently married couples predominantly want to have only two or three children. Separate sessions were held for older generation men, older generation women, younger generation men, and younger generation women. Complete sets of four

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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 twenty three sessions.

In order to keep the illustrative analysis of views on the appropriate age at marriage presented below in perspective, it is useful to keep in mind that the transcripts we analyzed are the result of a process with several distinct phases: sessions were tape recorded (with accompanying note taking), transcribed and translated. In the South, Northeast and North, sessions were conducted in the local dialect and "converted" into central Thai at the time of transcription. All transcripts were then translated into English. At each stage, there is risk of error occurring which effects the accuracy of the final record. In the actual analysis we worked with both the Central Thai and the English transcripts to minimize the errors due to translation. However, it is appropriate to view the data with which we worked as transformed to some unknown degree as a result of the processes through which they have gone and to recognize that they are several steps removed from what was actually said.^{2/}

2/ Problems in analyzing transcripts from tape-recorded interviews are discussed in some detail in Thompson, Nawab Ali, and Casterline (1982).

FINDINGS

Most participants seemed able to understand the questions about the appropriate age for men and women to marry and were able to discuss it in terms that appeared to make sense to themselves and to the other participants. Occasionally a participant, at least 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 twenty being most commonly mentioned, and that a man should marry in his mid twenties, with twenty five being most commonly mentioned. Only a few participants said it was appropriate for women to marry under twenty or over twenty five. Virtually no one thought a man should marry before twenty and only a few recommended that a man should be as old as thirty 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 indicate as appropriate for others but not by very much. There were no obvious differences in ages of marriage thought appropriate between the men's and the women's groups or between the older or younger generation.

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 where 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)

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

Generally participants showed more concern about the minimum age at which marriage is 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 with 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 of marriage for men was linked to completion of military service, ordainment 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. Men at the age of 20 expect to be drafted into the army for approximately 2 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 this was a good reason to postpone marriage until military service was behind him.

" Nobody wants a man who hasn't been in the army already. This is because they 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 a Buddhist monk (Smith, 1979, p 18, 32; Henderson et al., 1971, p 72; Limanonda, 1983, p 18) A number of anthropologists, however, have noted that, in contrast to the rest of the country, in the Northern region less importance is placed on a young man's having been ordained prior to marriage (Moung, 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 and that this should be undertaken 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, for a man who marries before ordination it will be difficult 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 women, South)

The salience of ordination as a prerequisite for marriage for a man was reasonably high although less so than for military service. This is perhaps because military service is compulsory and involves a far lengthier commitment of time. While in Thailand there is an ideal 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 age twenty 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, being sufficiently mature, having developed a sense of responsibility, and having the prospects 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 lives 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 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 indicating maturity such as to be firm and stable, to be confident, to be able to think and act carefully and independently and to be able 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 in 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 the duration of years at school 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 twenty five. People nowadays have to have 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 are 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 rule at most. Single 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.

Although we did not attempt to systematically explore how accurately participants knew their date of and age at marriage, some information relevant to these issues spontaneously arose in the course of the group discussions. In addition, in all sessions the moderator asked at least a few participants how old they were at the time of marriage and occasionally probed to determine how certain they were about their responses. The impression we gained is that almost all married persons in rural Thailand have at least an approximate idea of their age at and date of marriage but that a substantial proportion cannot give exact information. In addition, the discussions brought out clearly that participants distinguish between marriage, as marked by some sort of ceremony, and the beginning of marital cohabitation.

The following discussion among older women in the Northeast illustrates how respondents provide an answer to a question on their age of marriage even when they are unsure of how old they were themselves.

- Moderator: How old were you when you got married?
- Participant 1 : Are you asking me at what age? (trying to recall)
- Participant 2 : You don't know, do you?
- Participant 1 : It might be 22 years.
- Participant 2 : You were not as old as 22, you were between 17 and 18.
- Participant 3 : Think, how old is your eldest child now. You have to subtract that age from your own age and you will know your own age at marriage. You were not more than 20 when you got married, maybe 17 or 18.
- Participant 1 : Yes, 18.

There is also evidence from our focus group session indicating that even when an age at marriage is stated, the participant may be thinking of age in a different way than intended. The following conversation in which the moderator attempts to clarify if the participant is stating her completed age or her "going on" age (as is sommon for some Thais to do) comes from the older women's group in the Central Region.

- Moderator: Can you remember how old you were when you married?
- Participant 1 : I was 19.
- Moderator : Were you already 19 (past your 19th birthday) or were you going to be 19 (18 going on 19)?
- Participant 1 : No, I wasn't going to be 19, I was half way between.
- Moderator : You mean you were already 19?
- Participant 2 : She probably means in the middle (between completed ages 18 and 19).
- Participant 1 : Yes, in the middle.
- Participant 2 : Then she means she was going to be 19.

In Thailand there are various ways for couples to start a conjugal union ranging from simply moving in together to having an elaborate ceremony and celebrations lasting several days. As Limanonda (1983) has stressed, research on marriage in Thailand needs to consider carefully how best to define a marital union. It is the onset of cohabitation that is of greatest sociological and demographic importance. In some situations, particularly following elopement, couples may have a ceremony only after returning to ask the bride's parents for forgiveness. In other cases no ceremony at all may take place (Riley 1972; Yoddumnern, 1981). In Thai, the usual, more formal word for marriage in general also has a more specific and literal connotation of a marriage ceremony. While we anticipated that the use of this word in our focus group sessions would prove no problem and be interpreted in its more general sense, a number of participants who had not apparently had a marriage ceremony obviously interpreted the term more literally than expected. The following quotes underscore the need for researchers to be aware of the variety of ways conjugal unions are initiated in Thailand and the different terms used.

" I didn't really get married. Back then we just turned out the lamp and did it." (Older woman, North)

" I did not get married, I ran away (eloped)." (Younger women, construction site Bangkok). -14-

" For those who are labourers, they will not get married but will run away together (elope)." (Older woman, Bangkok construction site)

" Back then you didn't get married, not like nowadays." (Old woman, North)

The accuracy of reporting on dates and ages related to marriage is important for the study of marriage. The different ways of initiating a conjugal union, the bearing of these ways on recalling age at or date of marriage, and whether some Thais distinguish dates of cohabitation from the date of a ceremony or ritual marking the marriage are all issues which could be profitably explored in future focus group sessions, especially if such sessions were explicitly directed to the study of marriage patterns in Thailand.

DISCUSSION

Age of marriage in Thailand, especially for women has traditionally been moderately late by Third World standards. The results of our focus group discussions on the appropriate age at marriage provide some understanding of the normative structure 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;

For men, the special circumstances of compulsory military services^{Evers,} 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 and thus link male nuptiality to two important institutions in Thai Society: the military and the Buddhist religion.

Marriage has no particular religious significance for Buddhists as indicated by the fact that the dominant Theravada Buddhist tradition includes no wedding ritual per se. The rituals that are practiced are Brahamistic (Riley, 1972). Nevertheless the importance of entering the Buddhist monkhood as part of attaining adulthood and as a way of honouring parents and the fact 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 antropological literature which also indicates that there is less importance placed on ordination in the North than elsewhere (Mougne, 1981, p 415). Moreover, in the northern region, rather than waiting until age 20 and then directly entering the monkhood, the more typical pattern is to first become a novice at ages around 10-15 and remain one until one is old enough to be ordained as a monk. Often, however, boys remain novices for only a few years or even less and thus do not continue on to become a monk (Sunthornphesat, 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 only a very small minority (Mougne, 1981, p 415; 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 of wives in a Bangkok slum reported their husbands had been ordained as monks (Chamrathirong, 1983). While opinions stressing the importance of ordination before marriage are an intregal part of the normative structure underlying marriage timing in much of Thailand, in all liklihood ordination is not an important determinant of the actual age at marriage since ordination typically occurs at an age several years younger than marriage and is usually for only three months or less.. The fact that the male age at marriage in the North is not unusually early compared to the rest of Thailand is consistent with this conclusion.

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The link between age of 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 relate 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 emotionally, 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 leads to the moderately late ages of 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 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, 1979, p 79-80; Foster, 1977, p 121-2; Mougne, 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 newly-wed couple and 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 factor in accounting for the general avoidance of and lack of support for very early marriage in Thailand. The fact that complete economic independence is not expected of newly married couples and that they will have some opportunity to accumulate resources

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during the period of initial coresidence 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. Larro (1978) has recently argued, based on observations as resident ethnographer in a central Thai village, 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 of marriage was contingent on readiness to start childbearing in terms of being able to assume the responsibility of childbearing is age of marriage apparently linked to fertility in the conscious thoughts of the participants.

The lack of mention of these concerns does not rule out definitively that they are present or that they are related 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 behaviour which they influence.

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We hope we have illustrated in the present paper how the focus groups approach can be a useful methodology for study certain aspects of marriage. Indeed, we believe the potential utility of this approach for this purpose is considerably greater than we are in a position to demonstrate with our own data because the primary focus of the sessions from which we have drawn our illustrative analysis was reproductive behaviour and not nuptial patterns. Had interest centered on nuptiality, a more detailed set of questions would have been included in the discussion guidelines and far richer data would no doubt have emerged. Nevertheless we feel even our very modest efforts to tap attitudes relating to age of marriage yielded interesting material.

There are also clearly limits to the focus group approach mentioned above and perhaps a brief discussion of some of these with several examples from our own research as illustrations is an appropriate way to end our paper. It was evident, for example from the discussions that focus group sessions were not a good mechanism for determining gradual changes in behaviour 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 and Debavalya, 1983). 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.

The considerable time, effort and funds required to conduct and analyze focus groups sessions limits the number that can be done for any particular study. Moreover, participants are purposively selected based on predetermined criteria. There is thus a real danger of generalizing inappropriately from the results. In our own research 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 and Debavalya, 1983). Thus we were surprized at how remarkably similar the attitudes toward age at marriage expressed by the Moslems were to those attitudes expressed by the Buddhist groups. Our Moslem groups may not be typical of the majority of Thai Moslems, however, since they are from an area where Moslems speak the predominant Southern Thai dialect rather than the Malay related dialect more typical of Moslems in the South. Partially as a result of this, the Moslems in our sample are probably more integrated into the broader Thai society than are many Moslems elsewhere in Thailand. We suspect we would have tapped quite different attitudes regarding marriage had we conducted our focus groups sessions in a Malay speaking Thai Moslem Village.

In brief, we are advocating the use of focus group sessions only as one of a battery of methodologies which can be brought to bear on the study of marriage and not as the sole or even main approach to be employed. The focus group approach is clearly not a substitute for either broad based sample surveys from which statistically sound generalizations can be made or more intensive ethnographic and antropological studies of individual communities which permit far greater indepth analysis of linkages between marriage behaviour and its socio-economic and cultural underpinnings. It is, however, an approach which can yield useful insights into attitudes and opinions affecting nuptial behaviour and, as illustrated in the present study, reveal the normative structure underlying the timing of entry into conjugal unions. Moreover, focus group sessions can be valuable for exploring the quality and meanings of responses obtained through more conventional close-ended and tightly structured interviews or as a way of probing ambiguous or perplexing findings from previous research based on other approaches. Finally, focus group research serve as an important source of hypotheses to be tested through more quantitative data generated by other methodologies.

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