



Exploring the Stable and Changing Beliefs of Middle Class Urban Hindu Couples in New Delhi about Opposite Sex Marriage

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Abstract

This study explores the beliefs of middle class urban Hindus (MCUHs) about the meaning and purpose of the institution of heterosexual marriage. The intention was to develop a foundation for assessment tools valid for India's population. Individual semistructured interviews were conducted in the homes of 32 MCUH in New Delhi who had been married for at least seven years. Qualitative methodology along with the constant comparison method was used to analyze the data. This sample conceived of marriage, both as a noun and a verb, differently than the theoretical models underlying Western assessment tools. To these MCUH, marriage is a sacred, inescapable, socially-sanctioned, developmental stage in which pragmatic collectivist rationales exclude romantic motives. Accordingly, the researchers found probes about marital "satisfaction" to be largely unfruitful. Some MCUH described minor changes driven by formal education, Western thinking, and technological development. Implications for family clinicians and future research are given.

Keywords Indian · Hindu · Emic · Cross-cultural · Comparative studies · Marriage · Marriage assessment · Qualitative

Introduction

This program of scholarship has been occasioned by the institutional differences between two global subcultures, namely, the Western World (countries in the Western Hemisphere) and Eastern World, those countries in Asia and the Middle East. It began with a naive study by the current authors (Chand et al., 2018) wherein the *Marital Satisfaction Inventory—Revised (MSI-R; Snyder, et al., 2004)*, a well-accepted international instrument, developed in the West, was extended to an urban population in India, an occupant of the East. The authors obtained incomprehensible data. Subsequent factor analytic exploration suggested that Western constructions of marriage—and assessment instruments based upon them, such the *MSI-R*—would not do; Western

conceptualizations of marriage did not fit India's national and subcultural populations. This could have been expected.

Although the following sweeping generalizations are very controversial to sociologists and subject to many caveats, they are helpful compilations. Western cultures are said to be characterized by the beliefs, values, emotions, and action tendencies shaped by a 2000-year-old Judeo-Christian legacy. For example, according to Doran, Althen, & Szmania (2006), there now is a pronounced individualist orientation wherein the personal growth, well-being, and interests of the individual are valued and privileged, and final decisions remain one's own. Western cultures are often characterized as offering more degrees of freedom in emotional expression, speech, and ways of doing things, and as more egalitarian than hierarchical.

In contrast, Eastern cultures have been shaped by at least 5000 years of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Shenism, Taoism and, more recently, Islam (cf. Guilmoto & Jones, 2016). They also are *collectivist*. That is, in contrast to Western cultures, Eastern cultures perceive individuals as interdependent with each other and place the interests of their groups above the individuals' interests. The common good of kinship groupings and community are primary considerations. Decisions are taken by the group. As a consequence, people in the Eastern World are pressed toward conformity and are

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relatively inflexible in their beliefs and ideologies. They are not encouraged to make decisions on their own. They neither easily compromise nor question their long practiced customs and traditions. They are more restrained in their overt behavior and emotions. Moreover, the elderly—transmitters of cultural norms, mores, and values—are considered to be the leaders of the home. So their children often refer their choices to them and obey what they say. Important decisions related to their children's futures—including arranging their marriages—normally are made by the elders. And, when parents grow old, their children are expected to take care of them.

All of this, of course, is exemplified in the respective cultures' constructions of the institution of "marriage." In Western culture countries, members of the middle-, working-, and poor strata emphasize personal choice in mate selection. Much freedom typically is allowed in this, and romantic love is considered an important factor. The focus increasingly is on the union of two individuals (so-called companionate marriage) and their families of procreation. Nuclear families are mobile and often geographically distant from their families of origin. As Cherlin (see comprehension discussion, 2004) has observed, there has been a steady weakening of Western marital norms and structures over the past century, for example, more working couple families, with less traditional divisions of labor, more childlessness, and more divorces.

In contrast, in Eastern cultures, arranged marriages—usually arranged by parents and other family elders—are a common phenomenon. Love (*agape*) is expected to come after the marriage takes place and, instead, the elders typically weigh education, social status, and family background. Marriage is seen and experienced as the uniting of two extended families and divorce is negatively sanctioned throughout the community, especially for women. Romantic love (*eros*) is seen as coming after marriage, and public displays of affection are often frowned upon. Within marriages, the roles of women are traditional and conservative, and the freedom of wives may be restricted by the members of the males' families. Emotions are expected to be expressed subtly and through rituals, and public displays of affection are often frowned upon.

The Republic of India, with the second largest population in the world, is situated in the Eastern hemisphere and, despite previous colonization by the British, manifests the signature attributes of the Eastern world culture. In fact, despite being an international business center and the home of Bollywood (cf., Banaji, 2006), its demographers stress that its affinity with the Eastern culture has steadily been increasing (Mahbubani, 2006). That being the case, in keeping with Eastern cultural beliefs, "marriage and being married" is an expected, unquestioned, and non-negotiable developmental stage: When one is an adult, one is married.

This mandate has transcended 50 centuries and has been at the very core of personal and family identity for all of those years (cf., Sastry, 1999).

Indian family science literature contains several extensive literature reviews of the state of marriage in contemporary India (e.g., Goel & Narang, 2012; Srinivasan & Lee, 2004; and Vishwakarma et al., 2019), including "marital satisfaction." However, the topics of these largely are descriptive, and the outcome variables based on the needs of Indian government administrators or, with regard to marital satisfaction, surveys lacking enough specificity to be helpful to relationship clinicians.

This poverty of Indian-family-life-relevant data has driven the first author's laboratory to pursue a systematic program of scholarship intended ultimately to result in an integrated and relatively comprehensive "dashboard" for those academics and clinicians concerned with both the explicit and implicit expectations of Indian married couples seeking interventions. The laboratory aspires to making available an at-a-glance interface that keeps married middle and upper strata individuals—those mostly likely to seek remedial interventions—and their professionals focused on those relationship factors most central to their overall work together. India's relationship clinicians and social scientists require home-grown tools that are deeply rooted in the norms and mores of her indigenous peoples. Accordingly, the following is a qualitative study designed as a first step in uncovering the conceptual infrastructure that constitutes the experience of "marriage" by residents of India; that is, the aspects of their marriages of concern to them.

Next, having been codified, these descriptions then can be the basis of formal and informal assessments relevant to the specific individuals, couples, and families receiving attention. Beyond highlighting dashboard topics for individual, couple, and family therapists, this home-grown program of study is expected to inform the creation of valid psychometric tools with which family scientists can systematically and consistently assess that which defines the institution of marriage within and across India's subcultures and quantify those variables. These data would then determine quantitative (validation) studies within and between groups.

Method

Because the vision of this program of scholarship has been to uncover useful data for the understanding of, and helpful interventions within a given subculture, the participants in this first (pilot) study were carefully—"purposively"—selected. They had to be. India's population is very diverse in terms of religion, caste, geographical area, age and, accordingly, subcultural constructions of her social institutions. Therefore the authors recognized that they would have to

focus on members of one specific subculture at a time. They made their decision based on regional convenience (urban population density and accessibility), socioeconomic class, and religion. As a consequence, this initial study took place in New Delhi (India's Capital), and was focused on Hindus (its majority religion), who were middle class (middle class urban Hindus, henceforth MCUH). The latter presumably possessed the education and the interest levels in their social institutions to provide desirable data and to constitute a subsequent market for these data.

Consequently, a local data collection agency was engaged to recruit middle class Hindu married individuals who resided in the Northern and Western parts of New Delhi. The determination of "middle class" was made on the basis of the family's place of residence and the total family income earned in a month (cf., Khairnar et al., 2017). The income of the participants did not exceed INR 50,000 (approximately USD 1190) per month for the entire household. Participants also were required to have been married for at least seven years. This decision, albeit arbitrary, was based on the need to assure that the participants had sufficient experience in their marriages from which to draw. Seventy-nine couples met the study requirements and agreed to participate. All of these eligible individuals were given dates and times for them to be interviewed in their homes. These interviews were by the first author.

Procedure

Participants

Only the data of 32 eligible participants from 16 marriages actually were used in this study. That was because there has been no mandate for a specific sample size for qualitative research. Its goal is to identify variables, as opposed to assessing amounts. Since "new information" is its solitary

goal, qualitative research requires only enough participation to ensure that the data is "saturated," that is, when continued exploration within a sample ceases to yield new information (Hennink et al., 2017). In this study the participants delivered no new data after the initial one-third of the sample had been interviewed. Even with sensitive probing, the remaining participants offered nothing new. Therefore the interview process was stopped in order that transcript analyses could begin.

The types of marriage and living arrangements of those who were interviewed are given in Table 1. Overall, the participants were traditional in having their marriages largely arranged and within-caste. But they also were "contemporary" in that the majority lived in their own homes as opposed to living with the husbands' families.

Interviews

The participants were interviewed individually by the first author after each person had completed a basic background schedule that inquired into his or her age, length of marriage, number of children, employment status, monthly income, and education level, and a self-assessment of religiosity. Upon completing that questionnaire, the person was given a choice of either talking to the researcher in English or in Hindi, their native language. All interviews were audio recorded. These recordings subsequently were transcribed verbatim and blindly by a clerical worker employed for that purpose. The interviews varied in length. They averaged about one and a half hours and were ended when the interviewer determined that no further information would be forthcoming. The interviews encompassed five research questions for each individual:

1. *What is the meaning of marriage?*

Table 1 The marital contexts of the 32 married middle class urban Hindu individuals (MCUH) who both completed self reports and whose interviews were used in the analyses

| Contextual factor | Number of couples |
|---|---|
| Currently living with husband's family | 4 (24%) |
| Currently living in a nuclear family | 13 (76%) |
| Arranged marriage | 15 (88%) |
| Love marriage | 2 (12%) |
| Within-caste marriage | 16 (94%) |
| Inter-caste marriage | 1 (6%) |
| Current age of married adults | Range 28–68; Mean age 43; Standard Deviation 10.5 |
| Number of years married | Range 7–46; Mean 21; Standard Deviation 10.1 |
| Religiosity of the household 1 = Secular; 10 = Very Religious | Range 1–10; Mean 7.41; Standard Deviation 2.1 |
| Number of couples with children in their home | 17 (100%); Age Range 1–4 years old; Mean Age 2.6 years; Standard Deviation 0.1 year |

2. *Has the meaning of marriage changed in the last decade or so?*
3. *If so, in what way, and what has contributed to this change?*
4. *What is the purpose of marriage?*
5. *What constitutes adjustment in marriage?*

These research questions were presented in an open-ended manner, and the interviewer did not interrupt the subjects' responses except where probes were used to obtain clarification, e.g., "Tell me more about that," "Can you give me an example?"

Additional Verbal Data

The interviewer made field notes in order to capture both prominent and subtle aspects, such as nonverbal gestures and behavior. After each interview she also completed a contact summary sheet. Both the field notes and the summary sheets were expected to aid in the recognition of emerging patterns in the interviews, development of early coding constructs, and generation of early hypotheses to be explored in subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

Ethnographic content analysis specifically employs a reflexive movement between concept development, research questions, participant determination, data collection, analysis using formal coding procedures, and interpretation (Altheide, 1987; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Corbin & Strauss, 2021).

The interview transcripts were divided into two separate stacks; those of the wives and those of the husbands. Four individuals worked independently to do the coding. Three of them were family research scientists, trained in qualitative methods in their formal doctoral classes in the USA, and were currently involved in qualitative inquiries of their own. The fourth was a middle class, widowed, Hindu woman who had been married for 26 years. She had been trained in qualitative methodology by the first author. Each coder explored every transcript line by line. Each employed the constant comparison method of analysis to uncover emerging categories of meaning and to tease out nuances (see Glazer & Strauss, 2017). As each analyst worked, each was impressed that certain things stood out as being important in how the participants thought about "marriage." These organizing concepts were labeled "Codes". Once the analyst had compiled all of the examples of any one such code, these occurrences were inspected to see, while clearly being members of a common conceptual entity, if there were shades of

differences between the exemplars of that group ("Categories"). Finally, the categories themselves were analyzed to uncover nuances within each of them ("Patterns"). As the reader can appreciate, the constant comparison method involved coding, recoding, categorization, and sorting of raw verbal data on a constant basis. At some point in this process "saturation" was reached. That is, all the major concepts had been uncovered and thoroughly analyzed, and there was nothing new to be found. There were clear interrelationships between the categories and their subsidiaries that, taken together, explained how the participants—in common as well as uniquely—were making sense of the institution called "marriage."

Establishing the Trustworthiness of the Coding

Reassurance that researchers have, in fact, recognized and documented what they believe they have, may be enhanced in three ways.

First, researchers must have recognized their own pre-existing explicit and implicit expectations about the subject matter. In the present case, the first author is a MCUH raised in New Delhi (but who obtained professional education and training in the United States). The second author is a Western professor. However, both researchers shared a primary epistemological assumption: *Human attitudes* (defined as constellations of beliefs, attached affects, and action tendencies) are *the unique products of the total embedded environments in which individual psyches are situated* (cf., ecosystem theories such as Bubolz' and Sontag's, 1993, and Lerner's, 2001). Therefore, with regard to their study, they assumed that MCUH view marriage differently from Westerners because the MCUH's views of marriage would be a product of their own unique socio-cultural environments.

Second, qualitative researchers usually are advised to employ multiple coders who operate independently (the merit of this is questioned by Keene, 2020). In the present case, in addition to the first author, three other individuals—otherwise uninvolved in this study—independently analyzed and interpreted the transcripts.

Finally, trustworthiness in qualitative research can be enhanced if the data are triangulated (Creswell, 2016). That is, the data has been collected from at least three different sources and found to be in agreement. The data from the current study were triangulated by comparing the interview transcripts with the researcher's interview observation notes and with her field journal (a detailed account of her experience on each interview site). Further triangulation was provided by looking at the goals, methods, and findings of the present study compared to those from an earlier study of MCUH (Chand et al., 2018).

Findings

There was a relatively high level of consensus amongst the members of the coding team. There was only one instance of disagreement pertaining to the themes and codes. Under the code (below) “Learning Process,” the analysts mutually decided that one initial pattern—“modeling by others” or “social referencing”—would be separated into two, based on the source: “community or societal modeling” and “observing parents and extended kin.”

The coding frame emerging from their qualitative analysis of the interviews has been assembled as a chart, Table 2, to assist with the narrative discussion of the findings and to present these findings in a comprehensible

manner. Each “Code” corresponds to a research question. Within each code are “Categories,” and within each category are “Patterns”. The examples that follow are meant to convey the body of the transcript data. A more elaborate presentation is available at Chand, 2009.

Code: What Marriage Means to MCUHs (Middle Category Urban Hindus)

Category: Marriage is an End in Itself

“Marriage” generally was not described as a choice or even as a behavior. It was an unquestioned state of being of adults; a state of being married. One wife stated “marriage

Table 2 The coding frame emerging from the qualitative analysis of interviews with 32 middle class urban Hindus (MCUH) about “marriage”

| Code | Category | Pattern |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| What marriage means to MCUH | Marriage is an end in itself | Religious institution Social institution Universal developmental milestone Mandatory arrangement |
| | Marriage is a means to an end | Cultural respect and approval Fulfilling parents’ expectations and demands Bond and <i>Bandham</i> Union of two families Continuation of the cycle of life Interpersonal relationship Personal fulfillment Security Financial improvement |
| Desirable elements of a MCUH marriage | Attributes of the partner | Physical characteristics Educational status Financial attractiveness Management of the extended family Female obedience Realistic expectations Conflict resolution skills Prosocial personality traits |
| | | Supportive in-laws and extended family |
| Learning process | Attributes of the extended family | Ancient books Community or society modeling Observing parents and extended kin |
| | Ecosystem environments | Self; own ideas |
| Contemporary changes in MCUH marriage | Cultural deviation | Increased autonomy of choice Romantic love as a threshold state for marriage Impermanency Shift in views of adult women |
| | Sources of change | Formal education Media Technology |

is marriage—*Dam-Pati*—it has to be done.” (Hindi has no direct term for marriage. “*Dam-pati* is an image of an adult man and woman together.) The act of marrying someone or the wedding ceremony is called Vivaah or Shaadi. A husband stated: “Well it is a natural thing... for all people.” Another husband said: “We are complete with each other... and we give rise to a new generation with the completeness.” As the participants elaborated on this, four primary Patterns emerged: Marriage was a religious institution, a social institution, a universal development milestone, and a mandatory arrangement.

Pattern: Marriage is a Religious Institution

One wife said: “(Marriage is) between not only a man and a woman but between the two families that is decreed by God.” Another explained “God chooses your partner and (in doing God’s will) you will have a good life. It is Karma.” One of the husbands was more specific:

It is a unbreakable sacrament... a permanent relationship arranged by the families, and it is necessary for having children and fulfilling certain rites and rituals... and only after entering into this stage can you make a family and hope to enter heaven after you die.

Pattern: Marriage is a Social Institution

In India, the family unit fulfills many basic social functions for the individual members such as socialization, education, religious training, and personal needs (Das & Bardis, 1978). When describing marriage as a social institution, there were six sub-patterns, namely, relational values learned about and experienced in the marital relationship. These relational values were commitment, faithfulness (sexual fidelity), respect, trust, and love. The participants talked about these relational values when they were asked questions about the requirements for a lasting marriage. The specific questions posed to them were, “What is required of men and women in general to maintain their marriage?” and “What would be (is) required of you personally to maintain your marriage?”.

Commitment The response of one of the female participants is a solid example of this sub-pattern.

You should stay with your husband for the rest of your life, because it is not about our life alone anymore. The person who we have married, it is about their life too ... so if we are married to one person, then we should try and stay together ... you are with someone in the happy times (and) in difficult times. So this is what Ramayana teaches us ... if it (a habit in your partner that you don’t appreciate) improves then it is great and, even if it does not improve I would not leave him...

Once I am married then I will spend the rest of my life with my husband.”

Sexual Fidelity One husband opined, “In order to maintain a marriage, a man should pay attention to his work and to his family. A man should also have integrity and should be (sexually) faithful to his life partner.” A wife observed “A husband must understand the feelings and emotions of his wife (and not) seek pleasure from another woman... He should be careful with his money and should keep it only for his family’s expenses.”

Respect Both the males and females spoke of the importance of respect for one another in a positive marriage. A good example of what is meant by respect came from one of the husbands.

The husband and wife do not let the old thoughts about gender and inequality seep into your thinking. A man should not think that he is the man and so he is higher than her (his wife) and that he has a right over her. This is wrong. They should look at each other as friends and should give each other the position of equality ... It is essential to remove your *ahankar* (egotism, arrogance, and thinking of self) and to give attention to your life partner.

A husband admonished husbands to “...be mindful of the fact that his wife is born and raised in another family, and that she has come to join his family from another home, so she too is worthy of his respect and consideration.” In addition, the influence of marital respect was also extended to the children in a home. As a female participant put it, “It affects the lives of the children when we (only) think about ourselves or when we think that our husband is not worthy of our respect and that we should talk to him in any way we please.”

Trust The participants spoke about the importance of trust to the viability of any marriage, e.g., “Love in a relationship will (vary) but ... if they keep doubting one another then they cannot stay together.” Descriptions of trust could be specific: Partners were trusted to fulfill their gender role expectations, e.g., the wife “will take care of the children, and she will look after the home.”

Love When the participants spoke of “love,” it was as an integral and very necessary, emotional part of marriage; something that married couples expected.

When you love somebody with your whole heart, you accept him with all his weaknesses and all his strengths. So things do not bother you because you know him thoroughly and you know that maybe this is

the time maybe he is feeling low but I know what his true personality is. He knows what my true personality is. At the end of the day we know that and also that we are required for each other. We are the complete partners for each other and no one can replace us.

Love was described as “the only things we want from marriage” and as a redeeming feature. “So if my husband and I have a disagreement then because we have love between us we make-up also. So this is normal.” Love also can include the children; they love their children and are loved in return.

Pattern: Universal Developmental Milestone

The participants indicated that, for them, Hindus believe that life is meant to be lived in stages and marriage (*grihasta asrama*) is one of them. To them, marriage marks the passage into adulthood for both girls and boys. As one woman put it, “Marriage was the next step for me as an adult. And this is the way that the elders have been following.”

Another observed the normative aspect of this stage:

... and it was time for me to get married also... In India, because you grow up and earn, people say you should get married now ... After a certain age the parents will compel to get married ... They will not force you, but they will tell you that this is an ideal time to get married.

Pattern: Mandatory Arrangement

Getting married “... is an arrangement that has to be done... It is a given.” This is because the MCUH culture has a general way of doing things what we call *parampara* or traditions (*riti rivaaz*.)” For a male, his “life story starts after he gets married.”

Category: Marriage is a Means to an End

The participants spoke of how getting married was instrumental to acquiring socially desirable outcomes.

Pattern: Cultural Respect and Approval

The participants indicated that family honor in their community was vital and a family acquired and maintained it by following the rules set by their society. These milestone include children being married by a certain age, the married children starting their own families after they have been married for a certain number of years, and so on. A family lost face when any of the social milestones have been delayed. The following statements first illustrate the sociocultural demand for

marriage and then how noncompliant individuals as well as their families are sanctioned.

When we get married then we get respect from the society and our environment. So we should do the things that bring more respect to us and our families from our environment ... A person who follows the rules and the norms of a society, that person can live with their head held up high with pride.

God and history are a witness to this. Till a person is able to make a home there is no prosperity for this person. If a person is unable to make a home he is called all sorts of names. And his or her family will get insulted by and within the society and community.

The parents cannot hold their head up high because their child is unmarried and (this means that) they (the parents) have not been mindful of their responsibilities. ... So because of this fear, the people do what is determined by the elders of the family.

Pattern: Fulfilling Parents’ Expectations and Demands

The participants’ comments often indicated that their marriages, or the timing of them, were not a matter of personal choice. The decisions were made by their parents and the young adults had an obligation to obey. The following excerpts, one by a daughter and one by a son, exemplify this pattern.

Daughter: My parents decided to get me married and so I got married. I did not think about what will happen after I get married or what life will be like, I just got married because my parents had arranged it for me. Son: I personally do not feel ready for marriage but my father told me to get married ... This was my responsibility and I fulfilled it by obeying my father.

A parental decision for a child to marry can be for very practical reasons. One son said “My parents had trouble doing all the household chores. So they told me that they wanted to get a daughter-in-law.” Another male said, “They told me there was a lot of (paid) work (for married women) to be had in the village, so I said yes to my father’s wishes.”

Pattern: Bond and Bandhan

The participants spoke of marriage being both a social and spiritual bond. For one wife that meant the presence of “social and familial responsibilities needing to be fulfilled along with a life partner.” Some described this bond as a *bandhan*, a spiritual tying together of people, e.g., “tying the marital knot” much in the same spiritual sense as a Hindu sister ritually ties a protective thread around her brother’s wrist (*Raksha Bandhan*). A husband who described marriage as a “societal bond” complained that it could also include elements of *bondage* (authors: negative, in the Western

sense). A popular point of humor amongst people who have been married for a while is that “marriage is like a dessert: The people who eat it, and those who don’t, both regret it.”

Pattern: Union of Two Families

The MCUH described marriage as a bond/*bandhan* existing, not just between the betrothed, but also within and between the families in which they are situated.

Marriage means (more than) the coming together of two people. It means that two families become one ... When the girl and boy come together in a union, it automatically means that their families are there too and that they come together too. (The two families bring) ... different personalities, different thought processes, different weaknesses, and different strengths. It is the combination of two different cultures coming together.

Pattern: Continuation of the Cycle of Life

These MCUH believe that the purpose of marriage is to procreate. When children are born out of wedlock, the families are disgraced (and the children sent to orphanages). Therefore marriage is essentially synonymous with having children. At this point, the men and women diverged about what they expected from begetting children. The wives generally spoke of creating and enjoying family life. “So you are able to enjoy with them and have a family.” In contrast males focused on having sons because to do so is a paramount obligation to their families of origin. “Every man wants this, like my father did and my grandfather ... that he should have a son who would continue the family tradition and the family name... and the bloodline grows and continues.” The MCUH males indicated that sons also are needed to participate in family rituals. For example, the eldest son is expected to ignite his parents’ funeral pyre, along with the pyre of any unmarried female sibling. And, if he is the oldest male relative of a family that has no sons, then he is to ignite that father’s funeral pyre too.

Pattern: Interpersonal Relationship

The participants named many aspects of interpersonal relatedness, namely, companionship, intimacy, affection, and sexuality.

Companionship Only the male participants spoke of the need for company at home. Marriage provides that companionship:

A man is alone and lonely before he gets married....
With marriage men get company, and a comfortable

life. You come back from your office and you get a good environment in the home ... Otherwise all alone we will not like doing these things (such as coming back to an empty home, going to eat outside, or visiting places). And with great company (of the spouse) we feel happy.

Philosophically, a partner’s company does not negate but does ease some of the stresses contributed by life outside the family.

This is life ... Definitely (the ups and downs) will be there ... So companionship should save you from all these things... It becomes very difficult for me when my wife and children go away for a few days. I feel all alone at that time.

Intimacy The MCUH said that intimacy, defined as “sharing your emotions and your thoughts with your partner,” was an important part of a marital relationship. More explicitly, “We just merge our concepts, merge our feelings, merge our internal things, and that is called marriage.” Intimacy can be total transparency to each other, e.g., “You share each and every aspect of your life... and your joys and sorrows ... like monetary, physical, mental, and religious aspects. You get a partner to share your life with.” A male confided:

It (marriage) is sharing your life with your spouse. Sharing. And she can share her life with me. She talks to me and I talk to her and slowly we live our life and the time passes on... After a girl gets married, then she is able to share all the things that are inside of her with him. She is able to share all the goodness and all the things that are not so nice about her with her life partner. So the things she is not able to share with her parents, she can share with her husband.

Affection and Sexuality Male participants brought up the topic of sex in marriage. They experienced their sex drives as both desirable and inescapable. And marriage was the only legitimate way of satisfying their needs.

The foremost reason (to get married) is for physical needs of a person. That is very important in a marriage ... when one is young... only sex comes to your mind. So this is the first reason I got married ... physical satisfaction, or getting satisfied in bed... So if (a man) does not get married, then he will probably stay disturbed or then he will go here and there and will try and release the tension that he feels inside of him.

Pattern: Personal Fulfillment

Getting married in order to meet (nonsexual) personal needs was brought up consistently in the conversations.

For women, these needs included wanting love, to be cared for, and gaining *some* personal freedom and mobility. The wives spoke of existential fulfillment afforded by a caregiver role—“...supportive, caring, there is a shift toward friendship”—as opposed to (just) “running a house.”

Pattern: Security

Here the participants spoke of marriage bringing an existential peace, to wit, emotional security and a feeling of being *santusht* (at peace or satisfied). For example, one wife happily stated: “Marriage is a beautiful concept. It is a concept designed to protect a man and a woman from the outside world.” A husband said, “I got a child, a good wife, and a good peaceful life ... people want peace from marriage.” A wife said: “By (having) peace in the home, things (become) stable. The home is clean and... (the husband and wife) get peace and satisfaction in their hearts.”

The participants also indicated that marriage was a source of relational security. For example, a husband observed, “Today the husband and the wife... want to establish a relationship of friendship, and they support each other.” Another husband said: “The two people should be able to understand one another. They should listen to each other and they should obey each other. And they should support each other.”

The women also described a physical safety component: “Yes, it (getting married) is safer for her (the girl) because she is protected by the husband.” In fact, MCUH believe that marriage is the only way in which “decent” adult women can safely roam around their neighborhoods and community. They must be escorted by their husbands. Otherwise “people will say nasty things to her, or touch her.” But, as a married woman said, “Now I can get all dressed up, and go roaming around with my husband... This is what I thought marriage was going to bring for me... This is what I saw in the movies.”

Marriage also provides late-life security. It is a “support” (*sahara*). “If a person does not have a family with children, where will he or she get support from in their old age?”

Pattern: Financial Improvement

Two distinct views constituted this pattern. One reflected the traditional Indian view that the husband is the primary financial provider for *his* family. A good example of the traditional MCUH view, one by a male and its complement by traditional women:

I mean as a husband I have to take the responsibility, as a father again I have to take the responsibility ... from the financial perspective I have to take care of the responsibilities ... I have to take care of the growth and prosperity of my family and give them every sort of

things, whatever as a father and as a husband. Means I have to give them protection.

A girl cannot stay financially dependent on her parents all her life and (therefore she) ... goes to her husband’s house and allows him take care of her and the family. When the husband will earn money and will give it to me and then I will be able to run the house... Everybody (who is female) has a wish that they should get married into a family that is well to do... Even though I am not very well educated, I wanted my partner to be educated and to have a good job so that I would be able to run my house well.

A second perspective was revealed by husbands and wives talking about *both* parties contributing to the financial state of *their* family. A husband summed it up: “What I feel in my case I got a very good support from my wife. She is also working. So I got a very good support from her both emotionally and financially.” One man said that, for him, dual incomes were a mixed blessing. “Since living expenses increase a lot (after marriage)... it did not matter what she looked like. The only thing that was important to me was that she should be employed.” But this man also shared that he was shamed by his birth family. In their view, if he considered himself to be a man, then he should have the confidence that he would be able to look after his wife and their family.

Code: Desirable Elements of a MCUH Marriage

One of the questions posed to the participants was “What were your hopes and wishes when you got married?” The word “expectations” was not used. In a pilot interview, “expectations” was discovered to connote “dowry” or “bride price”. Moreover, the interviewed often denied that they had any “expectations” because having expectations sets one up for disappointment. For them, the Hindu religious teachings of the *Dharmasastra*, *Vedas*, and the *Gita* talk about conquering one’s expectations and living a life without any sense for expectations to experience a pure and deep joy (Gatwood, 1985).

Therefore, in the formal study two questions were asked instead: “What were your hopes and wishes when you got married?” and “Did you have any desires when you got married as far as your partner and your in-law family were concerned?” Responses to the questions inquiring into the maintenance of marriage and keeping it intact were also included here in order to offer a clearer picture of the characteristics and components of a Hindu middle class marriage. There

were two primary Categories that emerged from this Code: Attributes of partner; and Attributes of extended family.

Category: Attributes of the partner

This Category, encompassed eight patterns: Physical characteristics, Educational status, Financial attractiveness, Management of extended family, Female obedience, Realistic expectations, Conflict resolution skills, and Prosocial personality traits.

Pattern: Physical Characteristics

Only some participants mentioned physical attributes or attractiveness as a desirable characteristic in their partner. This may reflect the Indian idea that a person's physical appearance is not what makes them attractive (cf., Carter, 1982). According to the participants who did comment on desirable attributes in a partner, men were to be "handsome," "smart," and "rich". Women should be "beautiful" and "fair". In addition, the partners should match each other in physical attractiveness. Why? "People talk behind their backs. They say, well his parents really did not think about this, and even the girl's parents did not think about this."

Pattern: Educational Status

The participants indicated the value of highly educated husbands, but also the couple being matched in education achievement. For example, a woman said:

An educated person should have an educated partner. There has to be a match here. And the children should not feel that (their parents) do not know how to talk to or conduct themselves in front of their friends. Or (the bride) may get embarrassed in front of her friends if her husband does not talk well or is not a good match for her.

Another woman said, "The girl should be good and nice and she should also be educated. And this is really a gift from God." A husband indicated that "an educated girl as a wife ensures that your children will be educated and qualified too."

Pattern: Financial Attractiveness

Educational attractiveness for the male partners has long been held to go hand in hand with their financial attractiveness (e.g., Kumar & Rohatgi, 1989) because their educational status usually is parallel to their earning potential, thus placing them in the position to be good providers for their families. For example, a MCUH wife spoke of the importance of her husband's education. "I am not very well

educated, but I wanted my partner to be educated and to have a good job so that I would be able to run my house well."

Pattern: Management of Extended Family

According to the MCUH the wife joins her husband's home and family upon marriage It is important that she accept that this new family is her "true family."

A husband summed up what the sample considered desirable.

A good wife... understands (her husband's) nature. (She is) able to take care of the household duties and... she should respect my parents. And she should be able to adjust to my home and my family well. It should not be that she wants to go to her parents' house all the time.

Pattern: Female Obedience

Wives obey their husbands. This assumption was present in the interviews of both the men and the women; It was taken for granted. For example, a husband stated:

My wife has a master's degree and she used to work outside the home before we got married. I told her very respectfully that she was not going to work after we got married. I told her I need a mother for my children so she cannot go and do work outside the home. There was no question about that happening, and she obeyed my wish.

Husbands believed that they must be respectful and friendly towards their wives. Not one of them thought of themselves as "imposing their will" on their spouse in any way. (See "respect" above. Obedience does not connote lower stature.) Some husbands indicated that they considered the adjustments that the wife had to make in the husband's home were "effortless." Another said that marriage required "a wife who was good and adjusting." In agreement, some wives expressed pride in their skill and ability to adjust to their husband and their in-laws because, as one wife observed, "This is the mature way of handling things." Wives who did not manifest this personality trait were seen, by both husbands and wives, as problematic.

Pattern: Realistic Expectations

In possible contrast to the above, another desirable marital attribute was said to be a partner who "does not expect (me) to follow him all the time or unrealistically expect that I will think (exactly) like him and do all that he wants me to do or asks me to do all the time." "Your expectations should be

appropriate to the house that you have been married into” (in terms of finances and the personality of one’s partner).

Pattern: Conflict Resolution Skills

The sample also underscored the value of conflict resolution skills: Waiting until the accusing party calms down, actively listening to each other without interruption and counter-attacking, actually hearing each other, using loving words, following each other’s instructions, focussing on understanding each other, and making compromises.

Pattern: Prosocial Personality Skills

The participants also identified what they considered desirable prosocial personality traits in a mate: Tolerance, understanding, forgiveness, honesty, and respect.

Category: Attributes of Extended Family

Pattern: Supportive In-laws and Extended Family

It is desirable to have in-laws who encourage the marital house to be a positive environment:

So I used to think that I should get a family where (the in-laws) would be happy people... and (the new wife) should get the respect from all the members... The in-laws should not be nit-picking people who are always pointing things out to you on a constant basis.... I will have no interference from anybody (in my in-law family) to run my own house... The in-laws should keep (treat) their daughters-in-law just like they would (treat) keep their (birth) daughters in their home.

Code: Learning Process

Historically, Hindus in India have a tradition through which cultural information, knowledge, and behaviors are passed on to others or to the next generation either orally (Gatwood, 1985; Khatri, 1983) or by social modeling within a given environment (e.g., Sandhya, 2009). Therefore, the MCUH participants were asked, “Where did you learn your beliefs from?” A follow-up question posed to them was “Who taught you your beliefs?” In their responses they all indicated that their family or the community that they lived in were their sources of learning. As a result, one main category of how they came to believe what they believed about marriage emerged.

Category: Ecosystem Environments

Within this category, four time-relative transacting environments (cf., Lerner, 2001) were uncovered. The patterns were: Ancient books, family, community and societal modeling, and their own ideas.

Pattern: Ancient Books

Some respondents indicated that they had read and were impressed by ancient religious books, namely, the *Manusastra*, *Dharmasastras*, *Mahabharata*, *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Puranas*, and *Ramayana*. They shared that most of their behavior and the practice of rituals were influenced by these texts.

Pattern: Social Modeling

Participants also were influenced by the templates provided by their families and community. The following excerpts exemplify this Category.

I am just following the tradition that has been followed before me (in my house) ... I saw what my parents did and how they lived. So this is where I learned ...to respect other people... and to respect women also and to honor their wishes and desires... Whatever (my parents) did, we watched, and it influenced us, and our thinking. The same traditions we have brought into our own lives as well... I saw how my parents lived together as husband and wife, and learned things from them. My parents have a wonderful understanding between them. I have never seen them argue or fight with each other. I have always seen a lot of love between them.

Pattern: Self-Determination

In contrast to the above, some participants stated that their beliefs about marriage were the product of their own thinking and personal value systems. For example, “No one taught me these views and opinions. I have learnt these from my own wishes and my *hunar* (talent, skill, knowledge), and from the point of view of my soul.”

Code: Contemporary Changes in MCUH Marriage

Coding in this section captured the participants' view that the institution of marriage was in a state of change, and the causes for this.

Category: Cultural Deviation

Participants talked about how, in their opinion, "things" currently were much different than they were even a few years ago: "These days girls are doing love marriages"; "These days boys just don't listen, they want to study and get a good job, a house, a car, before they think about marriage." The patterns under this heading are many and detailed, and the reader is advised to consult the original source (Chand, 2009). Underlying these patterns was a refrain: The Hindu culture "was not able to retain its uniqueness" because it and the ecosystem within which it is embedded are in substantial flux.

Category: Sources of Change

The participants suggested that there were three basic change dynamics within their ecosystem: Increases in formal education, media influence, and the prevalence of modern technology. These three producers of change were typically described as bringing about "Westernization in norms and a softening of mores."

Participants observed that young adults—especially MCUH women—were tempted to no longer adhere strictly to traditional ways. Instead they were encouraged to exercise more autonomy of choice and to question the merit of cultural permanency. Increased autonomy of choice included romantic love as a threshold state for marriage, with the bride and groom having more say in the match (most strongly termed "self selection," or softened as "in consultation with parents," and "in collaboration with parents)."

One rationale implicated the socioeconomic empowerment of women. Examples of these:

In earlier days girls were very dependent and they were not educated. But today they are moving ahead with education and job skills to back them up. They want to choose their own life partner these days... The girls are making fewer compromises in their marriage these days...

Other statements suggested that marriage was weakening as a cultural institution.

There is more divorce and women think they can raise their children on their own.

Once upon a time people used to think of marriage as a sacred and pure relationship. But these days people think of it in terms of bondage and they feel tied down forcefully (so they look for ways of getting out of it)... Now the importance placed on marriage has reduced quite a lot. These days there is the 'living together' system. They stay with each other as a married couple without getting married. So you will stay with this person for about a year, and then there is no guarantee of anything, and then you change your partners and move in with someone else for another duration of time.

Field Notes

With the exception of one husband, all of the other participants (male and female) spoke authoritatively and showed gravitas and confidence. Their vocabularies indicated high verbal intellect and their collective cultural references demonstrated both cultural literacy and awareness of contemporary community, national, and international issues.

In this sample, the interviewer observed that marriage between an adult male and female appeared to be an unquestioned state of being. She often observed confused expressions when she probed into motivation for marriage, be it in general or specifically to the couple. Moreover, although the children in these households typically wore "Western" shirts and shorts, their mothers often wore the traditional *saree* and all of the indicators of a married woman: The red dot (*bindi*) on the forehead, red powder (*sindoor*) in the parting of the hair, the *mangalsutra* (marriage necklace) around the neck, glass bangles, toe rings on both feet, and a pierced nose. In contrast, in other homes the wives wore conservative-but-chic business suits and dresses, with contemporary makeup and dressy pumps.

Discussion

The present study is intended to be a credible and trustworthy foundation on which clinicians and family scientists can build assessment tools and conceive future research. Clearly, using an instrument that has been normed or standardized on one culture to gather data within another culture is inappropriate since the constructs and the meanings assigned to the words and constructs may be completely different (cf., Chand et al., 2018). For example, in the present study, marriage is considered an inescapable state of adult being (a noun) whereas Westerners consider it a verb and voluntary. Moreover, even though the word "love" was often used by the MCUH sample, it clearly did not connote romantic love. This sample's descriptions

of love in marriage were neither passionate nor sexual. Love was used as a noun more than a verb. Love was an expected byproduct of marriage and not its precursor. Love was an *expected state of trust* in each other's acceptance, protection, selflessness, and commitment—all parts of the ongoing bond that is marriage.

This MCUH sample sometimes mentioned the so-called Westernization of love and marriage (cf., Banaji, 2006; Chakraborty, 2015; Kelkar et al., 2002; Radhakrishnan, 2009; Sandhya, 2009; Tara & Ilavarasan, 2011). Nevertheless, both transcripts and field notes revealed that—with the exception of living in the homes of the husbands' parents—traditional beliefs and practices were very noticeable in the participants' own marriages. Granted, the wives' sample included descriptions of some shifts in their power and influence within their marriages as well as a softening of gender roles. But, as the reader has observed, the husbands' sample largely did not mirror this. In fact, India's social scientists have empirically found little evidence of cultural Westernization (cf., Rajadhyaksha & Smita, 2004). Instead they have found that fascination with romantic love is an ephemeral phase of pre-adult life (Gala & Kapadia, 2014) and that, in emerging adulthood, the traditional institution of marriage replaces it. The expectations and roles of India's emerging adults—including marriage—continue to be determined by three fundamental influences: traditionalism, conservatism, and religiosity (Bejanyan et al., 2014; Fuller & Narasimhan, 2008; Gala & Kapadia, 2014; Pothan, 1989; Sastry, 1999; Srivastava, 2013).

In contrast to Western notions about marriage, the MCUH sample considered marriage to be both a sacred and/or an obligatory *state of being*. To them marriage was a universal developmental stage that has been conceived and enforced by Hindu Indian culture. The researchers also found probes about marital "satisfaction" to be largely unfruitful. This was predictable. Chand and her associates' work (2018) stumbled upon this fact, amongst others, and Indian social scientists (e.g., Srivastava, 2013) have observed it. Couples and families face strong societal and moral pressures to stay intact. Adjustment and tolerance are emphasized. And the good of the extended family is more important than the rights or needs of the individuals (Sonpar, 2005).

Nevertheless, sources of dissatisfaction could be deduced from what the men and women said that they expected from being married. Presumably, a marital contentment survey—as part of an intake interview, or in the form of a written survey—suitable for *this specific* MCUH sample would inquire into the extent to which the married individuals are:

- Experiencing their partners as exhibiting certain desirable personality characteristics (e.g., positive temperament, comparable needs for and ways of companionship, acceptance of gender roles, and social acumen).
- Experiencing their partners as exhibiting adequate conflict resolution and problem-solving skills.
- Experiencing themselves as profoundly loyal, faithful, and committed to one another and their children.
- Experiencing fulfillment of each partner's needs and expectations within the marital dyad: For example, her experience of financial and physical security, and sense of freedom in their home and community; him feeling that his desires for companionship and sexual and non-sexual affection are being met; both of them satisfied with their division of authority and labor within their family.
- Experiencing birth and in-law family facilitation of his/her own desires within the marital home.
- Experiencing themselves as having agreeably adjusted to the extended family (e.g., managing their relationships within it as well as expectations of the birth and in-law families).
- Feeling successful in jointly creating and maintaining a marital "home" and "family."
- Experiencing themselves as being respected within their extended family and in their larger sociocultural community.

If the above were to be made into written surveys, two distinct questions could be explored depending on the goals of the clinician or researcher. Participants could indicate the extent to which he, she, or they actually considered each of the above categories *important* to their marriage. And/or he, she, or they could be asked to indicate its *presence* in their relationship. In either case, a Likert format is envisioned (e.g., a scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Very much").

With either question, differences within a couple, or two individuals considering marriage, would be useful in providing relationship services to them. If employed by family researchers who are exploring diverse subcultures, responses to the first question ("How important is this to your marriage") would be an important advance in the literature. One can envision structural equation modeling (Klein, 2016) being employed with the data from each subculture to ascertain the extent to which the conceptualizations of the researchers' models are valid within and between each distinct subculture.

Limitations

Although some professionals may be tempted to use these findings and the conclusions to follow "as is," the authors volunteer these caveats: Generalizing from the present sample is not only limited by its presumed subculture (MCUH) but also by the fact that it was drawn from only two regions in the capital city of New Delhi, India. The beliefs about the

meaning of marriage of other MCUH couples residing in New Delhi or in other geographic regions may differ from the present sample. Moreover, just as India is a pluralistic sub-continent, Hinduism is not a monolithic religion and the sample was not separated according to the form or kind of Hinduism that they followed, or the extent to which they practiced it. In addition, only MCUH couples who had intact marriages were interviewed. Hindu couples who were separated or divorced may have had different beliefs about the meaning of marriage. And so on. What the authors envision is the development of an initial assessment tool which then can be used, and modified when necessary, to explore the opposite sex marriages of pluralistic India. This challenge and invitation is extended below.

With regard to future research, committed relationships between same-sex individuals, including symbolic marriages, have not been prohibited by Indian law since 2018. Clearly the findings of the present investigation cannot be extended to them, although its qualitative approach should prove productive.

Implications for Family Therapists and Researchers

Although the interviews of husbands and wives were separated before analysis, there were only two pronounced gender differences between them: Husbands wanted their wives to be their “best friend.” Not one wife said this. Instead they spoke of personal security outside of their places of residence. Men also emphasized sexual behavior in marriage as a pleasurable end in itself. Wives envisioned it as the means to an end, namely, provision of children and thereby continuity of traditional family life. Based on the present study, those who wish to understand and assess diverse opposite sex Indian marriages should tentatively assume the following beliefs are in place, at least for urban Hindu populations:

- Despite the claims of Western, and some Indian, popular media, MCUH families in fact are multi-generational, patriarchal, non-nuclear, and guided by strongly accepted and sanctioned familial gender roles.
- The pre-existing extended families are very much involved in the choice of new marital partners; both the process of mate selection, and the final decision.
- Every young adult must get married to be able to live their life in an appropriate and righteous manner as has been taught and modeled by previous generations. (For example, certain religious rites and rituals have to be performed by a married couple only. If a person is not married, they get to be an observer, but they cannot perform the rituals).
- The eldest male in the family is the family’s leader for the family. He sets the rules for the family to follow and

he and his wife are expected to be exemplars for the rest of the family.

- “Being married” is a state of being, as opposed to “getting married” (a choice). Being married is an unquestioned developmental stage and a permanent bond.
- Since “not being married” is considered an alien state of being, maintaining the longevity of the relationship is not perceived as a challenge.
- Being married is the fusion of two families. The wife becomes a member of the husband’s family, and accepts its multigenerational hierarchy.
- Being married presupposes a family with children. Its sociocultural function is propagation of a family line. (In Hindu marital/family law, this is grounds for a divorce.)
- “Love” in a marriage is characterized by duties, mutual and compatible concerns, understanding, and caregiving. It is not a passionate or romantic type of love.
- Members of the husband’s extended family and relationships with them are a very crucial part of any marital relationship.
- Family name and status in the community, and saving face with family and friends, are two important and powerful processes that dictate family behavior and attitudes.
- Marriage provides adult Hindu women increased degrees of behavioral freedom as well as financial security.

India’s purveyors of marital and family therapy interventions will serve this population better by keeping these core beliefs in mind—perhaps making them part of an intervention dashboard. Being consistently reminded by that dashboard of what is meaningful to their clients, professionals can use that insight to facilitate therapeutic alliances, that is, to join with the family members during the initial sessions of therapeutic service.

Now, having spoken of the importance of homegrown evaluations and interventions, it may be that *some* traditional Western marriage and family tools can be applied fruitfully to uniquely MCUH couple and family therapy occurrences. And, perhaps, because MCUH families largely are traditional and multigenerational, some Western transgenerational family concepts may provide important insights into function and dysfunction within them.

For example, professionals consulting with them might appreciate Bowen theory’s concept of differentiation within a multigenerational family. Moreover, the professionals themselves might recognize the need to be differentiated enough that they can inquire into the *amount of flexibility* possible within an existing family unit. (See Lee, 2008, for a case illustration.)

Contextual family therapy offers many insights about unvoiced intergenerational expectations and obligations and resulting payoffs or destructive entitlement. These concepts may illuminate depression, social inhibition, and constant

bickering. Also, Structural family therapy—with its focus on hierarchy and alliances—may aid recognition and remediation of family dysfunction.

Finally, Solution-Focused Brief Therapy may provide clinicians to MCUH a valuable relational and family therapy tool kit. Although not strictly transgenerational, SFBT's focus is on whatever clients—individuals, couples, and families—already are doing that is working well, in *whatever* context they exist. (See illustrations in Charles et al., 2019).

Conclusions and a Challenge

Clearly, to a large extent Occidental constructions with regard to the social institution of marriage may not be a good fit for at least one major Indian subculture (MCUH). The present study illustrates this etic/emic conflict. In India, clinical and research theories and tools clearly must be based on the perceptions, beliefs, expectations, and action tendencies of the subcultures being served. This study is only a first step in that direction. Its open and questioning stance must be at the threshold of all family interventions. To fully capture “Indian marriage” will require hypotheses and recorded data within India's many socio-demographic groupings (cf., en.wikipedia.org)—Hindus (80% of her population), Muslims (14%), Sikhs (2%), Christians (2%) and Buddhists (1%)—and members of subsets of these—and their gender self-identification, age levels, castes, educational and vocational status, and their residencies (states and union territories, urban and rural). Social scientists whose programs of scholarship encompass Indian marriages and families have a fundamental obligation to their discipline: To join together to systematically and empirically delineate differences *within and between* India's diverse cultural groups with regard to these variables. This strikes the authors as an overwhelming task. They suggest that we savor one small bite at a time.

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