INTER-GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PARTNER SELECTION CRITERIA AMONG WOMEN IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Partner selection and marriage choices have become interesting research topics in societies experiencing transition due to technological advancements and modernisation. This qualitative study was envisaged to identify the differences in partner selection criteria among three generations of Pakistani women. Three independent age groups were selected to analyse the difference among them due to social and technological transition. The participants were recruited purposefully for semi-structured interviews from six different families, three women of subsequent age groups (grandmothers, mothers, and their marriageable grand/daughters) were chosen (N=18). The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. Line-by-line coding was done to extract the relevant and repetitive codes that comprised sub and main themes. Findings show that the social background and compatibility between potential families remained the most important aspects in general. Internal attributes such as religiousness and morality, and external attributes, specifically good financial status, decent occupation and job, were considered significant partner selection criteria as well. The factors that affect the partner selection choices directly included collectivist beliefs and disempowerment of women. Inter-generational differences and transitions in the desirability of partner selection criteria were evident as
an expected outcome of the questions posed by the current study. The implications include extending knowledge for marriage and relationship counsellors.

Keywords

Partner-selection, marriage, inter-generational differences, disempowerment, transition.

Introduction

Social relationships occupy a significant place in the lives of individuals. One of these remarkable bonds is the marital relation. Two people unite together and constitute a family; it is essentially a union of two people. However, in collectivist societies (Triandis 1995, 44) it is considered a bond or a beginning of relations between two families. Marriage is a beginning of a new set of relations, in terms of gender, age and sociocultural backgrounds, which demand ability to get along with each other in an amicable way. In Pakistan, it is generally and primarily a girl’s target to make her marriage and marital relations work successfully. According to Alavi, Alahdad and Shafeq (2014) marriage remains to be the most sought after relationship in almost all cultures for both men and women.

Finalisation of a marriage proposal is based upon the selection of a suitable partner; it may include choosing and analysing one or more suitable persons. The suitability is weighed on the basis of individual traits, social and economic status and other important aspects related to an individual and/or his/her family. In contemporary society, partner selection has become an increasingly interesting research subject due to the transition experienced by developing societies (Buunk, Park and Duncan 2009). Researchers in Malaysia have considered partner selection to be one of the crucial and important decisions that a young adult or his/her family has to make due to the obvious long-term repercussions involved: investment of emotions and finances (Abdullah, Li and David 2011; Maliki 2009). The family-oriented collectivist culture and Muslim traditions there make these findings pertinent to the indigenous context.

Research on partner selection by Vangelisti and Daly (1997) and Ali, Jehangir, Hussain and Rizwan (2017), show that when choosing a suitable partner, people have preconceptions or expectations about their relationships with that partner. One of these preconceptions is about the desirability or undesirability of certain traits or characteristics in a potential partner. Previous research (Tariq, Hassan and Ajmal 2013; Todosijevic, Ljubinkovic, and Arancic 2003; Blair & Madigan 2016) on partner selection choices
indicate that people have different preferences for diverse traits that could be present in an individual. This variability was found in terms of physical appearance (Hill 1945), age and gender (Buss, et al. 1990) socio-cultural belonging and religion (Mughani 2013), education and ethnicity. Moreover, people from different socio-cultural backgrounds and age groups have differences in their expectations concerning their potential partners and marriages (Alavi, Alahdad & Shafeq 2014).

Socio-cultural differences in the partner selection process have been studied extensively in the USA (Mughani 2013), in China (Blair & Madigan, 2016) and in Pakistan (Iqra, Hassan & Ajmal 2013; Husain & Gulzar 2015; Ali, Jehangir, Hussain and Rizwan 2017). Blair and Madigan (2016) and O’Neil (2009) suggest that partner selection is a culturally defined process. Based on these studies, it can be concluded that traits which prominently feature as partner selection criteria include physical appearance, as well as social, financial, religious, personal and educational factors; however, these factors are not exhaustive.

A landmark study by Buss et al. (1990), conducted in thirty-seven different cultures including India and Iran, but not Pakistan, concluded that men were found to be more likely to prefer physical attractiveness as compared to women. Some of the non-physical partner selection criteria considered most desirable by men and women alike included “good companion, honest, considerate, affectionate, dependable, intelligent, kind, understanding, interesting to talk to and loyal” (pp. 16-17). People from most cultures included in the study, rated physical traits such as apparent beauty, physique, skin colour, body shape and size as key factors in partner selection choices. However, in only three cultures, India being one of them, physical appearance was not considered as important.

Studies have supported the fact that the financial status of a potential partner or his/her family is a key consideration while evaluating the likelihood of accepting a marriage proposal (Badahdah & Tiemann 2009; Buss & Angleitner 1989; Shackelford, Schmitt & Bus 2005; Todosićević, Ljubinković & Arančić 2003). Buss and Angleitner (1989) also reported that a stable financial position was valued highly in thirty-six out of thirty-seven cultures. Furthermore, Maliki (2009) suggested that financial status was given a high rating by a majority of the university going adults. He further observed that having a similar financial status is key factor in maintaining amicable relations between two families and/or the partners.

Extensive literature asserts that religion occupies a central position while making important life decisions, including partner selection (Badahdah & Tiemann 2009; Mughani 2013). This tradition is supported by Blair and Madigan (2016) who, while
studying partner selection in China, also found that people were rarely willing to look for a partner outside of their religion. Preference for partners from the same religious background is not a recent trend, as Coombs' study, conducted almost fifty-years back (1969), asserted that people mostly select partners and marry those of the same religion. In Muslim traditions, marriage is considered as a socio-legal agreement with its roots in religious guidelines. Alavi, Alahdad and Shafeq (2014) found piety and religiosity to be significant criteria while in choosing a partner in Malaysian Muslim culture in Malaysia. It is a firm belief in Muslim societies across the globe that an individual’s religious concepts not only define their values and beliefs, but also a similarity of religious ideas is important for long-lasting and happy marital relations (Maliki 2009).

The family background of the potential partner has been given due importance in traditional societies. Studies conducted in traditional collectivist societies such as, Pakistan (Hussain & Gulzar 2015; Korson 1969); Iran, (Bidjaria & Zahmatkeshb 2011), India (Banerjee, Duflo, Ghatak & Lafortune 2009), Sri Lanka, Korea (Ahn 2011) and China (Blair & Madigan 2016) also found that family background plays a significant role when two families choose a potential son or daughter-in-law. While studying partner selection in the Pakistani context, Husain and Gulzar (2015) found that, similar to other tradition-based societies, the socio-economic background of the prospective family was considered an important criterion in reaching a decision about a suitable partner. Furthermore, in traditional and collectivist societies of China and India, the origin of the family is also considered important while selecting a partner (Blair & Madigan 2016; Banerjee, Duflo, Ghatak & Lafortune 2013). Coomb argued (1969) that the social-financial situation of a family was an important aspect assessed while choosing a partner, and it is still a relevant factor in making decisions. In most cultures where marriage decisions are made by parents, social and financial stability and suitable family background continue to be crucial criteria for selections.

Since marriage in the South Asian community is considered a family affair, the role of parents and family elders in collectivist cultures are most perceptible during partner selection or matrimonial affairs. The opinion of parents and family elders weigh more (Qureshi 1991; Zaidi & Shuraydi 2002) than the choice of a girl for whom a partner is being chosen. Girls have a subordinate position or little say in choosing an intimate partner. Their role is passive and limited only to accepting the decisions made by parents and family elders. Collectivist cultures inadvertently foster obedience training of girls, hence leading to systematic disempowerment of women (Jejeebhoy & Sathar 2001). Young people are expected to respect the decisions taken by family elders or parents. It is expected as a norm to prioritise and to accept family/parental choices in almost all important decisions, including education, occupation, and especially when it comes to marriage decisions (Goodwin & Cramer 2000). Added to this, in Pakistani culture as well, young
people are expected to respect decisions taken by family elders or parents concerning all major aspects of life. In Pakistan, marriage is celebrated as an event that joins two families, not just two individuals; hence parental involvement and consent are seen as necessary components.

Taking the cultural dissimilarity hypothesis into account, Mughani (2013), Buunk and Duncan (2009) and Bidjaria and Zahmatkeshh (2011), studied differences in partner selection choices. They found that differences were not only present in two different cultures but were also salient among successive generations in one culture. Studies conducted in Pakistan have addressed the partner selection criteria of men and women in general (Hussain & Gulzar 2015; Rehman, Alam & Safdar 2006; Haneef, Alvi and Ali 2014). However, intergenerational differences in partner selection choices have not yet been studied in depth in Pakistan. Hence, this study aims to identify the intergenerational differences in partner-selection criteria of women in Pakistan. The study becomes more pertinent when it is contextualised within the educational, social and technological transition that Pakistani women are experiencing.

It has been observed that the family-driven partner choice process in Pakistan is also changing. Young women are more actively involved and opinionated about these significant matters of their lives. The emerging socio-cultural changes in women’s behaviour are primarily due to education, women’s rights movements, cultural modernisation, increase in access and use of technology (smart phones, internet), and growth of the media as a means of dissemination of information (Hussain & Gulzar 2015; Haneef, Alvi and Ali 2014).

Since 1947 women’s education was stressed and measures were taken to bring girls to school and to educate them. The disparity in the school enrolment of boys, as compared to girls, in Pakistan is a known phenomenon. As per a recent UNESCO report, boys’ enrolment is 84% as compared to 60% enrolment of girls at the primary school level. The trend continues at the higher level as well; where male enrolment in the universities is 54% and the female enrolment is 46%. However, this gap has been closing over the last decade; in 2012-13, there were 1.12 million boys as compared to 0.76 million girls enrolled at the university level. It is observed that in five years 2016-17, overall enrolment had increased at the university level; 1.25 million boys and 0.93 million girls were enrolled in higher education institutes in Pakistan. It is interesting to note that the increase in boys’ enrolment is 11.3% whereas girls’ enrolment has increased by 17.7% (Shah, Amin, Kakli, Piracha & Zia, 2018 16 & 83). Malik and Courtney (2010), in their research on women’s empowerment in relation to access to higher education in Pakistan, found positive correlation between access to higher education and women’s empowerment. Similarly, Ashraf and Ali (2018) found that an increase in the education of women reshaped or
eliminated a number of biased social practices as education brings about positive changes at both individual and social levels.

Increased educational activity of women has led the way to their economic participation and financial independence. Goldin (1994) observed that women who completed the secondary level had better work opportunities, were able to access higher-status occupations and a better quality of life as well. According to Duflo (2012) empowerment and economic progress are closely linked. Hence, education is seen as fostering women’s empowerment and their economic development as well.

In addition to education, access to technology, use of gadgets like smart phones and internet, has redefined the notion of empowerment in recent years. The generation that grew up in the 1990's experienced the technology revolution and free access to information via the internet. According to Shah (2018), “a new Pakistan is being built by 200 million people in Pakistan through the power of their mobile phones. Step aside, mongers of change. Change is already here”. Shah (2018) wrote that “S. Khan and her mother come from different generations but share something in common”: getting married through community referral. But the transition differed when it was found that the mother only saw a picture of the prospective groom whereas S. Khan was lucky enough to have a conversation over WhatsApp (p. 01).

These aspects of transition are considerably less investigated in relation to Pakistani culture, which is undergoing both social and technological transition and modernisation.

**Theoretical framework of the study**

This research is conceived as the confluence of three social science research streams, which include social learning theory, technology theory and modernization theory.

Social learning theory studies the influence of dominant culture on behaviours of people living in it. Individual behaviour and social interactions are frequently studied in a social learning perspective (Sprecher 1998). The partner-selection criteria are no exception to the influence of socially learned behaviour. Researchers following this tradition have investigated socially learned behaviour from multiple dimensions. Culture is said to be an evolving entity; an argument to support this assertion is its transition from collectivism to individualism. An intergenerational analysis of Individualism–Collectivism can prove to be an engaging and interesting approach to the study of culture in psychology.
Modernization and Technology theories put forth plausible explanations for change or transition in the family institution. Ogburn (1947) in his landmark theory states that advancement in technology has the potential to change social behaviour. He wrote that one reason for social change is the introduction of different inventions and gadgets, “Technology changes our environment to which people, in turn, adapt”. The adaptations that we make in our social behaviours in becoming comfortable with technological advancements also changes and modifies the way people live, their customs and their “social institutions” (p. 84). Xu and Xia (2014), similar to Ogburn's observation, assert that modernization plays a major role in the transition of cultures. Hence, both these theories provide grounds for an assertion that modern life styles and new technologies, which include communication devices like phones and TV screens, have the potential to modify social behaviour and also aid in adopting newer ways of behaving. This transition can also be attributed to economic development, industrialisation and early economic independence of women.

**Current Study**

Research for this paper is part of a doctoral dissertation with three major objectives. The first was to find the partner selection criteria beyond the specific traits and characteristics among the female population in Pakistan. Consistent with the previous studies (e.g. Buss 1990; Hill 1945 and O’Neil 2009), it was predicted that traits women desire in a partner in a transitioning culture (i.e. Pakistan) would be distinct for religious and cultural reasons. The second goal was to assess the intergenerational differences, if any, among women. In line with earlier studies, (e.g. Buunk, Park and Duncan 2009; Bidjaria & Zahmatkeshb 2011; Huy, Jayakody, Knodel, and Loi 2004 and Mughani 2013) the transition in partner selection behaviour and choices were associated with the trajectories of socio-cultural and technological transitions and modernization. It was expected that in every subsequent generation of women in Pakistan, individualistic trends/values would be significantly more prominent in relation to their partner selection behaviour.

Third, it was assumed that older and middle-aged women would have experienced cultural change over the years. Hence, they might reflect some transition from collectivistic to individualistic values. However, a greater emphasis was to identify the individualistic values of younger women, engendered by socio-cultural change in Pakistan over the last 40 years.

**Research Method**

**Participants**

Participants included three cohorts of women from urban Lahore: grand-mothers (50 years old and above) and mothers (39-49 years old) of marriageable women (18-29 years old).
This selection method is based on Buss et al.’s (1990) study in which they suggest that for people living in one cultural group it is likely that they share common partner selection criteria; and on a study by Huy et al. (2004) which looked at three cohorts of women to examine changes in partner selection and marriage. To understand how marital relations developed over time, the current researchers recruited “three marriage cohorts”. The years in which the marriage was solemnised were targeted; for instance, the range of marriage dates from the first cohort (1963-1971), the second cohort (1977-1985) and then the most recent cohort (1992-2000) was selected to capture marital experience.

The sample size was kept flexible following qualitative methodology (Patton 2001). Therefore, N=18 participants were interviewed. In one set of interviews, three women from a family-one from each of the three age groups were interviewed. The families were selected based on the criteria of having three subsequent generations of women available for interviews. Upon reaching saturation, i.e. when the data reached the saturation point, the interviews were discontinued. The six young unmarried girls were university and college graduates. The middle-aged women participants were graduates (5 housewives and one working-woman). Six participants from the third cohort education ranged from grades 7 to 10. All twelve participants from the two older cohorts were married.

Semi-structured interviews

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to gain insight into the understanding of the participants’ partner-selection criteria. Keeping in perspective the discovery oriented constructivist approach, the semi-structured interview method was used. The interviews were conducted in a mix of daily conversation and storytelling styles to aid in understanding interviewee experiences and perspectives. The interview prompts relevant to the participants’ responses were reshaped simultaneously during the data collection. Each participant was interviewed on one occasion; an interview took approximately 40 minutes on average. The interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting, without any interruption. Some of the predefined probes included statements such as “Did you know about your partner before marriage? What were the characteristics of an ideal partner? Did you have anyone in mind before marriage? Do you find any change in the way young people are married these days? What are the changes? What do you think about intergenerational changes in partner selection and marriage? What are the reasons for these changes?”

Procedure

A purposive and criterion-based snowball sampling method was used to approach the interviewees. Participants (grandmothers and mothers) were selected since they had
experienced the partner selection process for themselves, and now they were considering the same process for their granddaughters or daughters respectively. Hence, they could articulate their lived experiences.

The quality of data was assessed critically, in tandem with its collection, keeping the research questions in view. The study was conducted strictly by following the APA ethical guidelines; consent for interviews was sought from all participants. The interviews were done by the researcher herself and recorded with prior permission in private rooms. The recordings were transcribed following the interview conduction and shared with the interviewees. Any information that could identify the participants was truncated to maintain their anonymity. All the names used in the discussion section are pseudonyms to conceal the identity of the interviewees.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were analysed using a thorough and iterative process of thematic analysis to create codes from the data. Key words and concepts narrated were extracted as codes. After identifying all significant, relevant, repetitive, and overlapping codes, they were clustered into emerging themes. These themes reflect experiences and criteria considerably important for women while selecting partners. Lengthy quotes from verbatim and rich descriptions are presented in the results as evidence of the research findings.

Results

Interview data was analysed using a selective coding technique. Similarly, repetitive codes were organized into categories to guide the analysis process of the data as shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Themes</th>
<th>Sub Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-Individual Qualities</td>
<td>1-Physical Appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2-Moral Virtues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-Social Identity</td>
<td>1-Family background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2-Social Status of the probable partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-Financial and/or Economic Aspects</td>
<td>1-Decent profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2-Capability to earn and support wife and children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D-Disempowerment of Women</td>
<td>1-Youngage marriages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2-No say in partner choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3-Ancestral Family decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4-Collectivist and Patriarchal values</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Our discussion with the respondents show that women interviewees possessed certain selection criteria which consisted mainly of the individual characters and identified qualities such as social identity, and financial and economic status.

The most significant set of findings involved an understanding of the process of partner selection in a predominantly patriarchal system, where partner selection leads to systematic disempowerment of women, as is illustrated in figure 1.3. A subtle reflection of disempowerment is found here which indicates how the process consolidates inferior and dependent status of women through marriage.

### Table 1.2 Generation Specific Themes and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generations</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| First Generations | 1-Family and Social-standing of the Partner.  
                      Virtuous.  
                      Individual / Personality traits i.e. patient, consultative,   
                      cooperative etc.                                                 |
| Second Generations | 1-Family and Social-standing of the Partner  
                      Individual / Personality traits i.e. patient, consultative,  
                      cooperative.  
                      Economic standing of the Partner                                  |
| Third Generations | 1-Compatibility/equality                                             
                      Individual / Personality traits                              
                      Economic standing of the Partner                                |

1.3  Illustrative diagram of factors leading to Systematic disempowerment of Women in Collectivistic, Patriarchal Social Systems.
The analysis also revealed specific patterns of partner selection for some generations, which are presented in the illustrative figures 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5.

1.4 Explanatory chart of primary Partner Selection Criteria of 1st Generation of women interviewees

1.5 Explanatory chart of primary Partner Selection Criteria of 2nd Generation of women interviewees

1.6 Explanatory Chart of Primary Partner Selection Criteria of 3rd Generation of women interviewees
DISCUSSION

Role of Women in marriage decisions and their partner choices

This study provides an insight into the forms of disempowerment, that women experience but fail to register and comprehend when it comes to making decisions regarding marriage and partner selection. A theme that emerged in the interview narratives of the first and second generations was that the interviewees expressed very few clear or crystalized choices about their probable partners. It is significant to note that all six of the interviewees from the first cohort were married at a considerably young age (between 10 years to 15 years). Given the young age at marriage and lack of exposure to the larger society, it is not surprising to find that women in the first cohort did not have any preconceived expectations for their intended partners.

Second, eleven interviewees from the first and second cohorts stated that they were married according to the decisions of family elders and had no say in the marriage decision-making, being young and naive. Some illustrative responses of interviewees are given below:

"I was not sensible enough at that time; I was only 6 months old when I got really sic., My grandmother said that if you commit her to someone she will get well, so my aunt said that she would marry her son to me if I survived. So that’s how I got married."

The aforementioned response points to a number of factors that come into play in a traditional and collectivist society while deciding marriage related matters. Among the key factors that contribute are the myths and irrational beliefs that define specific cultural practices and mores. These myths are so strongly ingrained in the minds of people that at times the unrealistic or even anti-religious/anti-Islamic nature of these practices does not deter them. One possible cause of such strong foundation of these myths could be the impact of other cultures in the subcontinent. It is argued that culture and religion both aid in shaping the worldview and perspectives of people adhering to them and influence their perceptions, thinking and concepts (Bradley, 2007).

Another interviewee said that “I was in grade 8th when marriage preparation started in my home; I wasn’t that sensible at that time”. In collectivist cultures, it is a common practice that girls are not allowed the agency and participation in their partner selection process or marriage decisions. This can be taken as evidence of women’s disempowerment. It is usually observed that in patriarchal societies, women have lived for long with low autonomy and a minimal say in decision-making in general. Disempowerment, or more appropriately limited empowerment, of women also reflects the amount of their say in marriage decisions and partner choice. Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) found similar evidence
in Punjab, Pakistan (p. 695). It can be asserted that women do not have a lot of agency to make decisions related to their marriage and selecting appropriate life partners. In arranged marriage setups, a woman’s disempowerment continues; post marriage, her husband or in-laws make most of her life’s decisions.

Another argument to support this discussion was put forth by Triandis (1995); he states that socialization in collectivist cultures is based upon obedience rather than fostering independent thinking. Thus, obedience in following orders and instructions is inculcated at a very young age in girls, which becomes a behavioural trait. The girl is duly informed about her marriage, but her say does not have an impact on the decisions taken by her family. Thus, she is usually given just one option: to accept the proposal and give her consent showing obedience. If the girl does not agree and asserts her own opinion, she is considered disobedient and disrespectful, a stigma on the family’s social reputation.

**Family Background and Social-stand of the Partner**

Participants from the first and second age-cohorts narrated that socio-familial background is the prime selection criteria in partner selection and marriage decisions. The socio-familial background may comprise any combination of several factors including caste, kinship, *biradri* (*biradari* is defined as “an association, attachment, emotional linkage and sharing common characteristics by an individual being a part of a particular group descended of the same ancestor”) and close blood relationships with the prospective partner. It was observed that in most cases the family and kinship of the prospective partner was the sole criterion used to finalize the marriage decision. It is interesting to note that five out of six interviewees in the first cohort and three out of six in second cohort were married to their first cousins.

Abida recalled that “my elder brother said how will we find such a pious and beautiful man for our sister” and Durdana mentioned that she was married to her paternal cousin “I had not seen him much. My mother went by herself and agreed to the proposal, and in a matter of 5 to 6 months I was married”.

However, in Bushra’s case, she got to know just a week or ten days before her marriage, “I was 15 years old, the marriage preparation was under way, I asked my mother whose marriage is it? She said your elder (girl) cousin is getting married. Eight days before the marriage my aunty came and I got to know that it was my marriage with my paternal cousin who was 10 years elder to me.”

It was also observed that the marriage decisions are taken while the girl is still in childhood and marriage bonds are solemnized by family elders. Kinship, caste and family background have been given a remarkable importance in Pakistan. Past research has found
kinship and caste to be major dealmakers in both marital choice and marriage decision making. The caste of the prospective partner, which can be taken as the equivalent of kinship in the subcontinent (Pakistan and India), is one of the most important and prominently featured criteria of partner selection. Strong evidence in favour of kinship and caste for shortlisting prospective partners has also been found (Banerjee, Duflo, Ghatak & Lafortune 2013).

**Virtuousness and Moral Character**

As earlier research by Park, Peterson and Seligman (2004) and Nakatani, et al. (2017) found, preference to be in a relationship with a person does depend on his/her morality, virtuousness and piety. One important feature determining the continuity of the relationship is the perceived morality of the prospective partner. People evaluate the relational outcomes based on whether the other person has been fair or unfair, morally upright and religiously similar (Singer et al., 2006). The virtuousness of the prospective partner was considered important by the interviewees in the first cohort alone. The majority of interviewees stated that they would like their husband to be a godly man who followed religious injunctions and prayed, who was pious, righteous, respectful, and virtuous with a high moral standard in general. Abida said that she wanted to marry someone who was “patient, pious, abstentious and religiously aware”. Farhana added to it by saying that “they were nice and decent people; my parents in law were religious and had a decent family background like proper people”.

It is interesting to note that virtuousness does not feature prominently as a desirable partner trait in most research on partner selection. Although virtuousness happens to be a set of traits, which benefits the individual him/herself, it is also related to relationship quality. Park, Petersen and Seligman, (2004) stated that virtuousness strengthens and builds relationships. In light of the research evidence, it can be asserted that the interviewees’ preference for virtuousness and high moral standards is an important factor that remains underexplored in collectivist cultures and needs to be studied in detail in terms of partner selection choices. It also indicates that in older generations, virtuousness and integrity were the most valued and desirably preferred traits in partner selection.

**Individual / Personality traits**

In traditional societies like Pakistan, marriage is seen not just as an agreement between two persons but also as an arrangement of extending family ties and biradri (Fuller & Narasimhan 2008). Marriage is a social event, and partner selection is done after much deliberation and consultation with family elders; it involves a long discussion of the deal-
making or breaking factors (Mason, 1995). The three cohorts interviewed for the current research have given a detailed account of the preferred characteristics they would want in a prospective partner. However, there is a clear difference in the desirable traits indicated by the three groups of women. The older women mostly talked about criteria such as piety, virtuousness, religiosity and physical appearance as their desired traits in men when they were young; whereas the second generation of women interviewees talked about appearance but also stressed the education and working/earning capacity of a partner.

The second generation appeared to be more concerned about the security of their future. They further talked about the desire and significance of love, care and understanding between married partners. The desires for love and care were completely missing among the notions of the earlier generation. The second generation of women was born in the late 1960’s and the 1970’s. During those years’ education was becoming accessible and women were entering higher education primarily in urban towns with better managed educational facilities. As television was introduced in the late 60’s, availability and access to media and information also stirred social change. Hence, the women born and growing up in the decade of 1960-70 had different thinking styles and opinions.

Desirable traits mentioned by the third and youngest born generation included traits such as independence to make choices, freedom to work and socialise, compatibility and communicativeness, equality in relationship and mutual respect for each other. Such a bold desire to have a strong position in married relationship is not only unheard and unseen in Pakistani society but for long it was considered as a sign of modernisation, westernisation and insolence. The third generation, born in the 1990’s, grew up in an era of media and technology boom in Pakistan. These young people learned the use of new gadgets and had easy and affordable access to the internet. Their information horizon expanded exponentially, and the youngest-born generation could reach the world with a click. Educational advancements, an information surge and the technological revolution all together have given rise to a generation of very different, strong, independent and opinionated women.

Similar evidence was also presented by South, Trent and Bose (2016), that modernization has led to a more vocal and opinionated generation of young women who have more crystallised notions of desired traits in a partner and are more vocal about their expectations from a marriage, as compared to older cohorts. The traits desired by the three cohorts are given in table 1.3 below:
Table 1.3 - Intergenerational Comparative partner selection criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Generation</th>
<th>2nd Generation</th>
<th>3rd Generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good looking</td>
<td>Handsome</td>
<td>Good looking, Tall, clean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tall</td>
<td>Good looking</td>
<td>independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Educated</td>
<td>Sharing of workload/cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smart</td>
<td>Caring, loving</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward looking</td>
<td></td>
<td>Compatible, communicative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based upon the choices indicated by the three cohorts of women, the differences are quite visible. These differences can be attributed to a socio-cultural transition due to better education of women (Ghimire, Axinn, Yabiku, & Thornton 2006), economic independence modernization, urbanization (South, Trent & Bose 2016) and technological advancement (Rosenfeld, 2016). The transition from skewed traditional values to more contemporary and balanced practices is evident in the narratives of the mother and the grandmother interviewees. The transition in the prevailing traditional, collectivist trend is felt when the parents support their daughters to have a say in marriage matters, unlike those of the preceding generation.

One of the interviewee from the first cohort, Naveen, said that “it is religiously prescribed to ask girls before their marriage. I did inform my daughters about their marriage proposals”. It is also important to note that this information sharing with the daughters was merely to inform them, not to ask for their active participation or consent.

However, the present-day mothers believe that now young girls are more aware, sensible and well informed. They are better educated, they interact with different people in school/university and at work and hence they can judge people and make an informed decision about their life partners.

Another illustrative quote by a mother from the second age-cohort states that.

You know the time has changed; children are now educated, sensible and they tell what they want. Our religion also prescribes that when children come of age it’s alright to consult them. Their opinion should be given due importance because they have to spend their lives together. I feel I agreed to my father’s decisions very easily and said yes straight away, without even seeing what he looked like; I saw him (the husband) after marriage.

Economic Standing of the Partner

The economic status of a prospective partner featured in detail only in the narratives of the second and third cohorts (Table 1.4). The difference of choices between the second and
third cohorts can be reflective of the outcomes of successive educational advancement, early economic independence and ease of access to technology. The era of the 1990-2000’s, when the third cohort was born and growing up, saw dizzying educational, economic and technological advancements in Pakistan. However, these advancements gained momentum and have become part of everyday life in recent years. These factors, besides many other aspects, have also led to a leap of differences in choices/desirable traits of partners. The older cohort of women considers economic stability more important, while the recent-born cohort wants economic affluence and a comfortable life style.

Young women seek an “educated and professionally strong man”, while earlier-born cohorts sought “property and land ownership” in addition to the “education of partner”. The desirability of the older cohort to marry a land and/or property owner reflects a traditional, collectivist, agrarian mind-set that considered business and ownership as a status symbol, while employment was not as attractive as it seemed to the young generation. It is pertinent to mention that in traditional or collectivist cultures strong lineage and inheritance is given much importance. Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) also found that landownership is closely related to economic status in India and Pakistan. Land and property inheritance plays a major role in deciding about partner selection, so that family land and property may remain in the family. Hence, most marriage decisions were made in the family deliberately without considering the parity of the prospective couple. However, educationally and technologically-equipped and economically independent young women have moved ahead; they desire and express different choices and more individualistic standards of partner selection.

Table 1.4 - 2nd and 3rd Generation Specific Criteria of Economic Status of the Partner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2nd Generation Specific Economic Status of the Partner</th>
<th>3rd Generation Specific Economic Status of the Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Enabling To Earn a Comfortable Living</td>
<td>Educated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decent Job or Business</td>
<td>Decent Profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>Affluent Family Background</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Desire for Equality and Compatibility

Another theme that stood out in the accounts of the youngest generation of interviewees was their desire to have autonomy and compatibility/equality in their relationship with a prospective partner. We define autonomy as freedom to choose a partner, give assent to or disagree to a marriage proposal. These young women stated that they would want to be familiar with the prospective partner. Young women want the freedom to assess their
compatibility and ability to have a long-term relationship. They wish to have a sense of equity in the married relationship. This desire for greater autonomy and role equity has emerged from educational, economic and technological advancements. Better educated, economically independent and technologically equipped women of the most recent cohort demand the freedom that their predecessors (i.e. mothers and grandmother) could not enjoy. Education and an active working life that give economic independence to young women not only foster freedom of speech, but when young people from diverse social backgrounds come together, they exchange ideas. Social exposure and increased networks enhance their choices, and the pool of prospective partners from which they can select a partner expands extensively. Stouffer (1955) advocated that education serves as an agent of modernisation by fostering diffusion of cultural values such as equality and freedom. Bengston (1975) and Bidjari and Zahmatkesh (2011) have also found a strong relationship between educational attainment and individualistic values in Iran.

Implications

The research findings are important in terms of contribution to the expansion of understanding of successive transition and resultant cultural change. After having examined socio-cultural changes from the side of Pakistani women regarding partner selection choices, this research provides a deeper understanding for family and marriage counsellors to resolve partner conflicts. It also offers insight as to how systematic disempowerment can influence women and their relationships before and after marriage. Furthermore, it provides potential to enhance the appraisal of relationship stress-coping options, in case of forced marriages.

The findings of this study could help relationship and marriage counsellors significantly when it comes to working with their married, and soon-to-be-married, women and men clients. Since implications for a professional-client relationship would indeed be favourable, Sue et al (2008) have stated that “a critical goal of counselling remains the development of a deep personal relationship between a helping professional and client that involves appropriate interpersonal interactions” (p. 24).

The choice of “purposive criterion procedures” to select participants was a limitation of this study, since it is assumed that the inclusion of targeted age groups represents some, but not all, strata of age groups. Nevertheless, the findings from this study do contribute to the limited existing literature on pre-marriage partner selection choices and criteria; moreover, the findings extend knowledge that can be beneficial for marriage, relationship and family counsellors.
Conclusion

The findings of the study showed that women consider certain aspects important while choosing partners. The obtained criteria can be seen as validating previous studies in general but certain preferences were cohort specific while others were culture specific. The first and second cohorts of women preferred traits such as family ties, piousness, education and economic stability. While the young women seek educational, economic and social compatibility, the first and second cohorts of grandmothers and mothers respectively were found to have a complacent, yielding and accepting behaviour for the decisions made about their marriages. The youngest cohort was found to be more assertive, vocal, precise and clear about their preferences while choosing a partner or making a marriage-decision. The reason behind the difference in choice, between the three cohorts could be the impact of socio-cultural transition. One of the critical finding is the subtle discernment of systematic disempowerment of women in the first two age-cohorts due to the centuries-old value system and culture of adherence to family/social norms. It was seen that the basic criteria to choose a partner, i.e. physical appearance and social background slightly overlap across the generations. However, differences were prominent in terms of desirability of compatibility, freedom and equality in relationship across the three subsequent generations of women.

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Inter-generational Differences in Partner Selection Criteria


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