ATTITUDES TOWARDS FAMILY FORMATION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

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Abstract

This study examines young adults’ attitudes towards marriage and family formation in Bruneian society. Questionnaires were distributed to a group of undergraduate students aged 17-31. Findings show that the majority of young adults in the study expected to be married within an ideal age range of 25-29, a period in their lives when they also ideally want to have their first child. However, respondents overwhelmingly agree that marriage should take place after graduating from university, and more importantly, after finding a stable job. This signifies not only an idealisation of a sequence of life course events that diverges from the traditional Bruneian Malay Muslim cultural narrative (in terms of timing of marriage and family formation), but also suggests increasingly heterogeneous life course pathways that might not be as predictable, given the challenges in securing a job (or a spouse), after graduation. This study, thus, sheds light on the transition to adulthood among Bruneians, and offers a glimpse of the motivations behind increasing ages at first marriage, increasing proportions of female singlehood, and apparent desires for smaller families that characterise the Bruneian population today.

Keywords
Young adulthood, Brunei, marriage, fertility, attitudes, higher education
Background of the Study

Brunei is a small, insular, sovereign state located in the island of Borneo in Southeast Asia. As a microstate, the population of the country has, to date, remained under half a million persons. As of 2015, the total population of the country was 417,200 people, of which 20.8% of the people living there are temporary citizens, consisting of migrants and expatriates. Over the past fifty years, Brunei has undergone a tremendous sea change in terms of its demographic profile (Figure 1). In particular, we have witnessed a dramatic shift in total fertility rates (TFRs) to below replacement level (Figure 2), which has occurred in the absence of official population policies and family planning programmes that typically accompany many developing countries, which would act as stimuli to encourage smaller family sizes. Being a pro-family Malay Muslim majority country, Brunei’s sustained declines in fertility rates may be perceived as counterproductive to the nation’s desire for further population growth. Even though Brunei’s total population is still growing, and projected to surpass the half million mark by 2030, its annual growth rate has been rather low for the past decades, standing at only 1.4% – the lowest figure it has witnessed since the post-war baby-boom era. For a country whose total population has still remained below half a million persons even today, and whose immigration policies are strict, Brunei faces real challenges towards its future in terms of labour force supply and a looming ageing population. It is against this backdrop that we should pay greater attention to the experiences of young adults, and try to understand whether their attitudes toward marriage and family life are reconciled with their ideals about their future selves and their career goals.

Figure 1: Structural changes in the population profile of Brunei

![Figure 1: Structural changes in the population profile of Brunei](image)

Population by age groups and sex (absolute numbers) 1950, 2015, 2050, and 2100 (projected). The dotted line indicates the excess male or female population in certain age groups. The data are in thousands or millions.

Figure 2: Total Fertility Rates (TFR) Brunei (1970-2013)

Pattern of decline for the Total Fertility Rates (TFR) of Brunei between 1970 and 2013. Figures show the dramatic decline over the years in the absence of official family planning programmes and policies. Source: Data obtained from various publications by the Government of Brunei.

Demographic changes to patterns of age at first marriage in Brunei have been considerably under-researched, and little is known about the determinants and factors that either motivate or discourage individuals and couples to move forward in their life course transitions. We know much less when it comes to the experiences and family life attitudes of young adults in the country, given that they generally stay far longer in education than did previous generations of youth before them. Further, young women in Brunei are increasingly becoming more educated; often having higher educational attainments compared to their male counterparts. For example, the country enjoyed a higher enrolment ratio for females in tertiary education, with a difference of 7% compared to the enrolment ratio for males between the years 2001-2002 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2007). Female enrolment in secondary level education exceeded that of boys in 2004, and at the same time, there were 32% more female students than males in tertiary level education (Zareena Amiruddin, 2011). In 2007, 73% of total graduates from Universiti Brunei Darussalam consisted of females (Adina Othman, 2010). In recent years, Brunei has been leading the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) economies in terms of female graduates of STEM disciplines, in which its share of tertiary graduates of science, technology, engineering and math who are women made up 49% between the years 2014-2016,
followed by Singapore with 45.4%. Brunei even fared better than the United States, where only 31.9% of graduates in STEM disciplines constitute women (Figure 3).

Despite the fact that there had been many Bruneian female graduates doing well in all kinds of disciplines and professions, the number of women in decision-making posts in the country does not appear to mirror this trend in higher educational attainments. To illustrate, while 61% of tertiary level graduates were female in 2015, and 62% of government scholarships (including in-service funding) were awarded to women, only 36% of senior managerial positions in the country are held by women (Adina Othman cited in Bandial, 2016). In addition, although more than half or 57% of female workers in Brunei are professionals, the proportion of female-led businesses and institutions are still considered sub-par (ibid.).

**Figure 3: Share of tertiary graduates of science, technology, engineering and math who are women in APEC economies**

Even though Bruneian women are increasingly active in the labour market, their participation rate has not seen marked increases over the years (Figure 4). On the surface, these figures paint a striking picture of changing societal attitudes towards education and higher educational attainments – particularly among women in the country. However, they also reveal a generally underdeveloped policy area that could address the lack of
reconciliation between educational attainment and work, the realities of occupational segregation, and over- and under-representation of women in certain jobs (particularly, in this case, decision-making positions) relative to their educational background. Bruneian women, once they become mothers, might withdraw from the labour force, and/or they might over-represent in certain jobs such as teaching professions, clerical work, and nursing. From a gender perspective, such observations perpetuate dichotomies of traditional gender roles played by women and men at the domestic and public spheres – strengthening notions that women should only perform mothering and housework, while men continue to be the sole breadwinners. However, I argue that this notion can no longer be acceptable given that Bruneian women have been breaking out of their traditional household roles, and increasingly adopting various other public roles and statuses. Although beyond the scope of this article, the policy implications for women in terms of reconciling work and family life in this population are plenty.

Figure 4: Labour force estimates and participation rates (2007-2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total labour force</td>
<td>Total 175,700</td>
<td>178,700</td>
<td>179,600</td>
<td>183,500</td>
<td>185,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male 104,400</td>
<td>106,400</td>
<td>106,200</td>
<td>108,500</td>
<td>109,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female 71,300</td>
<td>72,300</td>
<td>73,400</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>76,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Force Participation Rate</td>
<td>Total 66.7</td>
<td>66.9</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male 76.8</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>76.3</td>
<td>75.7</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female 55.9</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Economic Planning and Development, cited in Ministry of Education (2015: 16-17). There are more males in the total labour force of the country compared to females, mainly due to the large number of contract workers in the construction, development and industrials sectors.

Against these socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds, this study examines the central inquiry of how contemporary young adults currently enrolled in tertiary level education in Brunei perceive marriage and family formation. Questions forming the survey for this study were disseminated to a cohort of undergraduate students at a local university, which focused on the links between their attitudes and preferences towards marriage and family formation on the one hand, and the potential role of socio-cultural norms, values, and religion in shaping their fertility preferences, on the other. What kinds of family life ideals do they aspire to? How do these ideals square with the demands and expectations from parents in regards to being employed in the future? Moreover, do culture and religious belief play a part in young adults’ attitudes towards marriage and having children, given the strong emphasis on marriage, progeny, and the family among the Malay
Muslim community in Brunei? What kinds of gender role expectations do young adults in a university context possess in relation to family life, education and work? This study looks into these fundamental questions with the aim of shedding light on the wider, longer-term demographic changes that have been occurring in the country over the past fifty years, and that are likely to continue in the future – particularly in the context of low fertility rates, low population growth rates, and increased population ageing. Furthermore, no other study on Bruneian young adults from a socio-demographic perspective exists to provide explanations for the changes in population behaviour of the country thus far. Marriage and family size ideals, as well as fertility preferences of young adults from the study sample, are discussed in this article.

Who is a Young Adult?

Interestingly, there are various definitions for the concept of ‘young adult’, which is generally used to categorise individuals according to a specific age group corresponding to certain parameters such as status of schooling, employment, and marital status. Primarily it is a broad classification of individuals yet to be considered as adults. However, this simple definition is problematic in many ways, one of which is that as a social category, it is not just vague, but also flexible and open to contestation; boundaries of what constitute adulthood differ from one culture to another, and from time to time. Even today, some children carry out adult roles and responsibilities, particularly if we consider those who live in the margins of society, such as those living in poverty (or even those living just below the poverty line), or those living in precarious situations such as refugees fleeing persecution and conflicts. But perhaps equally important, a simplistic definition of ‘young adult’ masks the complexity of young adulthood as a distinct period in the life course, given various contexts, but especially in light of the contemporary era of post-modernisation and market-led globalisation. For example, the character, attitudes and behaviours of millennials – those who were born in or after the year 1982, to 2004 (although this also varies) – are often distinguished from those subsumed under the generational groups of ‘Generation X’ and ‘Baby Boomers’ (Oblinger, 2003; Rouse, 2015). In this context, depending on whether or not they have attained the traditional markers of adulthood such as finding a stable job or moving out of their parents’ home, millennials are observed to be experiencing delayed adulthood, particularly among younger millennials (Garikapati et al., 2016). Quite notably, they are also regarded as a generation that is expected “to be less economically successful than their parents… entering adulthood with unrealistic expectations, which sometimes leads to disillusionment” (Rouse, 2015). Surely, such generalisations should not be taken lightly in characterising one generation as a whole, as there are variations among individuals within every generation. However, such observations raise important questions regarding timing of entry to adulthood, which goes beyond the parameters of biological
Attitudes towards family formation in Brunei Darussalam

Thus, we are confronted with the complexities of ever changing notions of not just young adulthood, but also adulthood itself.

Another problem arising from a simple definition of ‘young adult’ is the variability in the ways young adulthood is perceived and formalised by different people and agencies: governments, international organisations, statistical offices, educational institutions, and so too religious institutions, including mosques and churches. Nevertheless, young adulthood is more than just ticking the right age box when filling in an official form. In Brunei, the youth category itself includes those aged 15 to 40, and this is explicitly stated in the country’s National Youth Policy (2002), which places no age restriction on who constitutes ‘Youth Leaders’ (Government of Brunei, 2002; youthpolicy.org, 2014). Thus, there is some degree of flexibility and variation in the way that institutions and researchers have identified young adulthood. To be sure, the exact categories of ‘young adulthood’ and ‘adulthood’ cannot be applied to every historical period, and the awareness, categorisation, recognition, institutionalisation, and even politicisation of ‘youth’ and ‘young adult’ as distinct periods are really part of a modern awareness and practise. However, according to Gillis (2004), “it is not that the biological and psychological processes of ageing have changed, but rather that our understanding of what it means to age has altered”.

Some young adults still marry and start a family at a relatively young age. However, in general, young adults are now experiencing a newly altered and extended timetable for entering adulthood, marked by a general delay in its key events. These events which are “usually considered as the demographic markers of the transition to adulthood” (Gauthier, 2007) include “home-leaving, marriage, and the onset of childbearing” and “take place much later in the life span than they did during the period after World War II” (Furstenberg, 2010). In examining how today’s young adults in their twenties differ from those in the previous generations, Vespa (2017) argues that today’s young adults take longer to experience the traditional milestones, i.e. finishing school, finding a job, setting up their own household, followed by forming a family. He stated further that, “what was once ubiquitous during their twenties is now not commonplace until their 30s”, and that such delays “represent a new period of the life course between childhood and adulthood, a period of ‘emerging adulthood’ when young people experience traditional events at different times and in a different order than their parents did” (Vespa, 2017).

Thus, depending on the perspective, this age category can include persons who are in their teens to early twenties, or those whose age falls within the range of 18 and 35. Still, however, young adults can be categorised further according to specific characteristics, such as whether they are still studying (in college or higher educational institutions), seeking full time employment or currently working full time, married with or without children, and single (i.e. never married). For some researchers reporting in the clinical sciences, ‘young
‘young adult’ is synonymous with the term ‘older adolescent’, and refers to an age range that covers 15 to 29 years (Bleyer and Albritton, 2003). From the perspective of demographic studies, Vespa uses the maximum cut-off age of 34 years, reasoning that those aged between 18-34 form a cohort, which is “a group of people that share a common demographic experience or characteristic (in this case, age)” (2017: 3). In this paper, the term ‘young adult’ refers to the stage in an individual’s life course that corresponds to the period prior to entering adulthood where traditional demographic markers of entry such as finding a job and setting up one’s own household are considered among a cohort of individuals of ages 17 to 34.

**Understanding Attitudes**

As discussed in the introduction, this study is situated within the context of wider societal and attitudinal changes occurring in Brunei that include increasing educational attainments particularly among women, their participation in the labour force, and their association with sustained declines in birth rates over the years. An examination of young adults’ attitudes towards marriage and family formation, especially those who are currently attending tertiary level education, is useful in providing evidence of the changes that currently affect the Bruneian society. Many commentators contend that Brunei’s falling fertility rates over the decades have been the indirect result of socioeconomic changes that the country has undergone (Furuoka et al., 2011; Niew, 1989; JikiahJumat, 2004). Hairuni (2007) argued that Bruneians are now choosing “quality over quantity” when it comes to having children. Preferences for smaller family sizes may reflect several things: first, it is a result of later age at marriage and thereby starting a family later so that exposure to pregnancy risk factors may be reduced.

In Brunei, the age at first marriage, particularly among females, has shown positive signs of an upward trend. For example, in 1960 the singulate age at first marriage (SMAM) was 19.5, and this increased over the years to 21.5 in 1971, 24.0 in 1981, and 25.0 in 1990 (Government of Brunei Darussalam 1973, 1983, 1994; Hull, 2013). Proportion of singlehood is also rising among females (see Figure 5), compared to males, which is largely characterised by delays in age at marriage as opposed to remaining permanently unmarried throughout their childbearing ages. Other reasons for preferring smaller family sizes may be due to financial constraints or the unavailability of childcare assistance and facilities while the mother goes out to work. These play a role in shaping the way the family is seen, but in the Bruneian context, little is known about the situation except that fertility levels have been declining; this could be a result of a combination of factors, including changes in attitudes.
Attitudes in this study refer to the views of young adults in Brunei towards family formation, and by extension, towards marriage. In Bruneian society, the fact remains that childbirth is legitimised solely through marriage (thus, marital fertility) and out-of-wedlock childbirth is deeply admonished. Thus, examining attitudes towards marriage is important to get to the heart of attitudes towards family formation. Attitudes in this sense and for the purpose of this study refer to attitudes towards performing a specific behaviour with respect to a defined goal; for example, if the goal is to have a child within the next year, the attitude towards contraceptive use will likely be negative, in order for the goal to be achieved. Therefore, there is an element of evaluation within the concept of attitudes, whereby a certain behavioural outcome, such as having children, is seen as either a positive/favourable outcome, or a negative/unfavourable outcome.

**Figure 5: Proportion Single, 1981-2011**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
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Source: Various official publications by the Government of Brunei Darussalam.

In demographic studies, fertility (i.e. having a child as a behavioural outcome) can be predicted well by using a social psychological theoretical framework, i.e. the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen and Fishbein, 2005; Buber and Fliegenenschnee, 2011). In this theoretical framework, one of the fundamental dimensions in shaping fertility is attitude towards the behaviour (in this case, having a child within a stated period). The TPB approaches behavioural outcomes by considering how much a person favours a stated behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), and whether the evaluation of the behaviour (i.e. having a child) is perceived positively or negatively in terms of its consequences towards the individual (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2005). Other factors such as subjective norms and perceived behavioural control are also considered in the TPB framework, but for the purpose of this study, the TPB is used only as a heuristic guide in formulating the questions posed in the survey, intended to explore young adults' perceptions towards marriage and family formation.
Research Design

Findings from a survey conducted on a cohort of first year undergraduate students studying in business, management, and accounting disciplines at Universiti Brunei Darussalam are presented in this paper. A simple survey mechanism was administered during a two-hour session to explore their attitudes and preferences towards marriage and family formation.

Participant Profiles

The total survey sample size was 172 participants (N=172). The respondents consisted mainly of female young adults, where Females made up 85.5% of the sample (n=147), and only 14.5% or 25 individuals were Males (n=25). The age range of the respondents coincides with the operational definition of young adults adopted in this study, which was between from 17 to 31 years. However, two students in the sample, due to re-entry to education were excluded. These two individuals (who happened to be in the higher end of the age range) were excluded because they were the only ones who have already achieved the traditional markers of adulthood, i.e. having a stable job - but currently taking time out to study; ever married, and having already started their own families. The mean age of the sample was M=20.05 (SD=2.12), and the group largely consisted of those aged 19 and 20 (29.1% and 33.1% respectively). Figure 6 shows the distribution of the respondents’ ages. Of the total sample, 69.8% consisted of Malays, 22.67% were Chinese and the rest made up the ‘Others’ category. Over 73% of the sample was made up of students in the first year of their Bachelor’s degree studies. The majority of them were Muslims, where 72% of the sample identified their religion as such.

The Survey

The survey questions identified in this study included the following aspects: expected age at first marriage, attitudes towards having children, intentions for having children,
perceptions towards factors that would lead to decisions to get married, perceived
behavioural control over having children (i.e. factors that are perceived to enable or
impede the respondent from having children in future), participants’ attitudes towards
gender roles, participants’ attitudes to work-life balance, perceptions towards social norms
regarding having children (at certain points in the life course), and attitudes towards God’s
Will in determining life pathways (see Appendix). Several basic socio-demographic
characteristics were also collected from the respondents, which included their race (Malay;
Chinese; Indian; Iban; Dusun; Others), religion (Muslim; Buddhist; Christian; Others),
year of birth, gender, usual place of residence, and their parents’ educational attainments
(Degree; Higher National Diploma/HND; ‘A’-Level, ‘O’-Level; Primary; Others; None)
(see Appendix). Consent was sought from the students prior to the survey, where they were
informed that if they wished to opt out of the exercise, they could do so without any
negative implications.

Discussion of Main Findings

94.8% of the respondents said that they do expect to get married in the future, while only
4.1% said they do not expect to get married in the future. This indicates that marriage is
still valued among the majority of the young adults in the study sample, and most of them
expect to experience it in the future. Speaking of prospective expectations, the survey also
asked the question of when they expect to be married. The majority of the participants
(76.1%) reported that they wanted to be married within the age range of 25-29 years old.
This shows an idealised age at marriage that is delayed to the mid-to-late twenties for the
majority of the respondents, but far fewer envisaged themselves marrying earlier or much
later. This is evident from the equal proportion of them (11% each) expressing their
expectations to be married between the ages of 20-24 or 30-39 (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Age Expected to Marry

Currently, 25-29 may seem like a normal and appropriate age range for young
adults to be married, particularly within the context of the sample who are still studying at
tertiary level, and would expect to finish their studies by age 24 or so. However, in the past,
and particularly those who were not in formal education, the ideal age range of 25-29
might be regarded as being too old. It was a common practise for girls as young as 15 and 16 years of age to be married, and to 'naturally' slip into traditional female roles and fulfil the responsibilities expected of them such as helping out with their mother’s or mother-in-law’s domestic chores like washing, cooking, and care giving (Asbol Mail, 2006: 4). Obviously there are generational differences between young adults growing up in the mid-20th century compared to those born later, but expectations of marrying at a relatively young age despite educational attainment might persist among some, depending on not just individual but also societal-attitudes, as well as cultural norms and expectations.

In terms of race, the distribution is slightly skewed with 75% opting to marry within the age of 25-29 for Malays, and 86% for the Chinese. However, only 3% of the Chinese respondents desire early marriage within the ages of 20-24, compared to 15% of Malays. This is consistent with the literature whereby Malays tend to marry at an earlier age compared to the ethnic Chinese in the Southeast Asian context (particularly Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei countries), and this earlier exposure to pregnancy through marriage may also explain why Malays tend to have more children than the ethnic Chinese (Leete, 1996). There could also be other factors such as contraceptive use, or cultural norms surrounding having large families, which is still pervasive among Malays. It is thus important to uncover motivations for marriage as a way of understanding childbearing desires.

When asked about the reason why they chose the age at which they desired to be married, most of the respondents (63.4%) agreed to “Marriage should only be done after I find a stable job”. With the majority expecting marriage within the age range of 25-29, this is indicative of a socially accepted perception of ‘stacking’ of life course events where marriage is ideally done after completion of higher education on the one hand, but more importantly, securing stable employment on the other. Such expectations reflect a hope that the life-course transition is smooth, where one event follows another in a predictive manner; but this is probably on the optimistic end, given challenges in finding employment or even a spouse. This is followed by the reason “I plan to further my studies before I get married” with 9.3% agreeing to the statement, and that “Marriage should only be done after I graduate from my Bachelor’s Degree” with 8.7% agreeing with the statement.

The survey also provided a statement to explore attitudes towards marriage: “Marriage is important to me because…”, and the top three common responses were: “Marriage shows more commitment to a relationship than staying unmarried or remaining engaged for years” (54.7%), “My religion encourages marriage” (47.2%), and “My parents expect me to be married and have children someday” (38.5%). It is interesting to note that the parental expectation for their children to get married appears to be higher among the
less educated. For instance, 45% of the respondents who said that their parents expect them to marry and have children, had mothers whose highest educational attainment were at Secondary Level. In contrast, only 26% of respondents who agreed to this statement had a mother with Tertiary Level education. A similar pattern is observed among respondents whose father had a secondary education compared to tertiary education. This is important in terms of parental educational background in shaping young adults’ attitudes towards early marriage and having children. While education may not solely be responsible for the increase in later age at first marriage on the national level, it is interesting that the findings of this study allude to the idea that parents may be shaping their children’s attitudes towards marriage in a way that reflects their own valuation of education. Their expectations towards their children may be an important driver of relatively early age at first marriage, but this depends on their educational attainment and attitudes towards education.

An overwhelming majority of respondents (93%) answered positively to the question “Do you want to have children in the future?” This is a strong indication that children are perceived as closely linked to marriage, which as we have seen above, is also valued highly among the majority of respondents. In contrast, we see the destandardisation of marriage as the only means to having children in other societies, particularly those that are experiencing a “second demographic transition” in the Western World (Lesthaeghe, 2014). For such populations, cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbearing are socially accepted, and there is clear evidence of “systematic postponement of marriage and parenthood, sub replacement fertility, the rise of alternative forms of partnerships, and parenthood outside marriage” (ibid.). In Brunei, and particularly within the context of the Malay culture, which is influenced heavily by Islamic beliefs and practices, childbearing outside of marriage is not permissible (and this includes surrogacy). The survey then asked the question of respondents’ ideal number of children, close to half of the total respondents stated an expressed preference to have “two children only”. Meanwhile, slightly above a quarter of the respondents expressed their preference to have between three and four children. This finding exemplifies a departure from traditional notions of desiring large extended families, and a change in attitudes towards choosing to have smaller, nuclear families. Only one respondent (0.6%) answered positively to having in excess of five children. In the main, respondents generally agreed on two children because, “It is about the quality, not the quantity”, whereas 31.4% agreed to the statement, and 16.4% said that, “Children are expensive and I think a small family is more affordable than a large one”. 15.7% agreed to “Time is limited, I will only be able to focus my attention on a few children”.

In terms of the age at which respondents said they wanted to have their first child, the majority of 65.1% cited ages 25-29, which is consistent with the finding on the age at which respondents wanted to be married. A quarter of the respondents on the other hand
agreed to have their first child within the age range of 30-34, and a small percentage of the responses (5.8%) cited a desire to have their first child between the later ages of 40-49. The survey then asked, “At what age do you want to have your last child?” in which 43.6% of respondents agreed to the age group of 35-39.

Respondents were also asked about the reasons why children were important to them. The top three most cited reasons included 52.7% who agreed to the statement that “They are fun to have and be around with”, 52.1% responded that “They can provide security for me in my old age and I will not be lonely”, and 45% who agreed to the idea that “They can take care of me when I am old”. Finally, the respondents were asked to agree up to three responses to the inquiry regarding their reasons for why they may be discouraged to have children in the future. The top three most cited reasons included, “I want to pursue other things in my life besides family” with a response rate of 32.5%, “I might not be able to have children because of illness or age factors” with a response rate of 30.7%, and “I will not have time to take care of them” with a response rate of 27.1%.

Conclusion

Compared to those in the past generation, today fewer young adults are married and have children. In a pro-family society such as Brunei, changing attitudes towards marriage and childbearing may signal the emergence of individualism. Few would argue against the notion that the life experiences and lived realities of young adults today differ considerably from those who preceded them many decades before. In Brunei, the period of transition to adulthood increasingly appears protracted in the life course, producing young adulthood as a distinct life stage. While in the past teen marriage was a norm rather than an exception, nowadays it is the opposite; young adults characterise marriage as a progression only after having completed school or higher education, and for many, after securing stable employment. This suggests that there are other life goals besides family that act as perceived contingents to the progression of young adults towards adulthood. Further studies are needed in order to examine the sources from which these contingent life goals appear to overtake the heteronormative progression of marriage at an early age, beyond the simple claim that ‘times have changed’. To be certain, this paper has demonstrated that increasing time spent in education provides a likely and convincing argument for the delay in age at marriage and/or family formation. Even though each generation of youth and young adults produce their own lived realities according to the social and political milieu they find themselves in, it is still important to understand the motivations and attitudinal dimensions that are part of the societal change occurring in a population.

In this paper, we have seen that young adults most desire to have smaller families – where the ideal number of children is two. Such an idealisation of family life in terms of
size can be understood in responses to notions of “quality, not quantity”, and the time they have to spend with children. Further, several contingents appear to be important among the survey sample when it comes to marriage and family formation. These include the desire to complete education, to further education, and to secure stable employment prior to marriage. Thus, completion of their current life stage (i.e. studying at tertiary level) is deemed necessary before they can consider marriage, and stability in life appears to be a highly sought aspect of the transition towards adulthood. Several questions arise from this study, which can be used to inform future research: do the perceived contingents apply to those who elect to marry at an earlier age? For example, does progression towards parenthood (and thus adulthood) somewhat mitigate any desires or plans to pursue a career or higher education for a young couple who get married and have children in their early twenties? In other words, are the contingents flexible? Perhaps the clue to this answer lies in the notion that there are in fact multiple pathways in the transition to adulthood, which invariably means young adults have different life goals. What then, does this mean for young adults desiring marriage, if a job is not found immediately after graduation?

Endnotes

1 The term here refers to countries with a population of less than half a million inhabitants as of 2017. This format of definition follows the work of Caldwell, Harrison and Quiggin (1980).

2 Formal education in the country started in 1914 with the establishment of the first Malay medium primary school in Brunei Town. However, in those early years only boys were sent for formal schooling, until 1930 when girls were included. Enrolment of girls slowly grew over the decades to the extent that Brunei has now achieved equitable access to basic education due in part to a nine-year free compulsory education policy. The literacy rate for Bruneian youth is one of the highest in the region with more than 99% (Ministry of Education, 2015).

3 Adina Othman was the deputy minister at the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Government of Brunei Darussalam. She was one of the very few women who rose up the ranks in public service in Brunei. She was pivotal in championing gender equity, policies for better work-life balance, and spoke on many occasions during her tenure, of the need for Brunei to address the gaps and challenges that remain despite progress made towards gender equality and women’s empowerment in the country over the years.

4 For a more detailed discussion of the concept of ‘emerging adulthood’ and ‘young adulthood’, see Arnett (2000). The author argued that emerging adulthood differs from adolescence and young adulthood largely because of heterogeneity in this age period, where very little is actually normative, and that it is very much a transitional period. Furthermore, Arnett contended that ‘young adulthood’ implies that adulthood has been reached, when in fact “most young people in this age period would disagree that they have reached adulthood”. Thus, he recommended the
term ‘emerging adulthood’ as a better term to describe the subjective experience of these individuals. This paper however, adopts a more demographic view of the usage of term, which looks at young adults as a cohort with some commonalities.

References


Government of Brunei Darussalam. 2015. *Brunei Darussalam Key Indicators*. Bandar Seri Begawan: Department of Economic Planning and Development, Prime Minister’s Office.


**Appendix: Survey Questions**

Demographic Background: Please fill in the following information first.

1) Gender: ______________

2) Age: __________

3) Date of Birth: ______________

4) Nationality: ____________________

5) Marital Status: ____________________

6) Race: ____________________
7) Degree Programme (Major): ________________________________
8) Year of Study: ______________
9) Usual place of resident: ____________________________
10) Religion: _______________________
11) Father’s education: ________________________________
12) Mother’s education: ________________________________

Questions 1-3 are for unmarried individuals. If you are currently married, please go to question 4.

1) Do you expect to get married in the future?
   a. Yes
   b. No

2) At what age do you want to be married?
   a. 18 – 19
   b. 20 – 24
   c. 25 – 29
   d. 30 – 39
   e. 40 – 44

3) The most relevant reason for your answer to the previous question is:
   a. Marriage should only be done after I graduate my bachelor’s degree
   b. Marriage can be done anytime during my studies
   c. My religion encourages me to marry early
   d. My parents will not allow me to marry before I finish my studies
   e. Marriage should only be done after I find a stable job
   f. I plan to further my studies before I get married
   g. Others (please specify)

4) “Marriage is important to me because... (You may agree up to three)
   a. My parents expect me to be married and have children some day
   b. My religion encourages marriage
   c. Married people are generally happier than unmarried people
   d. Marriage is a crucial part of society
   e. People who want children have to be married first
   f. Marriage provides security and stability to children
   g. Marriage shows more commitment to a relationship than staying unmarried or remaining engaged for years
   h. Marriage is as important to men as it is to women
   i. If I do not get married, people will think something is wrong with me
   j. Others (please specify)

Questions 5-6 are for married individuals only. Skip these questions if you are not married.

5) If you are currently married, how many years have you been married?
   a. Less than a year
   b. 1 – 2
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6) Do you currently have children? If yes, please state the number of children you have.
   a. 1
   b. 2
   c. 3
   d. 4
   e. 5
   f. More than five (Please state: __________)
   g. Not relevant to me

7) Do you want to have children in the future?
   a. Yes
   b. No

8) What is your ideal number of children?
   a. None
   b. 1
   c. 2
   d. 2 – 3
   e. 3
   f. 3 – 4
   g. 4
   h. 4 – 5
   i. 5
   j. More than five (Please state: __________)

9) Why do you want to have the number of children stated in your response to the previous question?
   a. Children are expensive and I think a small family is more affordable than a large one
   b. It is about the quality, not the quantity
   c. Time is limited, I will only be able to focus my attention on a few children
   d. It reflects the number of siblings I have
   e. I come from a large family and so I want to have a large family too
   f. My religion encourages me to have a large family
   g. Others (please specify):

10) At what age do you want to have your first child?
   a. 18 – 19
   b. 20 – 24
   c. 25 – 29
   d. 30 – 34
11) At what age do you want to have your last child?
   a. 20 – 24
   b. 25 – 29
   c. 30 – 34
   d. 35 – 39
   e. 40 – 44
   f. 45 – 49

12) “Children are important to me because…” (You may agree up to three):
   a. They can take care of me when I am old
   b. They are important according to my religion
   c. They are fun to have and be around with
   d. A marriage is not complete without children
   e. If I do not have children, people will think something is wrong with me or my spouse
   f. Life is quiet without children in a house
   g. They can provide security for me in my old age and I will not be lonely
   h. Others (please specify):

13) Reasons why you may be discouraged to have children in the future (You may agree up to three):
   a. I want to pursue other things in my life besides family
   b. I am career-oriented
   c. They will only get in the way of my success in other life goals
   d. I might not be able to have children because of illness or age factors
   e. I will not have the time to take care of them
   f. Having a nanny is expensive and tedious, and I will not be able to trust her with my child
   g. They are very expensive
   h. Others (please specify): __________________________ ___________