

**RESTRAINED BY *UYAT* [SHAME]: CULTURE OF DATING AND ROMANTIC
RELATIONSHIPS AMONG URBAN KYRGYZ YOUTH**

by

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Restrained by *Uyat* [Shame]: Culture of Dating and Romantic Relationships among Urban Kyrgyz Youth

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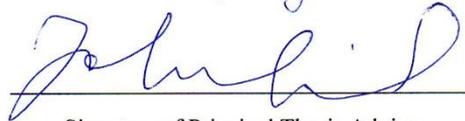
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Abstract

This thesis is an exploratory qualitative study of the culture of premarital dating and romantic relationships among urban Kyrgyz youth in the city of Bishkek. Drawing from focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews with young people, I analyze socio-cultural norms and expectations regarding premarital relationships in Kyrgyz society, as well as present young urbanites' experiences of these phenomena. I argue that dating and romantic relationships are socially approved practices in Kyrgyz society mainly because they are viewed as precursors to marriage – an important social institution. However, the approval comes with certain limitations – among them the most pronounced is condemnation of premarital sex in relation to women. While young men allegedly enjoy the freedom of their sexuality, young Kyrgyz women are strongly discouraged from engaging in premarital sex. *Uyat* – a local concept of shame is used as a mechanism of controlling correct gender performance, as well as an instrument of punishment for deviant behavior. Restrained by *uyat*, women are finding creative ways of upholding the social norms – their aim is neither subordination nor subversion, but rather finding new ways of operating in the given reality. Moreover, I posit that men, given their sexual freedom, also face sexual pressure, although of a different nature than women. Furthermore, it is not only the larger society which sees premarital dating as a prelude to marriage, young people also view dating as leading to marriage. Thus, they approach the choice of a potential partner with care. Among the factors of importance for young people are one's socio-economic status – such as quality of received education and financial background. Less important for young people are their prospective mate's ethnical, religious and regional background, however, they understand that these factors are important for their families, relatives and even the larger society.

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I dedicate this work to my family.

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Introduction

This thesis is an exploratory qualitative study of the culture of premarital dating and romantic relationships among urban, educated Kyrgyz youth. The study of premarital relationships among young people in Kyrgyz society is a relatively under-researched topic in contemporary academic literature. The majority of anthropological discussions surrounding the issues of gender and sexuality in Kyrgyz society have tended to focus on the phenomenon of bride abduction (Borbieva, 2012; Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007; Kleinbach, Ablezova, & Aitieva, 2005; Werner, 2009). It has been argued that unlike other countries, including the neighboring Central Asian states, the tradition of kidnapping a bride is still widely-practiced in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, especially among rural population (Werner, 2009). This has created a discourse that marriages in Kyrgyz society have a coerced character, and that women have no freedom of personal choice.

However, having had an experience of living in Kyrgyzstan for more than ten years, I witnessed that young Kyrgyz in my circle of friends and acquaintances – urban and educated – did not consider bride abduction as an option for establishing a family. Perhaps this is because they possessed different beliefs and values in comparison to rural youth. Instead many of them were involved in dating and romantic relationships, which they viewed as a pathway to marriage. But being engaged in premarital romantic relationships in Kyrgyz context meant dealing with multiple issues regarding the correct gender and sexual behaviors. For instance, while men were not very much concerned about their sexuality and enjoyed sexual freedom, women had to keep their chastity until marriage. Some of the young women, who “lost their virginity” before marriage, even if they considered themselves as educated and liberal women, were afraid they will not be able to get married in the future because they thought they would no longer be considered “pure” and worthy of marrying.

Given these I became very interested in how urban, educated young adults in Kyrgyz society experience premarital romantic relationships. Consequently, in this study I analyze the socio-cultural norms and expectations regarding premarital relationships in Kyrgyz society, as well as reveal how the phenomena of dating and romantic relationships is experienced by Kyrgyz youth. Thus, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the socio-cultural norms and expectations regarding premarital sexual behaviors in contemporary Kyrgyz society from the perspective of urban, educated Kyrgyz youth?
2. How do urban, university educated Kyrgyz youth experience premarital dating and romantic relationships?
3. What are the partner selection criteria of urban, educated young people?

Design of the Study

As the main aim of this study was to discover socio-cultural norms and expectations regarding premarital dating and romantic relationships in Kyrgyz society, as well as to explore urban Kyrgyz youth's perceptions and experiences of these phenomena, I used an exploratory qualitative research method. The exploratory qualitative method is often described as a "naturalistic, interpretive approach, concerned with exploring phenomena "from the interior" (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013, p. 3).

The primary data is obtained from two mixed-sex focus group discussions and twelve individual in-depth interviews. A qualitative purposive sample strategy was used to select the participants for the study. The participants of the study were unmarried, heterosexual young men and women of Kyrgyz ethnicity, aged 18 to 25 years old, who have received full-time university education or were enrolled at a full-time higher education program, and lived in Bishkek city at the time of the research (July-August 2017). The participants had to be unmarried, as the research focuses on the experiences of premarital dating and romantic relationships. I assumed that unmarried young people have a more recent experience, and thus can reflect on their

perceptions and experiences in more detail. The ethnicity of the participants was important to me as my research focuses on social norms and values shared by people of Kyrgyz ethnicity. The age group of 18 to 25 years old was selected because at this age young people are likely to engage in dating and romantic relationships. During the recruitment process I did not specify the sexual orientation of potential participants, but all of the participants who volunteered to participate claimed to be heterosexuals. Educated, urban citizens were of a particular interest to me as I assumed that this category of people are more exposed to liberal values promoted by popular media and other sources of information. Thus, these individuals are likely to have beliefs and values different from the conventional ones.

All of the interviews were conducted in Russian, however, the participants used occasional code switching between Russian and Kyrgyz. The detailed composition of the focus group interviews as well as a short background information about the participants of the individual interviews can be found in the appendices section of this study.

Participation in this study was on a completely voluntary basis. Potential coercion in subject recruitment was eliminated by using recruitment method (e-flyers, printed flyers, snowball sampling) that ensured the participants had sufficient time to decide if they want to take part in the study. The participants did not receive any material compensation for their participation in this study.

During focus group interviews I did not ask questions about personal experiences of the participants. All the examples of personal experience that appears in this study from the participants of the focus group discussion were brought by the participants' own decision. The interview questions for the group interviews were designed to obtain data on social norms and cultural expectations regarding premarital dating and romantic relationships in the given context. As for individual interviews, I aimed to explore individual dating and romantic experiences of young people.

Thesis Organization

This thesis is organized as follows. In the first chapter I discuss aspects of dating and romantic relationships in the context of Kyrgyz culture from the perspective of urban young people. I analyze why romantic relationships are socially approved phenomena, and discuss social norms and cultural expectations regarding these practices. In the second chapter of my thesis, I review one of the important aspects of dating and romantic relationships – that is premarital sex. It is a largely socially condemned practice in Kyrgyz culture and therefore I devote a large part of this work for its discussion. In the last chapter of this work, I explore partner preferences of young people – this aspect is particularly important as young people view dating and romantic relationships as a pathway to marriage, and therefore approach the selection of their partners with care.

Chapter I. Aspects of Dating and Romantic Relationships among Urban Kyrgyz Youth

Introduction

In many societies, especially western ones, dating is a dominant script of premarital interactions between individuals who are romantically interested in each other (Bailey, 1989; Bogle, 2008). Although dating is an informal private matter entailing in itself emotional and physical intimacy between two individuals (Joyner & Udry, 2000), sociologists and anthropologists regard dating as being a public act because it includes in itself publicly-expressed practices and social activities (Bailey, 1989; Bogle, 2008; Braboy Jackson et al., 2011). Moreover, dating is a largely social practice because it is often regarded as a precursor to marriage – an important social institution. It is assumed that by spending time together, the couple assesses the possibility of deepening their relationship, and possibly taking it to a next stage – permanent partnership, or, in a traditional sense, marriage (Bailey, 1989; Laws & Schwartz, 1977; Levesque & Caron, 2004). Thus, potential outcome of dating makes it largely a public matter as well as socially approved phenomenon (Bailey, 1989; Ginsburg, 1988).

Because dating is largely a publicly-expressed practice and the society is so invested in it, it often comes with a range of societal and cultural norms which prescribe cultural insiders normative dating behaviors. These prescriptions determine the acceptability of premarital romantic involvement, the age at which one may start dating, gender roles in dating encounters etc. (Ginsburg, 1988; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). In theoretical literature, these socio-cultural expectations and rules about premarital romantic relationships are called dating scripts (Ginsburg, 1988), or because the cultural norms are highly gendered, Simon and Gagnon (1986) refer to them as sexual scripts. These dating and sexual scripts determine the sequence of events and appropriate dating behaviors within individuals' romantic encounters, and exist at cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal levels (Ginsburg, 1988; Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Using the theories of dating and sexual scripts proposed by Ginsburg (1988) and Simon and Gagnon (1986), in this chapter I reflect on aspects of premarital dating and romantic relationships among urban Kyrgyz youth. Particularly, I discuss the socio-cultural acceptability of dating and romantic relationships, the acceptable age of dating, ways through which young Kyrgyz urbanites meet their dates, and how dating is initiated.

My arguments in this section rely on concepts that require definition. Before I proceed further, I find it necessary to explain such concepts as “dating” and “romantic relationship” which I use in this chapter, and generally in this study. As my interviews were conducted in Russian, I used the following phrases in Russian as *vstrechat'sia s kem-libo* – which is translated as dating someone, *romanticheskie ontosheniia* – translated as romantic relationship to ask the participants about their experiences of romantic interaction with the opposite sex. My interviewees, in turn, interchangeably used the same phrases to talk about their experiences. Therefore, in this context I am going to use the concepts as dating and romantic relationship together and interchangeably.

Theoretical Framework: Dating and Sexual Scripts

As mentioned, for the analysis of romantic interactions within a cultural context, scholars employ theory of dating and sexual scripts (Ginsburg, 1988; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). The core idea of the theory is that each society has dating and sexual scripts that act as schematic guidelines that help cultural insiders to organize, interpret and predict the behavior of each other in romantic and/or sexual encounters. (Ginsburg, 1988; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Although it is assumed that culture predominantly influences and shapes normative dating and sexual scripts, the theorists claim that there are also interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. Consequently, individuals' beliefs, values and behaviors in situations which involve romantic and/or sexual interaction are determined by reciprocal influence of all the three levels – cultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Ginsburg, 1988; Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

It is assumed that culture-level dating and sexual scripts are dominant determiners and influencers of individuals' sexual beliefs, behaviors and desires. Often, culture-level scripts are highly gendered, and prescribe different roles for men and women. For instance, traditional dating and sexual scripts prescribe men more active roles than to women – they are expected to be the initiators of the relationships and sex, the ones pushing those to the next level of intimacy, the ones desiring sex, preferring recreational sex over relationships, being sexually more experienced than women, and preferring multiple partners. Whereas women are often portrayed as being desired but not desiring relationships and sex, having weaker sexual drives in comparison to men, resisting the advancement of intimacy, preferring sex within relationships rather than no-strings sex, desiring of committed relationships, and oriented towards one partner rather than multiple partners (Ginsburg, 1988; Masters, Casey, Wells, & Morrison, 2013; Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Interpersonal and intrapersonal dating and sexual scripts either reinforce or sometimes reshape the conventional culture-level scripts. Masters and colleagues (2013) in their discussion of intra- and interpersonal scripts, categorize individuals into conformers and transformers. In the first category, there are individuals whose behavior and actions are often largely congruent with the culture-level scripts. Among those there are conforming participants –their personal scripts for feminine and masculine sexual behaviors are largely similar with conventional ones, and they tend to accept these scripts as natural and normal; individuals with conflicted conformity – this type of people feel dissatisfied with the culture-level dating and sexual scripts, but they see no other alternatives, and therefore conform; and exception-finding individuals – they do not bother changing the culture-level gender scripts, but rather accept them as a given, but they create exceptions for themselves or try to find partners who are exceptions to these rules. Those individuals whose behavior and actions do not conform the conventional dating and sexual cultural scripts, are referred to as transforming individuals. The people who fall into this category do not accept mainstream culture-level dating, sexual and gender scripts; they create

their own inter- and intrapersonal scripts and act based on them. These individuals are divided into two: unconscious transformers – these are implicit transformers who take their intra- and/or interpersonal scripts’ legitimacy for granted and they do not make any explicit attempts or open conflicts with the culture-level scripts; and conscious transformers – these are explicit transformers who want the culture-level scripts to be congruent with their own inter- and/or intrapersonal scripts, and therefore sometimes deliberately make attempts to transform them.

Dating and Romantic Relationships as Socially Approved Phenomena

According to the participants of the study, premarital dating is a widespread practice among urban Kyrgyz youth. All the young people with whom I conducted individual interviews told me that they had at least once been on a date and had had an experience that could be described as a “romantic relationship”. The participants of the focus group discussions also noted that young people in their society often experience romantic relationships before they get married. “It is a very normal practice when a guy and a girl date each other and try to build a romantic relationship”, says one of the female participants of the second focus group interview. The fact that all the informants report having had experienced romantic relationships, and the references of the participants of the focus group discussion to dating as often experienced “normal practice” suggests that in Kyrgyz society dating and romantic relationships among urban youth are widespread, as well as socially approved phenomena.

Dating and romantic relationships are socially approved practices mainly because they are expected to result in marriage. Young people have a certain degree of freedom to find the “right” mate with whom they will be able to create a family. Many participants of the study highlight that young people after reaching certain age feel pressure from their circle of friends and acquaintances, parents and relatives who often remind them of the need to be dating someone in order to get married. The following are the quotes of some of the informants that illustrate this:

When you meet your old classmates, teachers or friends the first question they would ask you if you got married or if you are dating someone. If you say no they look at you with regret. It is an inconvenient situation (female, focus group interview 1).

Whenever our relatives come to visit us, they all ask me if I have found a good girl and if I was going to marry soon (male, focus group Interview 2).

Although these informants perceive the societal reminders about the need to get married as a pressure, the way other young people talk about dating and romantic relationships illustrates that they view these practices as a pathway to marriage. As a participant of the second focus group interview put it, “[...] this is probably a natural outcome of life when a man and a woman in any case want to create a family”. Many of the individual interview participants report being either in a “serious relationship” (Russian: *ser'ioznye otnosheniia*) or indicate their wish to be in a “serious relationship” – which imply that young people approach romantic relationship “with a vision to the future”, that is marriage.¹

In other words, the findings suggest that on a culture-level scripts, dating and romantic relationships are socially approved practices in Kyrgyz society because they are seen as preludes to marriage. This is evidenced by societal reminders that young people receive about the need to be dating with someone in order to get married. Although these reminders might be perceived as pressure, young people themselves also view dating and romantic relationships as leading to marriage. This suggests that young people are acting in socially approved ways.

When to Date?

In Western societies, most individuals begin dating during their adolescence years while still under the care of their parents (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). My findings suggest that similarly to young people in the West, Kyrgyz youth starts experiencing dating and romantic relationships during their adolescence years. Many young people, when asked about their first

¹ “With a vision to future” – in Russian: *s pritselom na budusheye* – this is a phrase that was used by one of the individual interview participants Tomiris (22 years old). I find it particularly illustrative in this case.

experience of romance, recall their high school years. They describe their experiences with opposite sex as being comprised of “just talking” (Russian: *prosto obshalis*), “strolling in the park after school”, “eating ice-cream”, “texting each other [via mobile phone]” etc. They do not mention any sexual experiences other than “kissing each other on the cheek”, “first kiss”, “hugs”.²

Furthermore, many of them do not attach importance to their adolescence romantic experiences, and regard them as being “nothing serious” (Female, Focus Group Interview 2).³ One of the respondents characterized the type of romantic relationships that adolescents experience as “*to’ok suyuu*” – “chicken love” – a humorous expression from Kyrgyz to denote romantic relationships in which the couple is not “truly in love with each other” (female, focus group interview 2). *To’ok suyuu*, as another participant explains, can be used as a metaphor to denote a type of relationship between the two teenagers who interact with each other in a romantic sense, but whose relationship most probably is not going to lead to “anything serious” (male, focus group interview 2).

Although, dating and romantic relationship during adolescence is a widespread practice among teenagers, the informants of the focus group discussions note that dating at this age is often discouraged by parents. One of the informants explains this as followingly: “parents usually do not allow their teenage children to date because they think it is still early and the child can do some nonsensical and silly things” (male, focus group interview 2). He further explains that by “nonsense” and “silly things” he means engagement in early sexual relationships. This restrictiveness applies especially to females. As it was brought up by the participants of the focus group discussion Kyrgyz parents restrict their adolescent daughters’ dating activity mainly due to

² I have taken these descriptions from several individual interviews and the two focus group interviews. They are not addressed only by one interviewee.

³ This expression “nothing serious” was used by one of the participants of the second group interview, but I find it useful as, in my opinion, it also describes the attitudes of other informants regarding their experiences of romantic relationships during their adolescent years.

the potentially negative consequences such as unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and also because premarital sex is a socially condemned practice in Kyrgyz society.

However, as participants further note, Kyrgyz parents are reluctant to discuss these issues with their adolescent children because talking about sex is a taboo topic – “they do not talk about sex and its negative consequences because traditions do not allow that. It is *uyat* (Kyrgyz: “shame”)” (female, focus group interview 2). Here *uyat* – shame, is referred to as a moral code which restrain parents from discussing issues concerning about sex and contraception. Therefore, parents prefer to simply discourage their teenage children to interact with the opposite sex in romantic frames to avoid the unwanted consequences. “Parents should explain them, but instead they forbid it” (female, focus group interview 2).

Stephanie Madsen (2008) in her research about how European-American parents manage their adolescent’s dating behavior, found out that some parents act as supervisors – they set rules which require the teenager to tell the parents about his or her dating activities, other parents use prescriptive rules – those are rules that specify how the adolescent is supposed to behave with a date or in a dating relationship, and the last type of parents use restrictive rules that place limitation on the adolescent’s dating activity. Kyrgyz parents, in Madsen’s distinction, fall under the third category – by not allowing their teenage children to engage in dating and romantic relationship they are being restrictive. They prefer setting strict limitations rather than explaining the negative consequences, or prescribing rules.

Although Kyrgyz youth are discouraged by their families to engage in romantic relationships during their adolescence, as soon as they start university, these practices become more acceptable. Moreover, as some participants note as one approaches the marital age dating is even encouraged because ideally it is expected to lead to marriage. According to the informants, this usually falls to the period when one is at university or is about to graduate from university.

The following dialogue between participants of the first focus group interview illustrates this well:

Female: “Once you start university everyone begins asking if you have started dating anyone, and then soon they ask when you are going to get married”.

Female: “Yes the society constantly reminds you of this [of marriage].

Male: “My parents keep asking this question, and not only my parents, but my relatives also when they come to visit us”.

Another informant explains that “[...] during the first two years of the university you are expected to concentrate on studies, but later when you are a third and fourth-year student, everyone starts asking you if you are dating anyone, and then soon they ask when you are going to get married” (female, focus group interview 1). Thus, in Kyrgyz society the most acceptable period for establishing dating and romantic relationships for young people is when one graduates from school and starts attending university.

However, as the participants of both focus group discussions note, despite dating and romantic relationships are widespread and socially acceptable practices during the university years, the approval comes with certain limits: “[...] in the Kyrgyz sense, the relationships of romantic nature are accepted, however those should not include sex” (female, focus group interview 2). Here, the participant means sexual intercourse. Indeed, premarital sex is a largely condemned practice according to the Kyrgyz culture-level social scripts, and in the discussion of dating and romantic relationships it is an important aspect that requires close attention and analysis. This issue is discussed in the second chapter of this thesis.

Dating Initiation

Among the participants of the study there is a general perception that dating initiation should be on the part of man. During both focus group interviews, when I asked the question about who should be the initiator of dating and relationships, almost all the participants at once

said it should be “the guy”. However, when I asked why it should be a man, my respondents did not give me a clear answer. As an informant put it, “it is just like that” (female, focus group interview 2). Instead, the respondents preferred to explain and give reasons to why a woman should not be the initiator. When a woman asks a man out, she risks being perceived as “easy-going” and “not a good girl”:

“According to the stereotypes, if a girl asks a guy out it means that the guy will think she is easy-going and because of this the guy might lose his interest in her very soon” (female, focus group interview 2).

“[...] if a girl is the one who is running after the guy, it means that she is not a good girl” (male, focus group interview 2).

The respondents’ inability to explain why the initiation should be on part of a man illustrates that on the culture-level dating and sexual scripts this is considered to be a strong norm, and therefore most of the participants unquestionably conform to the belief that sexual initiation is an inherently masculine behavior.

In case when a woman does not feel indifferent towards a man she should not tell him directly about her feelings, but rather ‘hint and wait’ to predict how the man feels about her (female, focus group interview 2).

“Even if you like the guy a lot, it is not very acceptable to tell him that directly. You can still show your interest, but you should veil it. (Russian: *eto dolzhno byt’ zavualirovano*). If the guy is similarly attracted to you, he will make some initiatives, if he does not – there is nothing to catch” (Russian: *tam nechego lovit’*) (female, group interview 1).

Furthermore, respondents note that a woman should play a ‘hard-to-get’: “She should act like a fleeing doe” (Russian: *ona dolzhna byt’ toi samoi ubegayushei lan’iu*) (female, focus group interview 1). “Yes, speaking stereotypically, a girl should be like a ripe apple at the top of the tree which is there for the best man to get it” (female, group interview 1). This means that culture-level dating and sexual scripts prescribe women a certain image: apart from being unable to initiate a dating on her behalf, a Kyrgyz woman is expected to project an image of a hard-to-reach woman.

It is assumed that such behavior adds value to a woman's worthiness in the eyes of the man interested in her and in front of a larger society.

One of the female participants of the first group interview, Kanyshai, disagreed with the norm that dating initiation should exclusively be on part of a man. She thinks "there is nothing wrong with women who make the first step", and she also confessed that her last relationship had been initiated by her:

"I was the one to ask my current boyfriend out. I told him that I want to be in a relationship with him. We dated each other for quite a while and then I asked him to marry me. Again, I told him very directly that I need a stamp in my passport and a status because I was not going to give birth to a child out of wedlock. He said ok, no problem". (female, focus group interview 1).

Kanyshai's attempt to challenge the established norm makes her fall into the category of conscious transformers as she is aware of the norm, however she explicitly challenges it in front of her peers during the focus group discussion. However, this was not eagerly supported by other participants as they still believed that it is not appropriate for women to be the first to suggest dating:

There are few brave girls as Kanyshai. Of course, it is good when a girl is like that [brave], but still a girl should not be the one to make the first step" (male, focus group interview 2).

There are some girls who are not afraid of a public shame and they make the first step, but most of us are assured that we should not be the one who makes the first attempt, so we just sit and wait [...] because if you approach a man by yourself, he might think there is something wrong with you" (female, focus group interview 2).

Many female participants have expressed their concern about being pressured by parents, relatives, and larger community regarding marriage. When women reach certain age, usually this is the period after university graduation, they are expected to get married and when they do not do so, they face outside pressure. Often, these are pesky questions about when one is going to get married. Despite this, there is a strongly held view that women must not certainly be the first to express feeling, show interest and initiate a date. Moreover, they are expected to project an

image of a hard-to-reach woman to be seen as valuable. Those women who violate these prescriptions are very likely to damage their reputation. The only acceptable option in case a woman feels indifferent towards a man, is to use certain behavioral cues to predict if the man is interested in her. However, even if the interest is mutual, it would be more acceptable to wait until the man takes the initiative.

Where do young people usually meet each other?

Social Networks

My findings suggest that online technologies such as social networks are widely used by young Kyrgyz urbanites to get acquainted with someone of the opposite sex. As the informants note, the commonly used platforms are *Facebook, Instagram and VKontakte*. These platforms allow them to create personalized profiles of themselves, review the profiles of other people, send expressions of interest to each other, and facilitate communication through instant messages.

Many informants told me that they have at least once used social networks as a tool to meet someone for dating purposes. While some participants have used social networks to establish communication with someone they have already met offline, others use them partially as a dating tool to meet people they have not met before. For example, a participant of the second group interview uses social networks to communicate with women he had met offline: “I usually send friend requests to girls whom I have met at an event or somewhere else. If my request is accepted, I would send her a message. Afterwards, if we like each other we can decide to meet offline” (male, focus group interview 2). Others had used social networks to search for new people. For example, Talant (male, 24 years old, individual interview) and Jyrgal (female, 24 years old, individual interview), two of my interviewees who are dating each other, first met online through Facebook. Tomiris (female, 21 years old, individual interview) also met her

current boyfriend online: “It is funny, but nevertheless... he gave me a like on Instagram and then messaged me. And then everything started”.

According to one participant “social networks are easy way to get to know someone especially when you do not really have time to go out to meet someone” (female, focus group interview 2). Moreover, young people, especially women, might find a strong advantage in using social networks:

A lot of girls are shy to approach a guy and show interest. Maybe this is because traditions do not allow women to be the initiators. This is why it is easier to put a like on the guy’s photo and start talking to him. Internet is sort of a neutral territory” (female, focus group interview 2).

As it was discussed earlier, according to the culture-level dating and sexual scripts of Kyrgyz society, dating initiation should exclusively be on part of a man. However, the informant’s suggestion above adds a new dimension to the discussion about the dating initiation. Her way of referring to the internet as a “neutral territory” suggests that some women might perceive the internet as a place where social norms and cultural expectations might not be as important, and thus eliminate certain culture-level scripts. Such individuals fall into a category of exception-finders – they are aware of culture-level scripts, but they do not challenge them. Instead they find exceptions for themselves, in this case the internet as being seen a neutral territory is perceived as an exceptional place.

Although, social networks are very popular among young people, dating websites and applications are not as eagerly used. As an informant explains: “people tend to judge those who intentionally register on a dating website to get acquainted with the opposite sex. It is considered *uyat* (Kyrgyz: “shame”). That is why people prefer social networks, or if they chose to use a dating service they register under a pseudonym” (female, focus group interview 2). Another participant suggests that dating services “[...] have a bad reputation [...] a person who is using them might be perceived as looking for casual sex” (Male, Focus Group Interview 2). The concept of *uyat* again appears in this context – the fear of being judged if spotted using a dating

service restrains people from using them. Whereas, profile on social networks does not imply that a person might be intentionally using it for dating purposes.

Social opportunities

According to the participants, among other circumstances at which young people might meet someone of an opposite sex are university, work, trainings, conferences, and various social events. These venues provide an opportunity for youngsters to socialize with each other, and subsequently, establish new connections which can grow into romantic relationships. In an informant's opinion, this method of getting acquainted with the opposite sex is a good way to meet like-minded people (female, focus group interview 1). Moreover, in my opinion, as the aim of these types of events is to meet for different purposes as education or work, and not primarily to establish romantic relationships, it might be especially welcomed by young people because it does not put them into an uncomfortable position regarding themselves, and fosters communication between people that is supposed to begin with different purposes than dating.

Referencing

Referencing is another way of getting to know someone for romantic purposes. It requires an intermediary person who happens to know both parties and can facilitate their further acquaintanceship by introducing the two to each other. Often, as informants of the second focus group interview explain, this is not necessarily a physical meeting of those three people, but rather an exchange of phone numbers: an intermediary gives the phone number of a woman to a man who is interested in meeting her.

According to an informant, referencing is practiced usually by men who “would like to find a good girl for marriage” (female, focus group interview 2). As she further explains:

Those who are older than twenty-three do not have time for those games. They want to create a family and they look for someone through their friends and acquaintances because they can provide references regarding the girl.

But usually this is practiced by guys as for girls it is considered *uyat* (Kyrgyz: shame) (female, focus group interview 2).

As the participants explain, referencing might be especially valuable for men once they start looking for a woman to establish “serious” relationships for marriage purposes. Referencing allows men to ensure that the reputation of a woman he might get along with is ‘socially clean’ since other people will suggest her stand in society.

Parents as matchmakers

According to my findings, Kyrgyz parents sometimes act as matchmakers for their children when they think it is time for their children to get married. They often try to introduce their son to a daughter or their daughter to a son of other people they closely know. Usually these can be their friends, colleagues or acquaintances. According to the participants, this method of getting introduced to someone of the opposite sex by parents is a widespread practice:

If the parents of both sides know each other and are good friends, they would often try to bring their daughter and son together. I think it became widely practiced lately” (male, focus group interview 2)

All of my sisters-in-law were introduced to my brothers by my parents. My parents knew the parents of those girls and then they decided to become *kuda* (Kyrgyz: in-laws) (female, focus group interview 2).

As noted above, parents often interfere after their children have come of age. “Usually this applies to girls over 25 and to guys over 30. Before that age you are expected to find someone by yourself” (female, focus group interview 1). If one has outgrown the marital age and is still not married, parents would usually insist on marriage and will try to marry their children as soon as possible. “They usually say that *eldin baldari* (Kyrgyz: children of other people) got married, but you are still on the same page. You should also move forward” (male, focus group interview 2).

The following quotes illustrate experiences of some participants with the phenomenon:

So far, my parents have asked me twice to talk to some girls they have picked out for me. I said no. They know how stubborn I am, so they do not put much pressure on me. But in two or three years they will. I am 25 now (male, focus group interview 2).

My father does not say anything. But my mom is obsessed with marrying me off because her friends' daughters are all married and already have kids. Whenever she goes to a *toi* (Kyrgyz: wedding), she always comes back with suggestions to get to know someone's son who wanted to meet me. 'He is a lawyer, he has an apartment, his father is a good person' and so on (Saadat, female, 23 years old, individual interview).

My mom is pushing me to get married. She thinks I should marry as soon as possible because later it will be hard for me to give birth, no one will want to marry me etc. I heard that soon a family of one guy will come to woo (Kyrgyz: *kuda tushup kelishet*) (Alisa, female, 21 years old, individual interview).

Some participants think that their parents often "feel pressure from the outside" and this is why rush their children to marry:

I think our parents want us to get married after a certain age because of the influence of society. They often go for *toi* (Kyrgyz: wedding), for example, where they are often asked if their sons or daughters got married or not. This puts pressure on them. They see that someone's son got married and also want their son to do the same. This is a pressure from the outside (male, focus group interview 2).

While Alisa and Saadat, for example, do not welcome their mothers' attempts to find them a mate for marriage due to various reasons (Alisa wants to have a career and Saadat is skeptical about her mother's choice: "Imagine if I will meet the guy and he finds out how liberal I am, and then he will tell about me to his parents etc. No, no... Those kind of people would have stupid principles and priorities"), another female interview thinks that this method can be "[...] a great chance for a good guy and a good girl to meet. They could not even meet. But, of course, also the impression that these people were forced to marry". (female, focus group interview 2).

Conclusion

Dating and romantic relationships are widespread and socially approved phenomena in Kyrgyz society. After reaching a certain age young people are encouraged by their parents, relatives and friends to be engaged in romantic relationships which ideally, in a traditional sense, are supposed to lead to marriage. Marriage is an important social institution in Kyrgyz society – it is not only about two individuals, but it is about establishing a family that is a part of a larger

extended family. Thus, it is about making kin and establishing new kinship ties. Once a young individual reaches a marital age, she/he is supposed to establish a family in order to become a social adult and thus gain a status in the society. Therefore, the society is very invested in the outcomes of dating and romantic relationships.

While being socially approved phenomena, dating and romantic relationships often come with certain societal expectations and cultural norms regarding what an appropriate date and relationships should be like. As I have illustrated in this chapter, one of those rules are dating initiation which should entirely be on part of a man. Men are expected to be initiators and facilitators of the relationships, while women are expected to act passively.

Other important aspects I have addressed in this chapter are where and how do young Kyrgyz urbanites meet each other for dating purposes. Social networks, social opportunities, referencing, and parental matchmaking were the main themes that emerged as findings.

Another important aspect of dating and romantic relationships was the condemnation of premarital sex. This aspect will be closely discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

Chapter II. Premarital Sex – to be or not to be a virgin?

Introduction

While the degree of permissiveness of premarital sex differs across societies, often as a rule the societal norms regarding premarital sexual behavior are more tolerant towards unmarried males than towards unmarried females (Broude, 1996). For example, cross-cultural research conducted among 141 societies showed that premarital sex for females is approved in 44.7 percent of the societies, mildly disapproved in 25.5 percent of them and is strongly prohibited in the remaining 22.5 percent of cultures. By contrast, premarital sex for males is approved in 63 percent of 57 societies, mildly disapproved in 14 percent of the cultures, and strongly disapproved in 22.5 percent of the sample (Broude, 1976 in Broude, 1996, p.4). Drawing from this, it can be said that in many societies across the world men are much freer in terms of their sexual behavior in comparison to women.

Condemnation of premarital sex is predominantly observed in the societies where kinship ties form individuals' social, economic, religious, and political lifeline. Many such societies define themselves through patrilineal descent, which means a woman is usually identified through her paternal line, and is seen as the linchpin of her father's or elder brothers' reputation and respectability in the society (Abu-Lughod, 1999; Goethals, 1971). Lila Abu-Lughod in her ethnographic research of Bedouin society argued that a woman's sexual misconduct can put a great deal of shame on her patrikin and thus shatter the latter's authority and respectability in the eyes of the community (1999). Therefore, fathers and elder brothers are responsible for protecting female chastity as by doing so they protect their own honor and authority.

Penalties for transgression from the ascribed sexual behavior vary from culture to culture. In some societies in which premarital sex is mildly disapproved there might be no punishments. One example is Canadian Kutenai communities who warn unmarried girls to abstain by telling them they will turn into frogs at death if they engage in premarital sex, but actually have no direct punishment for woman's transgression (Harry Turney-High, 1941 in Broude, 1996).

The most extreme forms of punishment, as anthropologists document, can be observed in some Middle Eastern societies and in rural communities of Pakistan and Turkey, where a woman is killed by her father or brothers for flouting the prohibition against premarital sex. Often this form of a punishment is called an ‘honor killing’, and is performed to remove the shame and earn the honor back again (Kogacioglu, 2004; Kulczycki & Windle, 2011; Ruggi, 1998).

In other societies such as those found in Central Asia, a transgressive woman can become a subject of a public shame and stigmatization, and thus face social exclusion (Harris, 2004; Sataeva, 2017; Werner, 2009). Just like in the other Central Asian societies, there is a high value placed on female virginity in Kyrgyz society.⁴ According to anthropological studies conducted in the country, the premarital sexual reputation of a young woman is a public matter which has to be constantly open to external inspection. The practice of displaying blood-stained bed sheets after the first wedding night as an evidence of bride’s chastity is a widespread practice among Kyrgyz (Handrahan, 2004; Werner, 2009).

A recent sociological survey conducted among Kyrgyz youth by Astana-based research institute *Public Opinion* is also indicative of the importance given to female virginity. Among the 1000 respondents surveyed, 50 percent think that virginity is an indicator of one’s dignity and is an important quality for girls, 28 percent answered that virginity is an important quality for both genders, 13 percent found the question difficult to answer, and 5 and 4 percent respectively posit that virginity is an old-fashioned concept and a psychological burden for youth (Baktygulov, 2016, p. 77). Hence, virginity is valued among young people with a bigger importance given to female virginity.

My own findings regarding attitudes towards premarital sex in Kyrgyz society corroborate the works of anthropologists and the findings from the aforementioned survey. Kyrgyz women are strongly discouraged from engaging in premarital sexual activity, whereas

⁴ As the informants have noted, according to the prevailing perception the loss of female virginity is associated with a penis-in-vagina penetration that leads to the break of a hymen and bleeding that follows the first-time intercourse. Note that throughout the chapter, when I refer to premarital sex and virginity I mean vaginal sex.

their male peers possess a greater level of sexual freedom. I argue that this unwritten rule is enacted by the ruling principle of honor and shame complex which, with respect to sexuality, is exclusively linked to female virginity and chastity. In other words, premarital sex for a woman is considered a moral issue because it encroaches on her dignity and honor which are directly bound up with her virginity. However, individuals do not strictly follow the prescribed norms – their actions and behavior are often different from the societal ideals. In this chapter I demonstrate how Kyrgyz women are finding creative solutions which allow them to satisfy their sexual needs, while still complying with the prescribed norms. Moreover, I posit that Kyrgyz men, even given their sexual freedom, are also facing external pressure on their sexual behavior.

This chapter is organized as following. First, I discuss the concept of honor and shame, its origins and how it works in other societies, as well as how they are placed in Kyrgyz culture. Then I analyze the decisions of women to abstain or engage in premarital sex through the prism of the concepts of honor and shame. Afterwards, I look at how men experience premarital sex in the given context, and their attitudes towards female virginity.

Theoretical Framework: Honor and Shame

For my analysis of social norms and cultural expectations regarding premarital sex in Kyrgyz society, I use the concept of honor and shame. The concept of honor and shame in anthropology first appeared as a phenomenon of Mediterranean societies in a volume edited by Greek anthropologist John G. Peristiany titled *Honor and Shame, The Values of the Mediterranean Society* (Peristiany, 1966). According to Peristiany:

Honor is the apex of the social pyramid of temporal social values and it conditions their hierarchical order. Cutting across all other social classifications it divides social beings into two fundamental categories, those endowed with honor and those deprived of it” (Peristiany, 1966, p. 10).

That is honor defines one’s standing in the community. Those regarded as honorable had gained their honor by demonstrating their willingness and ability to live in accordance with the

prescribed norms, whereas those who were named as dishonorable had at some point failed to meet the societal expectations, and thus lost their respectability. Although interpretations of the concept of honor vary across cultures due to the differing societal norms, in its essence honor functions in a similar way: it is given to those who follow the societal rules and is taken away from those who fail to conform (Peristiany, 1966).

Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod (1999) in her discussion of the concept of honor in Bedouin society argues that individuals can reach different levels of honor depending on their age, level of wealth, gender, and even genealogical precedence. The ultimate honor is associated with autonomy, which is achieved by one's economic well-being, control over resources, and one's dependents. Often, autonomy is associated with maleness and therefore only men can achieve the supreme levels of honor in the society. Femaleness, on the contrary, is associated with dependency. Women have less honor than men because they are closely tied to sexuality, which is perceived as a threat to the social order. Therefore, women are expected to deny their sexuality and act modestly to show deference to those who stand hierarchically above them – their fathers and elder brothers. This means that if men achieve honor through autonomy, women achieve honor through sexual modesty and chastity.

With regards to family, a family is regarded honorable when its men are “real men” who embody the social ideals of Bedouin society by supporting and protecting their dependents, and the women are modest and show deference to their providers, and thus validate the men's status in the society. If men fail to provide for their dependents, the women lose honor in the society, and if women fail to conform to the modesty conduct, the men will lose honor. Thus, honor of the family is interdependent as it is measured by the correct performance of each of its members (Abu-Lughod, 1999).

The interdependency of honor, as Abu-Lughod further argues, is the main reason why women's sexual misconduct brings dishonor to her kin. In fact, it brings more dishonor to her kin

than herself. In part, this is because she is identified in the society through her patrikin. But most importantly, woman's chastity is perceived as a symbol of her deference to the older male members of her family – this is why her failure to comply to the ascribed sexual code puts more shame on men, as it shatters their authority and undermines their position in the society. As Abu-Lughod puts it, “in the eyes of others, a dependent's rebellion dishonors the superior by throwing into question his moral worth, the very basis of his authority” (1999, p. 158). Therefore, men’s honor is very fragile and strongly depends on the correct performance of his dependents – daughters and sisters (Abu-Lughod, 1999).

Similarly to Mediterranean societies, the concept of honor and shame is present in Central Asian societies. Anthropologist Collette Harris in her ethnographic research conducted in Tajikistan, demonstrates that the concept of *nomus* and *ayb* (honor and shame) has a central role in Tajik culture. Those who live in accordance with the societal norms and show compliance are rewarded with *nomus*, while those who fail to comply with the expectations of the society, are subjected to *ayb* (2004).

Drawing from my findings, I posit that in Kyrgyz conception, honor and shame are expressed by such words as *namys* and *uyat*. As long as an individual complies with the societal norms and expectations, he/she is viewed as to be possessing *namys* – honor and good name in the society. However, if individual deviates from the norms, he/she can become a subject of public shaming. Thus, *namys* – honor is bound to *uyat* – shame.

Begimai Sataeva, in her work about bride abduction, argues that the concept of *uyat* and public shaming have a central role in Kyrgyz culture (2017). It exists with the fear of public shame. Sataeva compares the concept of public shaming that exists in Kyrgyz society to Michel Foucault’s panopticon: “people scrutinize each other’s lives – what they say, what they do, what they choose, who they love, how they love” (2017, p.26). “*Uyat bolot!*” (Kyrgyz: there will be shame!) is a precautionary phrase which is used by Kyrgyz to control the behavior of each other

(Heide, 2015, p. 293). “Shaming generally starts at the kitchen table, amongst family members, friends and acquaintances, and is handed down by word of mouth” – writes Sataeva (2017, p.24). To avoid being shamed one has to follow a set of culturally defined norms that prescribe people certain behaviors and actions. Deviation from the moral standards can lead to a social exclusion, stigmatization, and sometimes to physical and mental violence. Thus, public shaming and the notion of “*El emne deyt?*” (Kyrgyz: “What will people say?”) is the panopticon of Kyrgyz people. They are the tools of controlling people’s actions and behaviors enforced by the society itself, without interference of government and social justice institutions (Sataeva, 2017).

Drawing from aforementioned scholars, I define honor as a social concept entailing a perceived quality of respectability and worthiness that affects social standing and self-respect of an individual and family. Accordingly, individual or families are assigned stature and worthiness based on the integrity of their actions within an accepted moral code of the society in which they live. If an individual transgresses from an established code of honor, he or she is likely to damage his or her reputation and thus lose their societal respectability according to social norms. With regards to sexuality, I will use Abu-Lughod’s (1999) explanation of honor and shame according to which a woman can achieve honor and defend the honor of her family by acting modestly and defending her chastity in the eyes of her family and larger society. Whereas for the explanation of the concept of shame in Kyrgyz society, I use Sataeva’s (2017) and Harris’s (2004) insights about how honor and shame function in Central Asian and Kyrgyz context.

Why abstain?

In comparison to their male peers who enjoy the freedom of their sexuality, young Kyrgyz women are strongly discouraged from engaging in premarital sex as they are expected to keep their virginity until marriage. Most of the young women interviewed claimed they have not engaged in a sexual intercourse and would not like to do so until they get married. When they are asked to explain their decisions, almost all of them simply put “this is not how things are here”,

or as one of the interviewees has put it “stereotypes, society, relatives” do not allow sexual intimate relationships before marriage (Jibek, female, 19 years old, individual interview).⁵ Although the linkage to societal norms that interviewees immediately make provides a somewhat a general discourse about attitudes towards premarital sex in the society, it is obvious and superficial.

When I dug deeper – I found that young women abstain because they feel responsibility for preserving the honor of their families. For instance, Jibek says she would not like to have sex until marriage because she is afraid to get pregnant out of wedlock. When I asked her if an unexpected pregnancy would be a problem if she gets married to her boyfriend, she still insisted on her earlier answer. “No means no [...] Those five minutes are not worth the problems that might arise”. In Jibek’s opinion, an early pregnancy could become an issue for her because she is still young and does not yet want to get married. She plans her marriage at the age of approximately twenty-three and wants to have children closer to the age of twenty-five. But most importantly, as she explains, if she gets pregnant out of wedlock, her family might be greatly insulted in front of their relatives and other people in the community if this is found out. The loss of a good name in Kyrgyz society in which social relations are maintained to receive help and support through family networks can “threaten the continued provision of help” (Gullette, 2010, p. 115). The ashamed family will either be segregated by the community, or they will segregate themselves as the burden of shame is too great. This means that honor and good reputation are not intangible goods as they may appear at first sight, but they are the concepts which might affect one’s economic well-being and support which depends on the benevolent attitude of other members of the community.

⁵ In Russian: “Prosto u nas tak ne priniato”. This particular phrase is an extract from an interview with Jyrgal, (female, 24 years old, individual interview). However, many other interviewees’ answers were similar in essence. I use Jyrgal’s expression as, in my opinion, it’s the most illustrative.

Therefore, a family's reputation and honor as well as material well-being is directly tied to a daughter's correct behavior. An adolescent girl who is not yet married is usually identified through her father, or if she does not have one through her older brothers and other male members of her kin (Gullette, 2010). From my own experience of living in Kyrgyzstan for more than ten years, I remember that I was often asked the question: "*Kimdin qyzysyng?*" (Kyrgyz: Whose daughter are you?). Usually older people ask this question to get to know one's father's name. Knowing the father's name helps people to identify the young girl within the community through her family's social status. This is why, when a young woman violates the moral code by engaging in premarital sex, she destroys the honor of her father, or if she does not have one, of a man responsible for her. Furthermore, because the father is the head of the family and thus represents the family (Gullette, 2010), the shame falls upon the whole family. This is congruent with Abu-Lughod's interpretations of the significance of woman's chastity for the maintenance of her kinsmen's honor because she is identified with her patrilineal kin. A man's position in the society is validated by the deference of his dependents – daughters and sisters. Thus, when a woman transgresses from the moral code which ascribed to her denial of her sexuality, the man responsible for her will be dishonored (1999).

The values of chastity and virginity are inculcated into girls through parental upbringing and influence. Informants explain their decisions to abstain mainly stem from their upbringing and parental influence. For instance, Nurai (female, 24 years old, individual interview) says that the ideas of morality and female chastity have been "poured" into her since childhood. When she used to live with her parents in Osh (now she lives with her sister in Bishkek), her parents did not allow her and her sisters to stay out until the late evening. This is how, in Nurai's interpretation, her parents protected them from engaging in "undesirable relationships" which might encroach on their daughters' chastity. Similarly, Tomiris (female, 21 years old, individual interview) mentions that her mother strongly influenced her and her elder sister's decisions to stay virgins until marriage. As a result, her sister got married being a virgin, and did not cause

her parents “to lower their heads in shame”. Tomiris is proud of her sister and clearly wants to follow her example and marry chaste as it seems “more logical” to her. Nurai and Tomiris, like Jibek, reason that by abstaining they are showing deference to their parents and thus protecting the honor of their family.

The determination of the girls not to enter into sexual relations before marriage is a testament to the fact that parents exert a strong influence on their daughters. For instance, Jibek (female, 19 years old, individual interview), whose decision I have earlier discussed, is both emotionally and economically dependent on her parents. She thinks she must show gratitude to her parents for bringing her up and providing for her. Her parents pay her university tuition fee and she feels that she needs to pay back by showing her deference and helping them financially in the future. If she transgresses and her parents find that out, she might ruin her relationship with her parents and possibly lose material benefits she is receiving from them. “*Ata-enemden uyat da*” (Kyrgyz: I will feel deeply ashamed in front of my parents), explains Jibek. This statement of hers implies that her emotional dependence on her parents is stronger than financial dependence. She feels morally obliged to pay back to her parents by following the expected ethical rules. Another respondent’s story is also a good example of how daughters feel deeply emotionally attached to their parents. In the present, even though Nurai (female, 24 years old, individual interview) lives separately from her parents in a different city and makes her own living, she still feels obliged to conform to her parents’ admonition. “I do not want to disregard what my parents say [...] It is for the peace of myself and my parents” – she explains. Despite the fact that Nurai lives apart from her parents in a different part of the country and she is no longer directly controlled by her parents, she is still trying to comply to the commandment of her parents. Both young women feel deep emotional attachment to their parents.

Judith Butler, in her discussion of the dynamics of relationship between parents and children, claims that subjects, that is children, cannot entirely free themselves from their subjugators – parents (Butler, 1997). Butler’s subjects develop passionate attachment to their

subjugators, and “subordination proves central to the becoming of the subject” (1997, p. 7). It is this attachment that makes Jibek and Nurai emotionally dependent on their parents, and thus makes them comply to their parents’ admonition. Even when children are not dependent on their parents, just as Nurai who is not financially dependent on her parents anymore, they will never be able to entirely escape some level of conformity because they still remain emotionally attached to their parents.

Furthermore, it would be wrong to say that the notion of honor works only in one way that only daughters are responsible for their parents’ honor. Transgressive sexual behavior of a young girl does not only destroy her family’s honor, but also deteriorates her own reputation. This is why as the informants have explained their parents put efforts to make sure the daughters understand the importance of keeping their chastity until marriage. As Goody and Tambiah suggest, the restrictiveness on female sexuality is mainly imposed by parents because they want to ensure their daughter’s marriage to be appropriate. Thus, the family which controls their daughter’s sexuality wants to save her reputation in front of the society, because the loss of virginity can “diminish a girl’s honor and reduce her marriage chances” (1973, p. 14). Earlier in this work I have discussed the importance of the institution of marriage in Kyrgyz society, arguing that marriage transforms young people into social adults and gives social status. Taking this into account, it is very important for Kyrgyz parents to make sure their daughter will marry, and this makes them especially aware of the need to guard their daughter’s reputation.

This means that the notion of honor in Kyrgyz society works in two ways: as daughters understand their responsibility for preserving their chastity in order to retain their parents’ and family’s honor, the parents safeguard their daughter’s reputation by controlling her sexuality. Preserving chastity and thus honor also implies pragmatic reasons behind themselves – a girl who is chaste in the eyes of the society is perceived to have better chances for successful marriage. Therefore, parents play an important role of safeguards of their daughters’ chastity by restricting them from engaging in premarital sex.

If sex is not allowed, what is allowed?

The concept of honor-and-shame is an important factor which affects the decisions of many young Kyrgyz women to abstain from engaging in premarital, namely vaginal, sexual intercourse. The abstinence of these young women can be interpreted as subordination to the patriarchal values which prohibit premarital sex for women. Such framework suggests that women are forced to comply to the prescribed norms and thus lack agency. However, the decisions of women to abstain from premarital sex should not be analyzed simply through the binary of resistance and subordination.

In order to analyze the choices made by young women who abstain, I use Saba Mahmood's theoretical framework about human agency. Mahmood challenges the poststructuralist feminist theories which conceptualize human agency on the binary model of subordination and subversion by arguing that human actions cannot be analyzed solely through the prism of repression and resistance. Humans as social beings often make ethical and political choices which are not always backed up by a desire to liberate oneself by subverting power (2011). As Mahmood puts it:

[...] what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms (2011, p. 15).

Mahmood's argument allows us to think of human agency not only as a set of actions which are taken by a subject in order to liberate oneself from the burden of the prescribed norms, but also as political and ethical choices made by individuals depending on the social reality within which they operate. In other words, an individual's choice to comply with the expected social norms does not necessarily mean he or she is not exercising agency because the way they choose to follow those norms is itself an expression of agency.

Moreover, drawing from another aspect of Mahmood's (2011) theory of agency as not simply being exercised in the form of resistance and non-compliance, I argue that the decisions of women not to have sexual intercourse before marriage does not necessarily mean they are abstaining from engaging in other forms of physical intimacy. Often, young women who have boyfriends experience other forms of sexual relationships with their partners. For instance, Nurai (female, 24 years old, individual interview) has a boyfriend whom she has been dating for a while. Although, her boyfriend had continuously insisted in having "full" [vaginal] sex with her, Nurai did not agree to that.⁶ As a result, they have "some degree of intimacy", but it does not include vaginal sex. Likewise, Tomiris (female, 21 years old, individual interview) also has a boyfriend with whom they practice "petting". "It happened just a few times. It is all hormones. You want to release them sometimes".⁷

In my opinion, both young women whom I have earlier mentioned, Nurai and Tomiris are exercising their agency by choosing to abstain from premarital sex, but at the same time allowing themselves to engage in other forms of physical intimacy. They understand that keeping their virginity "is always an advantage" as Tomiris puts it. It ensures their successful marriage, preserves their own reputation and their family's honor. Having other forms of sexual intimacy allows them to enjoy physical aspect of their relationship. They want to remain virgins, but at the same time they want to get physical pleasure from their relationship. Tomiris's explanation, "[...] it is all hormones. You want to release them sometimes", is a good evidence of this. Therefore, it can be said that young Kyrgyz women juggle the established sexual discourse by delineating the boundaries of what is permitted and what is not permitted. And although they may feel sexually constrained by the patriarchal norms which prescribed sexual abstinence for them, they are able to find ways in which they can get some degree of sexual freedom without allegedly breaking the rules.

⁶ Russian: "polnotsennyi seks"

⁷ Russian: "Vsio ravno zhe gormony igrayut. Hochetsia ikh izlit"

Subversion of the norm?

This discussion would not be complete without looking at the experiences of young women who actually engage in premarital sex. According to an interviewee, anonymous surveys conducted in Bishkek show that every fifth or seventh schoolgirl has had a sexual experience. She further continues: “what people think and what is out there are two different things”. Although the society reproaches premarital sex, many girls, in the respondent’s opinion, in fact have sex. “If you check anonymous groups [on social networks], every fifth girl writes that she became pregnant and the guy refuses to marry her. And those are 16-17 years old girls” (female, focus group interview 2). Another interviewee thinks that “in the regions [outside of Bishkek], girls keep their virginity before marriage only because they enter marriage very early, but in Bishkek the picture is entirely different” (female, focus group interview 2). Unfortunately, I could not find any survey data which could prove the numbers the informant is referring to, but my aim here is not to deal with statistics, but rather explain the cultural discourse. I find the statements of the informants interesting since by referring to online social networks and survey questionnaires, the interviewees are trying to emphasize that many young women in Bishkek engage in premarital sex, but they prefer or have to hide it in order to avoid unpleasant consequences.

“Dispraise” (Russian: *osuzhdeniie*) and “slut-shaming” are among the consequences that an unmarried woman whose private sexual life became public might face (male, focus group interview 2).⁸ In respondent’s opinion, dispraise and slut-shaming involve publicly criticizing and judging women for their deviation from the accepted code of sexual conduct. Often slut-shaming involves the articulation of the phrase “*uyati jok*” (Kyrgyz: “She has no sense of shame”) (female, focus group interview 1).

⁸ I need to note here that I did not translate the word from neither Kyrgyz nor Russian. The informant used the English word “slut-shaming”.

As mentioned earlier, the concept of *uyat* (Kyrgyz: shame) among Kyrgyz is used to impose power to moderate behaviors of the societal members, as well as to punish their misbehavior (Sataeva, 2017). Collette Harris in her ethnographic study of Tajik society, has also demonstrated that *ayb*, similar concept to *uyat*, “can be wielded like a sword to keep order”, as well as be used as a punishment for the ones who failed to comply with the expectations of the society (2004, p. 73). The story which Nurai told me (female, 24 years old, individual interview) well illustrates how *uyat* and public shaming can be used as instruments of control and as a punishment for deviation:

When I was a teenager, a girl in our neighborhood was suspected by our neighbours to have slept with her boyfriend. I heard this story from my girlfriends, and they might had heard this from their elder sisters or mothers. I don't know exactly. But everyone was gossiping about that girl. You know, this was served for us, other girls, under a spicy sauce like if we also do the same thing we might face the same things as that girl did. Soon the girl married her boyfriend as their parents found out their daughter became pregnant. But, nevertheless, people continued saying things like “*uyati jok*” (Kyrgyz: “shameless”) How do her parents walk with their head held high after all that has happened...

As the story shows, a mere suspicion of a transgressive behavior of a girl leads to public discussions of her sexual misbehavior. The way the incident was discussed in the neighborhood made it clear for other girls to be careful about their behavior and control their actions if they do not want to become a target of communal scrutiny and bear the same burden of shame. Furthermore, the circulation of the gossip in the neighborhood ensured the girl's parents know exactly what was going on. They rushed to arrange their daughter's marriage as otherwise her future marriage chances would be very few as a result of the ruined reputation, and on top of that it was found out the girl was expecting a child. However, the marriage did not remove the shame which fell upon the girl and her family because people continued to question the honor of the family.

Thus, *uyat* is used as a precaution for other girls to stay away from deviations as well as a punishment for transgressors and their families. As the story illustrates *uyat* functions on par with

gossiping. Collette Harris describes gossip as a “tiny word that carries a gigantic force” (2004, p. 74). According to Harris, the slightest scandal around a woman, if becomes a subject of public discussion, can destroy her reputation and by extension the honor of her family (2004). Therefore, the notion of *uyat* is an instrument of control and punishment in the society and gossip is a mechanism of its implementation.

Furthermore, I want to illustrate another story of my informant to show how women who have experienced premarital sex learn to cope with their situation and try to avoid being shamed. Saadat had “lost” her virginity at the age of 16 with her first boyfriend. It was her own decision to have sex with her boyfriend as she wanted to please him as her boyfriend continuously insisted on having sex. She is now 24 years old and she broke up with her first boyfriend long time ago. Saadat confesses that at first, she had to live through a long-term depression, but later she learned to cope with being a non-virgin:

Yes, at first, all of us think that losing virginity is the end of the world. ‘How am I going to get married?’ and ‘Who will marry me’ are probably the questions every girl is concerned with. But with time you learn to accept yourself. It is ok to be a non-virgin, you should just avoid *kyrgyzbais*.

Concerns about marriage becomes the most difficult issue for Kyrgyz women. They think no one will marry them because they are not virgins anymore and not chaste. This causes young women to develop mechanisms of coping with the situation. For instance, Saadat thinks she should avoid *Kyrgyzbais*. *Kyrgyzbais* – in Saadat’s opinion are men, who are “too conservative and are too concerned with [woman’s] virginity”. They are those kinds of guys who hold “traditional” and “Kyrgyz” values – marrying a virgin woman is one of the requirements. Therefore, she thinks that girls who are not virgins anymore should try to find someone “liberal”. “You have to be careful with the choice of a guy. There are some guys that might gossip if they find out you were not a virgin anymore”. Saadat does not plan to hide or pretend she is a virgin, in her opinion, the man should accept her as she is, otherwise it would not be “true and honest” relationships. But she does not feel safe about confessing – she has to make sure the man will understand her. For that he

needs to hold similar “liberal” values as she does, and thus she wants to avoid guys who would not understand her and can spread gossips, namely *Kyrgyzbais* as she puts it.

Moreover, Saadat is also very careful about sharing her story with other people. “You have to be careful with whom you tell this”, – she says. In her opinion, girls who have lost their virginity do not receive much support from others as many women judge and say things like: “stupid, you should have kept yourself for your husband”. Therefore, she thinks that it is better not to tell anyone in order to avoid unpleasant rumors about herself, or as she puts it: “so that they do not set me on fire as in the Middle Ages”. Only one of Saadat’s friends know about her secret. She decided to share her story because she needed support from a friend, and she knew that her friend is also not a virgin anymore. “When I told my friend [about sexual relationships] she was surprised at first, but did not judge me. She just told me that me if I was going to meet another guy I should not sleep with him immediately because it is not good to do so”.

Saadat’s case well illustrates how women who have violated the expected sexual norm learn to deal with their situation. They carefully select people whom they can share their story with. Saadat’s friend is also not a virgin anymore, this is why Saadat is sure that she will keep her secret. It is a mutual agreement. This makes her feel secure about her secret. Additionally, Saadat’s story highlights that gossiping is not used by women only, but men can also do that. This makes her to be extremely cautious when choosing a partner. He has to be liberal enough to accept her as a non-virgin. Saadat case once again confirms that gossips – as a tool for punishment and *uyat* – as a mechanism of control are strong in Kyrgyz society.

However, later, Saadat says that even the liberal man might complain about it. She describes her present boyfriend as “quite liberal” and his family as “very democratic” (Russian: *demokratichnaia*). At first, Saadat’s boyfriend told her that he does not care about virginity very much. But despite this they often have conflicts over the fact that Saadat had sex with another man before. “He thinks someone has used me and this has been bugging him since we started

sleeping together”. This shows that although Saadat has been managing to avoid social implications by hiding her secret and carefully choosing people whom she can share her story with, she cannot avoid negative implications in her private life as her boyfriend constantly blames her. This is why she is not sure whether they are going to get married.

Hymenoplasty – therein lies salvation?

Hymen reconstruction, also named as hymenoplasty is a type of gynecological cosmetic surgery often sought by women who want to reconstruct their hymen often for social reasons (Ahmadi, 2016; Amy, 2008; Cinthio, 2015). There are many discussions on the ambiguity of the hymen as an anatomical feature. According to Jean-Jacques Amy, a researcher with an expertise in gynecology, many girl's hymen can be stretched and torn without bleeding following the intercourse, and some girls are also born without hymen (2008). Despite this, there is a prevailing fallacious thinking that a hymen is an evidence of virginity and the first intercourse must be followed by bleeding. It is especially true about the societies which place high value on female virginity at marriage, such as Iranian, Egyptian, Lebanese and Turkish to name a few (Alemdaroğlu, 2015; Awwad et al., 2013; Baydoun, 2011; Wynn, 2016).

In most of the Middle Eastern countries where hymenoplasty has become an often-sought procedure, conventional societal attitudes towards the procedure are very negative. For example, in Egypt hymenoplasty is a widely discussed issue and is a socially condemned procedure as it is thought that female sexuality must be socially visible and reconstructing the hymen hides a woman's sexual past (Wynn, 2016). In other countries like Sweden, where the surgery is often sought by immigrants from Middle Eastern countries, hymenoplasty is not welcomed within the public healthcare system (Juth, Tännsjö, Hansson, & Lynöe, 2013). In general, in most of the European countries, hymenoplasty is regarded as an ethical issue since it is not a “medically indicated surgical procedure” (Bawany & Padela, 2017, p. 1005). In Kyrgyzstan, however, hymenoplasty has received little scrutiny from the public healthcare system. There are many

private gynecological clinics that freely offer the surgery with a guarantee of anonymity. The average price for the procedure varies from 70 to 150 US dollars, which makes it affordable for those in the middle class.⁹

Like young women in the other societies, Kyrgyz women often consider having their virginity reconstructed through hymenoplasty to avoid negative repercussions for their private life and public life. “It’s not a secret that everyone can go and do the surgery” says an interviewee (female, focus group interview 2), pointing to the widespread use of the procedure. As Saadat, whom I discussed earlier as among the few women I interviewed who revealed her non-virgin status to me, I was interested in her opinion on hymenoplasty.

Saadat does not plan to have hymenoplasty as she does not want to start any potential relationship with a lie. She rather wants to establish a “true” relationship with a man who will understand her and accept her as a non-virgin. As previously mentioned, she wants a man who holds liberal values, and therefore she does not consider doing hymenoplasty as she presumes if she will marry a man with liberal values, she can escape the custom of displaying blood-stained bed sheets, and also, she does not expect parents and relatives to interfere into their personal intimate life. However, Saadat notes that her friend wants to do surgery “if she is going to marry a Kyrgyz guy”. She then continues: “In her opinion, no matter how liberal the guy is, one day he will point out that she was not a virgin”. This way she wants to secure herself by having the surgery done as it will serve as a guarantee of escaping any potential negative consequences.

Marzieh Kaivanara (2016), based on her research of hymenoplasty in Iran, argues that by engaging in premarital sex Iranian women are challenging the existing dominant discourse which taboos premarital sex, however, by deciding to undergo hymenoplasty, they are showing conformity to the traditional values and thus, reinforcing the existing power relations. I agree with Kaivanara’s conclusion that Kyrgyz women who decide to undergo hymenoplasty are reinforcing

⁹ I have obtained this information on the internet through a search engine.

the existing societal discourse. However, women's decisions to reconstruct their "virginity" can also be interpreted through Saba Mahmood's (2011) framework – hymenoplasty is a creative way of dealing with potential negative repercussions for women who have subverted the social norm, but want to secure themselves from social punishment. It is a form of agency.

Men – to be or not to be a virgin?

"They say value your honor from your youth, but we all understand that this applies only to girls as it is thought that a man should be an expert" stated one of the male informants during the second focus group interview.¹⁰ The statement clearly demonstrates that while female virginity as a matter of honor for women has to be guarded at all costs, male virginity, on the contrary, is dispraised and is something to get rid of because a man is expected to be an "expert" (male, focus group interview 2).

Harris argues that in Tajik society men are disgraced neither for having premarital sex, nor for committing a rape. Such behavior does not negatively affect a man's honor, moreover she claims that "rape may even enhance a man's reputation by demonstrating his power over women and ability to engage in extra-marital sex" (2004, p. 79). In her opinion, much shame is put on a man who fails to demonstrate his sexual experience.

Similar attitude is observed in Kyrgyz society as men are encouraged to be experienced in sexual "matters" (Russian: *v etih delah*) as one of the informants put it (Alisa, female, 22 years old, individual interview). Although this speaks to sexual freedom that men possess, I argue that it is also a form of external pressure for young men. They are forced to be sexually experienced – being not so can diminish a young man's masculinity. Therefore, at all costs, a man should at least appear sexually experienced.

The stories of young men whom I have interviewed regarding their first sexual experience are supportive of this. For instance, Aibek (24 years old, individual interview) claims to have had

¹⁰ Russian "Bereg chest' i dobroe imia smolodu [...]"

his first sexual encounter with a sex worker when he was seventeen years old after his friends decided to take him to a brothel. Although Aibek does not regard his experience as negative, he claims that he had experienced some sort of coercion from his friends: “Me and my other friend had to do that because everyone else were not a virgin anymore”. Other participants, Nurlan (25 years old, individual interview) and Daniyar (19 years old, individual interview) had their first experiences when they were at high school with their classmates. As Nurlan explains “Everyone was having sex at that time, and I also thought that I have to have it”.

How important is female virginity for Kyrgyz men?

Proceeding from all this, it is interesting to hear opinions of men whom I have interviewed on female virginity. Generally, I have an impression that they are less concerned about it in comparison to the female participants. “Kyrgyz girls are all too much concerned with their virginity [...] They think once they are not virgins they are spoiled... or are deprived of something”, thinks Aibek (24 years old, individual interview). He further continues: “I cannot judge the girl by what she did because I do not know what she felt at that time”. Similarly, Talant (24 years old, individual interview) does not think virginity is a “stumbling block” and he could be happy with a girl even if she is not a virgin.

Collette Harris argues that in Tajikistan “for young women, almost more important than *being* pure is *being* seen to be so” (2004, p. 74). I suggest that in the case of the story I am telling, men are also concerned about the image a woman projects rather than being obsessed with virginity. They place a high value on a woman’s reputation. For example, Talant (24 years old, individual interview), although he is not anxious about the presence of the hymen, says that the girl should still be “a decent girl”¹¹ with a good reputation. Similarly, Aibek (24 years old, individual interview) has pointed out the importance of a girl’s reputation in the society, but in a slightly different way. He noted that he never talks to his friends about his private sexual life

¹¹ Kyrgyz and Russian: “Ia by ne skazal, chto magha bolo beret. Poriadochnaia devushka bolush kerek”.

because he is concerned about his girlfriend's reputation. "I do not feel that it would be nice towards my girlfriend. I do not feel safe for her. I am not sure if we will be together in the future, so, to avoid negative consequences, I do not talk about this with others". Both young men have talked about the importance of having a good reputation for women. By avoiding talks about his private life with friends, Aibek is trying to preserve his girlfriend's good name, while Talant thinks that the presence of hymen might not be as important as the image a woman projects.

Conclusion

According to the general attitude in Kyrgyz society, a young unmarried woman is strongly discouraged from engaging in premarital sexual activity. She is expected to abstain because her reputation, and by extension her whole family's honor, are tightly linked to her chastity. Sometimes, a mere suspicion of a deviation can harm the woman's reputation and destroy her family's honor. This might negatively affect the woman's marriage chances and cut off her family's relationships with their kin network. Therefore, parental upbringing and influence become an important mechanism in imbedding the value of chastity and virginity into daughters.

However, this is not to say that Kyrgyz women totally abstain from engaging in other forms of sexual relationships. Often, they might be avoiding vaginal sex to preserve the hymen – a symbol of virginity – but they engage in other types of sexual contact. This way, Kyrgyz women delineate for themselves the boundaries of what is permitted and what is prohibited – although they may feel sexually constrained by the patriarchal norms which prescribed sexual abstinence for them, they are able to find ways in which they can get some degree of sexual freedom ostensibly without breaking the rules.

Those women who have engaged in premarital sex try to hide it at all costs to avoid being publicly shamed. Probably, this category of women are the ones who are the most cautious regarding their reputation and the image they project to the society. Their actions can be

interpreted as neither subordination nor subversion. They have had sex before marriage, but they are hiding what they consider to be deviant in order to avoid public shaming. Some women, in order to secure themselves from possible negative implications in their private lives, are finding creative ways of dealing with their situation by undergoing hymenoplasty.

Men, on the contrary, possess a greater level of sexual freedom. They are expected to be experienced in sex, and moreover demonstrate their experience to attain authority in front of their peers and women. However, this is not to say that they are not facing sexual pressure. The fact that they are expected to be sexually experienced is a pressure in itself.

Chapter III. Partner Choice and Decision-making Factors

Introduction

Selecting a mate is one of the most important decisions that people make in their lifetime (Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001). Individuals select partners for long-term relationships and marriage based on various criteria which they have consciously and unconsciously incorporated into their minds. Physical appearance, physical health, age, race, ethnicity, religion, financial status, educational background etc. are among factors that make one person attractive to another. However, while personal preferences vary and certainly matter, sociologists argue that individuals' decisions about long-term relationships and marriage are never divorced from the larger society and societal factors (Buss et al., 2001).

In this chapter I am going to discuss how socio-economic and cultural variables such as education, financial situation, social status, ethnicity, religion, and regional origin factor into young people's partner choice in one or another way. Similarly to their parents and the larger society, young Kyrgyz people view dating and romantic relationships as precursors to marriage, and therefore approach the selection of their dates with care. As the chapter proceeds, it becomes more obvious that young people, when asked about their desired partner, give their answers presuming that the desired

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I provide a theoretical framework that I use for the analysis of my findings. Second, I discuss the socio-economic and cultural factors which have been mentioned by the participants of the study to be important when they choose their partners. Then I proceed to the discussion of factors which bear less importance for the participants. Lastly, I conclude by discussing all of the findings – comparing and analyzing them using the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework: Endogamy and Exogamy; Homogamy and Heterogamy

People are likely to marry within their social group (endogamy) or to marry a person who is close to them in social status (homogamy) than marry outside their social group (exogamy) or social status (heterogamy) (Kalmijn, 1998). According to a sociologist, Matthijs Kalmijn, marriage patterns are a result of an interplay of three social forces: individuals' preferences for certain characteristics in a partner, the influence of the social group – “third parties” – of which they are members, and the constraints of the social environment – the marriage market in which individuals are searching for a partner (Kalmijn, 1998, p. 395). These factors, although analytically different, are regarded by Kalmijn as complementary elements of a single theory (Kalmijn, 1998).

1. Individuals' preferences

In order to explain the patterns of marriage selection, scholars use the concept of a marriage market. Unmarried men and women operate within a marriage market where each person considers a set of potential partners. Individuals evaluate their potential partners on the basis of the resources those can offer and compete with other singles for the partner they want most by offering their own resources. There are several kinds of resources that can affect one's choice of a potential partner, however, sociologists have mostly focused on socio-economic and cultural sources. These sources are considered important as they produce family goods such as status, financial well-being, social confirmation and affection (Kalmijn, 1998, p. 398).

Socio-economic resources are the resources that produce financial well-being and status. Financial well-being is shared by all the family members, and the status is given to the family as a whole rather than to its individual members. Consequently, the income and status of the spouses are interdependent – the income and status of one spouse can positively or negatively influence the income and status of the other. Therefore, individuals search for a spouse whose socioeconomic resources are the most attractive. However, in the outcome of the process of

selection, the most attractive ones select among themselves, while the least attractive ones have to rely on one another. Thus, a competition for socio-economic resources on the marriage market leads individuals to make homogamous choices (Kalmijn, 1998, p.398).

It is often thought that women give more importance to socio-economic resources of a potential partner than men. However, since women are becoming increasingly involved in the labor market, and therefore gain and possess socio-economic resources, men are also increasingly attracted to women's resources. The wife's financial capital may provide stronger economic security, facilitate access to useful networks, and bring many other benefits. Therefore, the socio-economic status of the wife may also become important for the status of the family (Kalmijn, 1998, p.399).

While the importance of the socio-economic resources is based on a preference of a resourceful partner, the importance of the cultural resources is based on a preference of a partner who is culturally similar. Individuals seek similarity of values and opinions in their potential partners because it leads to mutual confirmation of each other's behaviors and worldviews which are important to sustain relationships. Similarity of tastes attracts individuals to each other as it increases opportunities to participate in joint activities, and similarity of knowledge ensures common topics for conversation which enhances mutual understanding. Furthermore, because marriage involves many joint activities, such as the spending of leisure time, the purchase of a house or the raising of children, similarities in tastes are very important for harmonious relationships. Therefore, individuals prefer partners who have similar cultural resources to theirs as this allows them to develop a common lifestyle that produces affection and social confirmation (Kalmijn, 1998).

Preferences and Homogamy

However, individuals' preferences for socio-economic and cultural resources do not fully explain the tendencies for homogamy. Some authors argue that social characteristics of people are correlated with their preferences of such resources, and thus, homogamy can be an unintended by-product of individual preference for resources in a partner (Kalmijn, 1998). Kalmijn argues that one's educational background is among the social characteristics that leads to homogamous choices. Education is not only strongly related to income and status, but also to tastes, values, and lifestyles (Kalmijn, 1991).

Unintended homogamy is also explained by Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus – Bourdieu argues that individuals' tastes – that are their perceptions and preferences that were inculcated into them by their social origin, upbringing, or education do not only shape individuals' preferences in “music and food, painting and sport, literature and hairstyle”, but also affect their choice of sexual partners (Bourdieu, 1984, p.6; Bourdieu, 2002). People tend to choose partners who share similar cultural practices to their own in order to ensure conformity of tastes, values and beliefs, however this should not be necessarily seen as an exertion of individual will, but also as part of the habitus (Bourdieu, 2002).

2. Third Parties

The reasons why people's marriage choices are often endogamous than exogamous is explained by the involvement of the third parties such as family, relatives, and the larger society (Kalmijn, 1998). It is perceived that mixed marriages – interethnic, interracial, or interreligious may threaten the internal cohesion and homogeneity of the group. Therefore, third parties try to keep new generations from marrying outside the group. They prevent exogamy by group identification and/or by group sanctions (Kalmijn, 1998, p. 400).

For instance, individuals who belong to racial and ethnic groups where the norms of group identification are firmly internalized, or in other words to the groups where there is a strong

awareness of common social history, are more likely to marry within their own groups. The stronger such feelings of belonging to the group, the more likely they are going to marry endogamously (Merton, 1941 in Kalmijn, 1998, p. 400). However, it is assumed that higher education diminishes individuals' identification within racial and/or ethnic groups. The university students are less likely to identify themselves with their cultural and social roots (Hwang, 1995 in Kalmijn, 1998, p. 401).

Even if individuals have not internalized norms of group identification, they still may be restrained from marrying out of the group by the third parties. Among the most important of them, according to Kalmijn, are the family, the church, and the state. Although in Western societies parents do not have strong sanctions against their children's marriage decisions, they still try to interfere by arranging meetings with potential spouses, giving advice regarding certain candidates, or by withdrawing emotional or financial support. Whereas, the churches, although this has substantially changed over time, have strongly disapproved interreligious marriages for many centuries. This is because interfaith marriage might cause the loss of members. The strongest sanctions, according to Kalmijn, were at times imposed by the state – for instance until 1967 in some of the states in the United States there was a law that prohibited racial intermarriage between whites and blacks (Kalmijn, 1998, p. 402).

3. Marriage Markets

While individual- and group-level factors certainly matter and are important, structural arrangements also affect endogamy and homogamy. Those individuals who live in homogenous societies, and interact with the group members more than with other groups on a daily basis, are more likely to marry within the group than outside of it. Demographic composition of the population, regional distributions of groups, or even the smaller settings – local marriage markets such as the neighborhood, the university or the workplace can affect the marriage patterns. The

schools are believed to be the most efficient markets as they are heterogenous with respect to age and homogenous with respect to sex.

These above discussed three social forces – individuals’ preferences, the influence of third parties, and the constraints of the marriage market are particularly useful for my discussion of the Kyrgyz youth’s partner choice and decision-making factors. The young people whom I have interviewed place a high value on socio-economic and cultural resources – educational, financial and social background of a potential partner, and claim to place less importance to such characteristics as ethnicity, religion, and regional origin. But they understand that these last three factors are important for the third parties – family, relatives and even the larger society. Moreover, although young people give less importance to their potential partner’s ethnicity, religion, and regional origin, the constraints of the marriage market in which they operate might lead them to make both homogamous and endogamous choices.

Educational background

The majority of young people who participated in the study, both male and female, prefer a partner with similar educational background. As a participant puts it, “those who are educated prefer an educated partner” (Nurai, 24 years old, female, individual interview). It is generally assumed by the participants that couples where both partners are educated are likely to have better quality of life in comparison to those who are not educated. Therefore, individuals seek a partner with whom they will be able to maintain/have a desired quality of life. Such a concern stems from the pronounced low quality of life that majority of people in Kyrgyzstan lead.¹² One of the participants explains this as followingly:

The level of poverty is very high in our country. Couples with good [higher] education have happier marriages. Those who are not educated have worse quality of life: their diets are scanty... they have poor access to information.

¹² World Bank assesses Kyrgyzstan as lower middle-income country with GNI per capita in 2016 equaling to 1,100 USD. According to the statistics, 32,1% of the population in Kyrgyzstan lives below the national poverty line, The total population of the country by 2016 is equal to 6,082,700 people (World Bank, 2018).

Educated couples, in comparison, have higher quality of relationship (female, focus group interview 2).

As the quote illustrates, the absence of education is associated with poverty and low quality of life, whereas having higher education is viewed as a way to maintain/achieve economic well-being. Thus, the young people seek an educated partner to be able to ensure a desired quality of life which are seen as a determinant of harmonious relationships.

Another assumption that young people have is that educated partners are more likely to intellectually satisfy each other; this is why young people seek a partner with whom they will match intellectually. For instance, Beknazar (male, 24 years old, individual interview) considers himself to be “well-read” and “knowledgeable” and because of this he likes “intelligent girls”, that is those who have a good education and are “well-read”. Similarly, Aibek (male, 24 years old, individual interview), considering himself as an avid reader, is attracted by girls who can “eloquently express themselves” (Russian: *liubit krasnoye slovtso*) and are able to hold an interesting conversation. Moreover, an educated partner is preferred because he/she is likely to be well-mannered and well-behaved. As a participant puts it, “education is so important: by observing the way one talks and behaves, you can tell whether the person is intelligent or not” (female, focus group interview 2).

Furthermore, young people seek someone who has received a quality education as they assume such a background prompts an individual to possess a particular mindset. There is an expectation that an educated partner will be an open-minded individual and will constantly strive for self-development. The following dialogue of the participants from the focus group discussion illustrates this well:

The level of education is the most important criterion for me. He should be involved in self-development and encourage me to do so [...] He might not have much money, but education is the foundation that must be there (female, focus group interview 2).

I agree. He should be engaged in self-development. It is not enough to have a university diploma, he should widen his horizons and constantly develop. This is the most important thing (female, focus group interview 2).

Yes, I also agree. He does not necessarily have to be a scholar, but he should be an open-minded person (female, focus group interview 2).

As illustrated, the informants have an assumption that education is a foundation that teaches individuals to possess a particular mindset – open-mindedness. University education in combination with open-mindedness is perceived as a pledge of individual's constant strive for self-development in terms of career, further education, and life in general. It is believed that a partner who possesses these qualities is also likely to support similar endeavours of the other partner as well. Thus, young people are seeking in their partner similarity of values and beliefs. They do not want their values and beliefs to be challenged by their partners, and therefore they desire someone who possesses similar outlook to life.

Furthermore, female participants prefer an educated partner as they assume an educated is likely to support gender equality in a relationship. They believe that an educated man is likely to support their professional endeavours (female participants, focus group interview 2). Similar opinions were expressed by male interviewees. “An educated guy will also support girl's endeavors to advance her education” (male, focus group interview 2). In evidence to this, Aibek (24 years old, male), a participant of individual interview says the following: “I would not like my wife to become a housewife. I want her to work and earn her own money. I want her to interact with other people and develop herself both professionally and personally”.

Uneducated men, on the contrary, are thought to have less harmonious relationships with their spouses. The informants posit that an uneducated husband can infringe on his wife's rights:

I have many male cousins who are not educated. Their quality of life is low. They work in bazaar [...] They do not treat their wives well. They even do not allow them to work because of jealousy (female, focus group interview 2).

Otherwise “[...] if the man is not educated, he will want the woman to obey him” (Nurai, 24 years old, female, individual interview).

As the findings illustrate, there are many positive assumptions that are associated with the attainment of a higher education. When analyzed using Kalmijn's theory (1998), firstly,

education is perceived as a socio-economic resource that positively influences one's earning power and thus allows oneself to have a better-quality life. Secondly education is perceived as a cultural resource that positively influences one's level of intellectuality, manners, and behavior. This also closely resembles Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1984; 2002) as young people desire to be with a partner who is culturally similar to them to ensure the similarities of tastes. Thirdly, a quality education is believed to foster a particular mindset that makes one to possess certain values and beliefs as, for instance, gender equality in relationships. Along with the quality education, young people value an individual's constant strive for self-development. Thus, an educated partner is sought to ensure similarity of values and beliefs, equality in relationships, and financial stability. Surprisingly, these, in combination, are thought to be the determinants of a happy relationship, or to put in Kalmijn's terms – produce affection (1998).

Financial situation

The financial background of a potential partner is another factor which is considered to be important by the participants of the study. However, this does not necessarily mean that young people desire someone with better financial situation than their own. Both female and male participants prefer their potential partner to be of similar financial background to their own. Among the informants, the financial background of oneself is perceived to be determined by the financial situation of one's family, and this assumption is the basis for several reasons that explain the young people's preferences of a partner with the similar financial background.

First, the participants consider the financial background to be important because if the couple decides to get married, their families will need to make a financial contribution to the wedding. As an informant puts it, “when it comes to marriage – parents, relatives, everyone will be in; if one side has less money to contribute for *toi* (Kyrgyz: wedding) that can become a big issue” (male, focus group interview 2). Often financial contribution includes the exchange of dowry (Kyrgyz: *sep'*) in return to bride price (Kyrgyz: *kalym*), organization of bride's farewell

(Kyrgyz: *kız uzatuu*) and the wedding itself (Kyrgyz: *toi*) (female, focus group interview 2). As the informant explains, *kalym* is delivered first by the groom's side, and if the amount of it is less than it was expected by the bride's side, unpleasant rumors might circulate among the neighbors and other relatives. It is *uyat* (Kyrgyz: shame) and the bride's parents might perceive it as an offence. In their turn, the bride's parents might send a *sep'* of a much greater value to show how much they value their daughter. Such an act might insult the groom's parents.

On the other hand, if the groom's side is wealthier than the bride's side, the exchange of *kalym* and *sep'* might not be as problematic, as the *sep'* is compiled in accordance with the value of *kalym* (female, focus group interview 2). However, as another interviewee notes, recently there is an emerging culture of organizing a *kız uzatuu toi* (Kyrgyz: bride's farewell), and if the bride's parents do not hold that *toi* or organize it poorly from the viewpoint of the groom's family and relatives, again the rumors may circulate among the kin (female, focus group interview 2). Therefore, as the informant explains, it is best when both sides are more or less of the similar financial backgrounds.

Furthermore, the importance of equal financial situation is highlighted to be important to avoid various misunderstandings in the future family life. For instance, young women do not prefer to marry up, in other words, to marry someone whose family is wealthier than their own as they fear to be humiliated by their spouse and his family. The issues in family life might arise because of different lifestyle habits – differing views on household management, cooking, and consumption style. “I might not be the right *kelin* (Kyrgyz: daughter-in-law) for them as I will cook food differently, or I will not clean the house in the way they want it”, explains Jyrgal (24 years old, female, individual interview). Other interviewees also point out that a *kelin* from a less wealthier family might be psychologically bullied by her in-laws:

I often notice when a girl is from a less wealthier family, her in-laws tend to intimidate her all the time. This is why it is better to marry someone whose family has similar financial status to yours (female, focus group interview 2).

After all, the girl is not marrying only the guy, she is marrying the whole family. She should be able to find something in between. If the family is much wealthier than hers, she will be intimidated a lot. So, it is better to find someone of the same status (female, focus group interview 1).

Similarly, men do not want their future spouse to be of a higher financial status than their own family. For instance, Beknazar (24 years old, male, individual interview) considers rich families to be a different society stratum, and therefore he does not want to marry a woman from a wealthier family than his own.

If I would find out her family is richer than mine, it might scare me...because it is a different society stratum. Her parents might be against; my parents will not welcome it. So, hopefully, this is not going to happen with me (Beknazar, 24 years old, male).

Furthermore, the similar financial backgrounds of the prospective partners are important because the families have to establish kinship ties. In Kyrgyz society this often involves networking and exchange of material goods between families on various occasions such as wedding celebrations, funerals etc. (Gullette, 2010). Therefore, parents also encourage their children to marry someone of a similar financial background. The informant explains this as followingly: “[...] my father has always told me I should marry someone who is neither very poor nor very rich. Our families should have similar backgrounds partly because our parents should somehow keep in touch with each other” (female, focus group interview 2).

As the findings show, in comparison to education which is perceived to be the socio-economic and cultural capital of an individual, financial background of oneself is seen as the socio-economic capital of a family. Kalmijn (1998) in his explanation of homogamy, posits that individuals look for a partner whose socio-economic resources are the most attractive, however, in the outcome of the competition for resources on the marriage market, the most attractive ones select among themselves, while the least attractive ones have to rely on one another. This means that people often marry someone with similar financial background not because they prefer that, but because of the constraints of the marriage market. However, drawing from my research, I suggest that Kyrgyz urbanites consciously prefer a partner with similar financial background.

They do so because they understand the importance that cultural practices such as the organization of the wedding celebrations, the exchange of a dowry and bride price, as well as the further exchange of other material goods at various celebrations require the established kin to contribute similar amounts of resources.

Furthermore, Kyrgyz urbanites desire a partner with the similar resources as they want to ensure similarities of lifestyles in terms of food and goods consumption, as well as the household management. Women prefer a spouse whose family's financial resources are similar to their own as they do not want to be humiliated by their in-laws. Thus, they are concerned about the distribution of domestic power – the dissimilarity of the financial backgrounds is likely to cause humiliation of the new bride for coming from a poorer family. Men, as well, prefer their future spouse to be of similar financial background as they want to marry within their own “societal stratum”. People from different societal stratum might have differing lifestyle habits which can cause misunderstandings in further family life. Therefore, in order to avoid such issues, young people prefer to establish long-term relationship or marry someone of a similar financial background. All these closely speak to Bourdieu's habitus (1984; 2002) – the individuals want to ensure the similarities of lifestyles to avoid misunderstandings in their further relationship.

Social Status

Despite some interviewees consider financial well-being as a determinant of a high social status, other informants' viewpoint is rather different than that. According to them, while financial well-being can raise a family's social status, it is not necessarily a determinant of a social class, as the social class of a person is defined by the professional career and education of one's parents. As the participant explains, “[...] Kyrgyzstan is socially very diverse: there are many people who are very rich, but it does not mean they belong to high social class – they just went from rags to riches” (female, focus group interview 1). Furthermore, the following quote

illustrates how an informant is drawing clear boundaries between the financial well-being and the social class:

The social class matters. I come from a family of academicians. In Kyrgyzstan, professors do not earn much money because their salaries are usually state-funded. So they are not the wealthiest. But, despite this, they belong to the upper social class. They are intelligentsia [...] There are people who think they belong to the upper class as they have all the financial means. A guy might think he belongs to a high class just because he had a car in his sixteenth and he could change it every half a year. His parents might own a big flock of sheep and horses and be very rich, but he will not be of the same social class as I am (female, focus group interview 1).

Bourdieu (1987), in his discussion of forms of capital, distinguishes between economic capital, cultural capital, informational capital, social capital, and symbolic capital that become legitimate if valued in the society. Economic capital consists of one's material possessions, while cultural, informational, and social capital can be obtained by the nature of work and occupational milieu of individuals. The participant's viewpoint illustrated above, is constructed according to the similar logic that Bourdieu is using to describe the forms of capital. Academicians are perceived to belong to a high social class, despite little financial reward they receive for their jobs, as they possess cultural, informational and social capital. They are further regarded as intelligentsia that are different from people engaged in pastoralist occupations by their manners, tastes, and resources they possess, which are based on connections and certain group membership. Therefore, individuals who perceive themselves to be belonging to a high social class are making clear differentiations between themselves and those who do not belong to intelligentsia. From the perspective of Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1984; 2002) the participant's preference of a partner from a similar social class can be interpreted as a desire to ensure similarity of values and beliefs of herself and her family with the partner and partner's family.

Ethnicity

From the perspective of young people whom I have interviewed the ethnic background of a prospective partner is an unimportant factor. They claim to perceive cultural diversity as a positive phenomenon and thus welcome interethnic unions, both premarital and marital. According to them, what is more important are personal traits, similar interests and mutual dialogue between partners. One of the informants explained it as followingly: “[...] if you have similar interests with the person, why shouldn't you give it [the relationship] a chance?” (female, focus group interview 1). Similarly, another respondent Talant (male, 24 years old, individual interview) says that if it happens that he finds a girl of another ethnicity to be attractive, he would not perceive her ethnicity as a stumbling block. Furthermore, another participant Aibek (male, 24 years old, individual interview) had an experience of dating with girls of different ethnicities and claims that he did not consider ethnic background of his girlfriends to be an important criterion when he decided to establish relationship with them. He talks about his experience as followingly:

Ethnicity is not important. I have dated girls of various ethnicities. I had a Russian girlfriend, who was very open-minded. We could talk about anything. I also dated an Uighur girl. She was a conservative one. It was hard to kiss her even on her cheek. I also have seen girls from mixed families, Uzbek and Russian for example. The most important thing is a how you two get along with each other. You should be able to find compromises (Aibek, 24 years old, male).

Aibek recognizes the peculiarities of his ex-girlfriends' behavior and he thinks that it stems from their ethnic background and therefore, as he explains, his relationships with them were different on various grounds. Although he had to find compromises over issues that stem from cultural differences, he positively perceives his experience: “[...] it was quite interesting with them, such a great mixture of cultures”.

On the other hand, despite young people giving little importance to their prospective partner's ethnic background and regarding it as an unimportant factor in their decision-making,

they acknowledge that for their family and relatives, the ethnicity of their future spouse bears a particular importance. As ethnicity is regarded an attribute that defines people's culture and customs, the most desirable spouse for both women and men would be someone of the same origin, that is of Kyrgyz ethnicity. According to the participants of the two focus group interviews, when both spouses are of the same ethnic background, it will be easier for their parents and relatives to establish kinship ties due to the similarities of cultural practices and customs.

However, depending on the degree of cultural similarities, other ethnicities can be acceptable. As Nurai (female, 24 years old, individual interview) explains, her parents, especially her father, prefers her future spouse to be Kyrgyz, or "[...] maximum Kazakh [...] because they are very similar to us". She further continues: "but they are very strongly against Uzbeks or Tatars, for instance". Again, this highlights the importance given to similarities in cultural practices and customs as this is thought to positively influence the relationship between in-laws. Kazakhs are perceived to be the closest to Kyrgyz in terms of their culture and language, and therefore regarded as acceptable by parents. However, Uzbeks which also belong to Turkic ethnicities, are not as welcomed. As Nurai explains this is due to the negative stereotypes that society has towards this particular ethnicity. The negative attitude towards Uzbeks may stem from the ethnic tensions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the city of Osh located in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan. There have been ethnic clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz throughout the post-Soviet period which has resulted in nationalism (Liu, 2012).

Furthermore, it should be noted that an unwelcoming attitude towards interethnic marriages is also present in the larger society. More often this is manifested particularly by other men in relation to women. As an informant explains, this is because, "Kyrgyz men find it shameful when a Kyrgyz woman is with a foreigner" (male, focus group interview 2). "[...] Some Kyrgyz guys think that they are the only ones who deserve Kyrgyz women. According to them only Kyrgyz are the worthy men" (male, focus group interview 2). The negative attitude of

some Kyrgyz men towards interethnic unions between Kyrgyz woman and man of other ethnicity can be interpreted as an assertion of authority through possessing and controlling women. Another reason is that there is an existing notion among people that Kyrgyz nation might cease to exist as a result of assimilation with other ethnicities: “people think that we are the nation that is subject to assimilation, so it is very risky when Uzbek or Chinese men marry Kyrgyz women. We are neighboring countries with China and Uzbekistan, and this can become a problem in the future” (male, focus group interview 1).

Hence, being in a relationship with a foreigner might have serious social implications for women. The story of Nurai (female, 24 years old, individual interview) whose boyfriend is a Pakistani man illustrates these implications very well:

Whenever we go to have a walk outside, go to café or cinema we notice that people stare at us. With time, we learned not to pay attention to this. However, there are frequent cases when they say insulting words. There were several cases when young men lowered the car windows to shout out offensive words. To avoid such situations, we chose not to go to the certain parts of the city. For instance, we do not go to Osh bazaar quarter as it is populated mainly by those who come from villages. Instead we try to walk in the downtown because the streets are lit and people are mostly educated, well-mannered and have more or less liberal attitudes. Sometimes, we prefer places where there are less people. Going out with friends is also an option. They can help in case we encounter problems. I also have a car. When we need to go somewhere which is not safe, we just drive. The best option for us is, of course, to stay home. We can watch films, read books or do other activities.

Apparently, Nurai’s boyfriend’s appearance is noticeably different from the appearance of a typical Kyrgyz, and therefore they experience a virulent dislike from people when they are in public places. Again, the negative attitude is expressed mainly by men. Nurai and her boyfriend learned to cope with this situation learning to avoid certain public places as they are crowded by people who are, as Nurai explains, are less urbanized and of conservative values. Furthermore, Nurai is unsure whether she is going to get married to her boyfriend. She explains that she has an emotional attachment to him, however, she realizes that both her parents and the parents of her boyfriend are unlikely to support their union because of cultural differences that stem from

different ethnic backgrounds and physical distance of the families. Nurai also notes that she feels a great deal of pressure from the larger society as she is often a subject of public shaming. Therefore, if the couple decides to get married in the future, Nurai would like to live in a different country – neither Kyrgyzstan nor Pakistan. This would help them to escape societal scrutiny.

Conversely, when Kyrgyz men date or marry someone of a different ethnicity the society does not treat it as a negative phenomenon. Instead, when a Kyrgyz man marries a non-Kyrgyz woman he might even receive praise from other people in the community: “when a guy marries a foreign woman, it can be even shown on TV, this is propagated on various levels” (female, focus group interview).

As the findings illustrate, the cultural diversity is perceived as a positive phenomenon by young people themselves, and therefore they place less importance to the ethnicity of their prospective partners. Kalmijn (1998) argues that education has a tendency to reduce individuals’ sense of belonging to a particular ethnic/racial group. In the case of young Kyrgyz, we see that they identify themselves as Kyrgyz, but they claim to welcome cultural diversity. However, they realize that their families and larger society in general might not perceive interethnic unions as positively as young people themselves. Therefore, the influence of the third parties, which Kalmijn explains in his theory may greatly affect Kyrgyz youth’s choice of a spouse (1998). Moreover, young Kyrgyz are likely to make endogamous choices in terms because of the constraints of the marriage market in which they operate; that is although young people welcome cultural diversity, they are more likely to end up marrying someone from their ethnic group if they are mostly surrounded by people of Kyrgyz ethnicity.

Religious Background

In order to illustrate to what extent religion influences the mate choice of young people, it is necessary to understand their own attitude towards religion. Among the participants there are those who identify themselves as ‘cultural Muslims’, ‘Muslims’ and ‘agnostics’. All the

categories were drawn by the interviewees themselves. Depending on their understanding of religion and its role in their life, young people regarded religion of their prospective partner to be an important or a less important factor.

Those young people who identify themselves as being cultural Muslims do not regard religion of a prospective partner to be a factor that can significantly influence their decision:

For me, religion is more of a tradition, or rules of behavior imposed by certain people. I believe that God is one and all those existing religions have been invented by people. After all, the main idea of any religion is that people must not kill, must not lie etc. The basis is similar. However, there might be differences in traditional rites: some religions allow certain things while others do not. These were all invented by people (Nurai, 24 years old, female).

Furthermore, in Nurai's opinion (female, 24 years old, individual interview), if a couple has different religious backgrounds, "there might, of course, be some conflicts on religious grounds, but if a person has an ability to accept and tolerate, then [differences in] religion should not negatively affect the relationship". However, at the same time, Nurai acknowledges the advantages of being of the same religious background as religion largely determines one's traditional and cultural practices. The other participants, Jyrgal (female, 24 years old, individual interview), Tomiris (female, 21 years old, individual interview) and Aibek (24 years old, male, individual interview) were of similar opinion as Nurai.

Other young people, who identify themselves as Muslims and regard religion as a part of their identity, prefer their partners to be Muslims as themselves. For instance, Talant (male, 24 years old, individual interview) would prefer his future spouse to be a Muslim. Similarly Alisa (22 years old, female) thinks of Islam as her life guide and she tries to follow moral code prescribed by Islam. Therefore, an important criterion she sets for her prospective partner is his religion.

There were also two participants who identify themselves as agnostics. Agnosticism in their understanding is someone who is not attached to any particular religion and is "religiously

neutral” (Beknazar, male, 24 years old, male). Furthermore, Beknazar explains that he decided to identify himself with agnosticism because he does not like the situation with religion in his country:

[...] the country is a state of turbidity because of religion (Russian: *strana nahodistsia v pomutnenii*). Many young people who live in the regions [outside of Bishkek] lack critical thinking and easily lend themselves to religion. In my opinion, this is a big issue for the country.

Another participant explains that he is agnostic because he cannot find answers to his questions in religion. Both of the participants prefer their future partners to be religiously neutral as themselves. Beknazar would not like his future spouse to be “a big fan” of any religion, however, he does not mind if the person “has a particular faith in her heart”. The participant of the focus group interview says: “it is better if she is not religious”.

The preference of young people of a partner with similar religious outlook also speaks to the fact that they want to ensure similarity of values and beliefs with the partner. Although the participants do not mention the importance of similar religious backgrounds as necessary for the third parties’ approval, they have mentioned the importance of the similar ethnicity to receive the social approval. During the focus group interview, participants mentioned that there is a widespread discourse in the society, according to which being a Kyrgyz automatically means being a Muslim. I assume this is one of the reasons to why the participants did not mention the importance of a couple’s similar religious backgrounds to the third parties. Otherwise, the third parties are also very likely to give importance to the religious background of oneself.

Regional origin

In this section of the chapter I am going to discuss how regionalism – a factor that stems from which region a person or the person’s family is from – can affect one’s choice of a potential partner for dating or marriage. I will first give background information about the derivation of the concept of regionalism in the context of Kyrgyzstan and then will talk about how my

participants referred to the concept when I asked them questions about their and their family's preferences of a prospective partner or why they have chosen to be with a person if they were already dating someone.

Kyrgyzstan is comprised of seven administrative regions which are Chui, Issyk-Kol, Naryn, Talas, Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken. The first four regions are considered as the northern regions of the country, while the latter three are referred as the southern regions. Geographically, they are divided by Ferghana range of the Tien-Shan mountains, and were not linked to each other via any road line until 1997 when the Bishkek-Osh mountain pass was constructed. Today, the road line connects the two major population centers of the country – Chui Valley in the north and the Ferghana Valley in the south. This has eased considerably the communication between the two parts of the country, making the transportation of people and goods possible.

Unfortunately, there is no confirmed data on whether the construction of the road has positively influenced the internal migration in the country, but obviously it made it possible.¹³ From the perspective of the researchers who have studied the internal migration in the country, the significant rise in the number of migrants from the southern part of the country to the capital occurred after the Tulip Revolution of 2005, when president Askar Akayev, northerner by the origin, was replaced by a southerner Kurmanbek Bakiyev. This has led to the change of political elite and personnel at all levels of state bureaucracy and business, and presented more opportunities for southerners to build successful careers and businesses in comparison to the previous years. Another driving force for the migration was the poor socio-economic situation that migrants were facing in their hometowns (Flynn & Kosmarskaya, 2012).

As a result of this, the “old residents” of Bishkek who were by origin either born in the capital or have moved there a decade or two decades earlier from other northern oblasts, (1980s-

¹³ It is very hard to estimate the internal migration in Kyrgyzstan due to the lack of systematic registration of migrants. National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyz Republic does not provide sufficient data on this.

1990s), had grown anti-migrant, specifically anti-southern sentiments among themselves. Such words as *ponaekhali* (Russian: they descended upon us), *zapolonili* (Russian: they flooded us), *naplyv* (Russian: influx); *nashestvie* (Russian: invasion), etc. were used to label the new migrants (Flynn & Kosmarskaya, 2012, p. 459).

Furthermore, Flynn and Kosmarskaya present a very well put description of the attitudes of the “old residents” of Bishkek towards the people who came from the south.

The difference between new migrants and “old residents” is being constructed by the latter as something essentialist, biological, natural, genetic and unchanging. Comments such as “...those from the northern regions of the republic and those from the south, they are from the beginning, through blood, somehow made to be hostile to one another” were common. Some of our respondents, with little reflection upon what they thought and expressed, spoke of how differences in the Kyrgyz nation can be defined according to particular characteristics of different Kyrgyz clans. The characteristics of the northern clans were seen as “good” (reliable; strong; honest) whereas the Southern clans were seen to possess the opposite “bad” features (unreliable, weak, dishonest). Other respondents, showed similar levels of predetermination: “all of us are northerners, and that goes without saying that we react to Southerners with enmity” (2012, p. 460).

From cited above, it can be seen that the sub-national division between the Northerners and the Southerners is more complex than it seems at the first sight. Regional identities seem to be supported also by clan, or tribal identities within one ethnicity. Luong (2002) posits that during Soviet times tribal identity was very strong among Kyrgyz people. In order to weaken the (preexisting) local identities and instead strengthen the (nonexistent) national identity, Soviet authorities applied specific administrative segmentation policies. These divisions, as Luong argues, have split the tribes, but left regional clans intact. Later, clan identities became associated with the region, and the regional identity eventually became very significant creating separate a sense of the north and the south (2002, p. 64).

Scholars who have studied the concept of regional identities in Kyrgyzstan contend that the north and the south indeed differ among themselves when examined from socio-economic, political and cultural perspectives (Lowe, 2003 in Everett-Heath, 2003; Gullette, 2010; Luong, 2002). However, it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss every single perspective. I am

going to rather focus on the cultural perceptions that people have towards their compatriots from the other part of their country.

The northerners, particularly those who live in Bishkek and Chui valley are seen as comparatively more “russified”, whereas southerners are regarded as being more like Uzbeks. This stems from a diverse composition of the population in the regions. Both parts of the country are mainly populated by the representatives of Kyrgyz ethnicity, however there are significant number of Slavic (mainly Russian) people in the north, and Uzbek people in the south (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2018). This fact has influenced many aspects of people’s life including language, religious culture, traditions, and customs etc. (Bolponova, 2013, p.7; Lowe, 2003 in Everett-Heath, p.125).

This widespread discourse among the population about the socio-cultural differences between the south and the north that stem from variety of factors have also been mentioned during the interviews. “Regional differentiation is a very common stereotype” (male, focus group interview 2). These preconceived stereotypes, according to the participants, have a tendency to influence one’s choice of a spouse as parents and relatives might be against having in-laws from the different part of the country. If one is from the northern part of the country, “[...] the permissible areas are Issyk-Kul, Naryn, Chui and Talas” (male, focus group interview 2). Consequently, it can be assumed “the permissible areas” for the southerners are Jalal-Abad, Osh and Batken oblasts.

While young people themselves do not regard regional origin of their prospective partner to be a factor that can significantly influence their decision, they understand that this might play differently for their parents:

I do not really care whom I will end up finding. But my mother says that I should marry a Kyrgyz girl, and better if she is from where we come from (male, focus group interview 2).

It is the same for my family. They say my future wife should be from where we were born and raised. According to them, [people from] other regions are bad and only we are good (male, focus group interview 2).

Yes, god forbid if you end up marrying a southerner if you are from the north, and vice versa. [At this point everyone started laughing] (female, focus group interview 2).

The dialogue is illustrative of how parents of the informants stipulate and make it clear to their children not to marry outside of their region. Negative stereotyping about regions is one of the main reasons why interregional marriage is not welcomed. “Yes, these regional stereotypes are very strong. They would say: *Osh-ton alba!* (Kyrgyz: “do not marry a girl from Osh!”) (male, focus group interview 2).

Furthermore, parents mainly interfere in their children’s marital choices as these are important to avoid misunderstandings between the in-laws regarding cultural practices and customs. As a participant highlights, “there are a lot of disagreements on this ground because each region has its own traditions” (male, focus group interview 1). Another participant explains this as followingly:

One of the reasons why our parents do not like the idea of their children marrying someone from other oblasts is because each oblast has different traditions and customs. Even Issyk-Kul and Chui have different traditions (male, focus group interview).

The participant is referring to differences in the performances of cultural practices and customs at various ceremonies such as wedding. In general, the ceremonies might seem alike and the differences are in small details. For instance, in Talas the expected amount of *kalym* (Kyrgyz: bride price) is higher than in other oblasts; or the amount and type of presents people exchange at the wedding might also be different across the regions (female, focus group interview 2).

Therefore, in order to avoid such misunderstandings and conflicts that might arise on the basis of differing customs, the best option for parents is when their children marry someone from the same region as themselves.

Young people have an attitude of carelessness towards regionalism as a factor that can influence their decision. As some participants have put they just do not care whom they will end up marrying. In their opinions, the existing stereotypes about the south and the north are nonsense. However they understand that for their family and relatives, the regional origin of their future spouse is important. The most desirable daughter-in-law or son-in-law is someone from the same region, or even oblast'. This will ensure social approval, particularly the approval from parents' and relatives' side – the third parties – of which Kalmijn (1998) speaks about.

Conclusion

When asked about partner choice the participants of the study referred to a desired partner for a long-term relationship or a marriage. Among the most pronounced filtering factors for the participants of the study were potential partner's level of education, financial status, and social class. However, at the same time they mentioned religion, ethnicity, and regional origin to be important for the third parties such as family, relatives, and sometimes the whole society. Thus, the findings suggest that factors which can influence one's decision of a partner choice can be divided into two: factors of primary importance and factors of secondary importance. The primary factors are those which young people think are the most important for themselves in a desired partner. Those are educational background, financial status, and social class. Among these factors, educational background is considered to be the most important factor as it determines one's ability to achieve financial well-being, predetermines one's values and beliefs, and predisposes to a particular mindset, that is open-mindedness and strive for further professional and educational self-development. Financial status of a prospective partner is also an important factor – both young men and women prefer their partners to be of the same financial status as themselves as this way young people want to avoid a feeling of being intimidated by their prospective spouses and in-laws. Also, it is considered to be important as if the couple decides to get married, their parents will need to make financial contribution to it. If one side has less resources to contribute, misunderstandings and conflicts might arise on these

grounds. Furthermore, some young people differentiate between the financial status and social class. They make clear boundaries between these two as in their opinion financial well-being, although it gives a family certain status in the society, does not necessarily mean they possess cultural and social capital which they consider as more important.

Among the factors of less importance are religion, ethnicity, and regional origin. These factors, except religion, might not be considered as important by young people themselves, but they are important for the third parties such as parents, relatives, and sometimes the whole society. Those who identify themselves as Muslims do not regard religiosity of their potential partners to be a very important factor, but they prefer their spouses to be Muslims and “God-fearing”. This is similar in the case of cultural Muslims. They prefer their partners to be of the same cultural background in terms of religion as it makes it easier to understand each other. Ethnicity of a potential partner is also regarded as not very important by young people. They are ready to establish a relationship with a person of different ethnicity in case if they like the person. However, this can become a big issue as parents, relatives and sometimes the whole society can be against interethnic union. However, attitudes towards interethnic unions might vary and be ambivalent. The society is likely to welcome interethnic marriages if a man of Kyrgyz ethnicity is in a couple with a woman of a different ethnicity, but if a Kyrgyz woman is doing so, it might lead to negative social implications. The case of Nurai and her Pakistani boyfriend is a good example of aggressive reaction from the larger society. Regionalism is another factor of secondary importance for young people, but of importance to their parents and relatives. As there are various negative stereotypes about north and south, interregional marriages are not welcomed by parents and relatives. However, this can be less important for young people themselves.

Overall, there is a strong tendency among urban, educated Kyrgyz youth to make homogamous choices as they place a big importance to socio-economic and cultural resources of a potential partner; and furthermore, even though young people regard ethnicity, religion and

regional origin of their potential partners to be less important, under the pressure of the third parties and the constraints of the marriage market they are more likely to marry endogamously than exogamously.

Conclusion

In this study, I aimed to explore socio-economic norms and expectations regarding premarital dating and romantic relationships among urban, educated Kyrgyz youth. My findings suggest that dating and romantic relationships are widespread, as well as socially approved phenomena in Kyrgyz society. Many Kyrgyz urbanites experience romantic relationships starting from their adolescence, even though dating is discouraged by parents during teenage years. However, as young people approach marital age, they are allowed and, moreover, expected to establish premarital relationship that should ideally be leading to the ultimate goal, which is marriage, in order to become social adults. In their turn, young people themselves view dating as leading to marriage – this shows that they are acting in socially approved ways.

Although premarital dating and romantic relationships are socially approved practices, there are certain limitations to these practices – premarital sex is strongly discouraged. However, the restrictiveness applies only to young women and does not apply to men. Therefore, some young women decide to abstain. They relate their decisions to fear of damaging their own and their family's reputation. The concept of *namys* and *uyat* – honor and shame is very important in this case. A family's *namys* – honor, largely depends on the correct gender performance of daughter. In case if a woman transgresses and this will become known to the larger community, the woman risks putting shame on herself and her entire family. However, abstinence from sexual intercourse does not necessarily mean young women are not engaging in sexual relationships – in fact, they are finding other permissible ways of satisfying their sexual needs by engaging in other forms of sex which do not involve vaginal intercourse.

Other young women who have experienced premarital sex employ specific strategies to avoid being publicly shamed. They do not openly talk about their sexual life and instead prefer to hide their experiences. They carefully choose people with whom they can discuss their sexual lives – usually those are women who also had experienced premarital sex and this makes them safe people to share a secret with. Women who have transgressed also carefully choose their

potential partners – those should have liberal values and should not be concerned with virginity. Additionally, women, in order to exclude the potential negative consequences of their transgression decide to “reconstruct” their virginity and undergo hymenoplasty.

Although Kyrgyz women’s sexuality is controlled by the society, this does not necessarily mean that women are not exercising their agency. Similarly to Saba Mahmood (2011) I argue that agency is not only resistance – agency is employing creative ways of upholding social norms. Kyrgyz women, both who decide to abstain and those who experienced premarital sex, depending on their situation, exercise their agency. Those who abstain are finding ways other than vaginal sex to satisfy their sexual needs. One example is petting. Other women who have experienced premarital sex are either largely hiding this fact, or finding ways of coping with it by choosing friends who also experienced premarital sex, and thus are less likely to judge, and being particularly choosy of their potential partners by looking for men who would not be concerned with virginity. Thus, even though Kyrgyz women are not openly challenging the social norms regarding their sexuality, they are still finding ways to exercise their agency.

Although, at first sight it seems as only women feel the pressure of their sexuality being questioned, it is not true. Unmarried men, although permitted to have sex, also experience certain pressures regarding their sexuality. Often, young men are pressured by their peers to be sexually experienced – there are cases when the first sexual experience of young men happen with sex workers or women they do not have any emotional attachment. This is why often the first sexual experience of young men might be coercive in its nature. This suggests that men also might experience certain forms of pressure.

Furthermore, as dating and romantic relationships are perceived both by young people and larger society as precursors to marriage, young people approach the selection of a partner with care. Among the factors of primary importance for young people are those of socio-economic character that is education, financial status, and social class of a potential partner.

They prefer their potential mates to have the same educational level as they think it ensures similar outlook to life and can be a guarantee of a quality life as education to some degree ensures financial stability. As for financial situation and social class – which are defined by one's family, young people prefer their partners to be of a similar background to avoid various issues that might arise as a result of inequality. Among the factors of secondary importance for young people are such factors as ethnicity, religion and regional origin of a potential partner. They do not regard these factors as important for their decision – instead they welcome diversity. However, they understand that these factors are important for their families, relatives and sometimes larger society in general.

The fact that young people regard ethnicity, religion, and regional origin of their potential partner as being less important for themselves or not important at all makes them appear exogamous. However, their preferences of an educated partner with similar beliefs and values, financial situation and social class to those of their own, speaks to the fact that young people are highly endogamous in their choices.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited in the sense that it explores the social norms and cultural expectations regarding dating and romantic relationships only from the perspective of young educated Kyrgyz urbanites in the city of Bishkek. I think research conducted in rural sites, or with young people of a different social background than the informants of this study would present a different picture.

Also, this study, does not present a comparative historical perspective of how socio-cultural norms and expectations regarding premarital dating and romantic relationships in Kyrgyz society have evolved and changed throughout the history. That is, it is conducted in the ethnographic present.

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Appendices

Appendix A Study Participants

Focus Group Interview 1

There were 4 women and 2 men at the first focus group interview. They come from different regions of the country including Osh, Issyk-Kul and Chui. At the time of the research they were all living in Bishkek. Their ages range from 22 to 25 years old. They all hold at least a bachelor degree from a university in Bishkek. Most of them speak at least one foreign language.

Kanykei is 22 years old woman from Chui oblast. She is unemployed.

Beknazar is 24 years old man from Issyk-Kul region. He is an IT specialist. He is also Kanykei's close friend.

Jyrgal is 25 years old woman from Osh. At the time of the research, she was unemployed.

Talant is 24 years old man from Osh. He works as an anesthetist in a hospital. He is also Jyrgal's boyfriend.

Nurai is 24 years old woman from Osh. She holds a master's degree in law. She works as a lawyer in Bishkek.

Kanyshai is 24 years old woman. She holds a bachelor degree in psychology and works as a counselor at a call center.

Beknazar, Nurai, Jyrgal and Talant volunteered to participate in an individual interview.

Focus Group Interview 2

There were 3 men and 3 women at the second focus group interview. Two of the participants originate from Bishkek, others are from Issyk-Kul, Talas, Jalal-Abad and Osh oblasts.

Adil is 21 years old man from Bishkek. He is a sophomore student and he studies medicine.

Zarina is a 25 years old woman from Bishkek. She has completed bachelor degree and works as a teacher.

Nazira is 23 years old woman from Jalal-Abad oblast. She holds a master degree, and is self-employed.

Alibek is 20 years old man from Issyk-Kul. He is still a university student.

Malika is 25 years old woman from Talas oblast. She holds a master degree in Economics, and works in state sector.

Edil is 25 years old man from Osh. He is a master degree student and has a part-time job.

Individual Interviews

Tomiris is a 21 years old woman who was born and raised in Bishkek. She is a fifth-year student at Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University. She studies architecture. She lives in Bishkek with her family. Her father is an entrepreneur, he runs an advertisement agency, and her mother is a realtor.

Jibek is a 19 years old student who studies economics at one of the state universities in Bishkek. She is originally from Osh, but she has moved to Bishkek with her parents 10 years ago. Her parents established a small trading business in Bishkek, and this is why they decided to stay in the capital.

Nurai is 24 years old woman from Osh. She holds a master's degree in law. She works as a lawyer in Bishkek. Nurai and her younger sister rent an apartment in Bishkek, while their parents live in Osh. She was a participant of the first focus group interview.

Saadat is 23 years old woman from Bishkek. She is pursuing a master degree in International Relations.

Aibek is 23 years old man from Bishkek. He has been working as a lawyer for three years.

Beknazar is is 24 years old man from Issyk-Kul region. He is an IT specialist. He was also a participant of the first focus group interview.

Jyrgal is 25 years old woman from Osh. At the time of the research she was unemployed. She was also a participant of the first focus group interview.

Aisuluu is a 21 years old young woman who was born and raised in Bishkek. She is a full-time student who studies finance.

Talant is 24 years old man from Osh. He works as an anesthetist in a hospital. He is also Jyrgal's boyfriend. He was a participant of the first focus group interview.

Alisa is a 23 years old young woman from the suburbs of Bishkek, but who has been living in Bishkek for five years. She is a recent graduate of a university in Bishkek.

Nurlan is 25 years old young men from suburbs of Bishkek. He is a graduate of a university in Bishkek. He has a rental business.

Daniyar is 19 years old university student. He was born and raised in Bishkek.

Appendix B. Interview Guides for Focus Group and Individual Interviews

Interview Guide for Focus Group Interviews

Let us talk about dating culture in your community.

How would you define dating?

What does it mean to date someone?

What does dating involve?

Is dating a widespread practice among your friends?

Where do young people usually meet each other?

How do young people initiate romantic relationships?

What might be the intentions of young people who decide to date someone?

Where do young people usually go for dating? What kind of activities do they do together?

Who usually pays the bill? Why?

How do you think, what is the appropriate age at dating? Is it different for men and women?

What should be the appropriate age gap between partners in a romantic relationship?

What do you think about interethnic (from the same country, but of different ethnicity) couples?

What do you think about international (from different countries) couples?

What do you think about interreligious couples?

How do you think, what is the role of education of each partner in a relationship?

What do you think about couples in which one partner is wealthier than the other?

What other factors might influence the couple's relationship?

What is the role of emotional intimacy when dating someone? What does emotional intimacy involve?

What do you think about physical intimacy in romantic relationships? What is allowed? What is not allowed?

What do you think about premarital sex?

What do you think about cohabitation?

How do you think is dating nowadays different from dating in the past? If yes, what makes it different?

Have you heard about relationships without commitments? If yes, could you tell me how is it different from committed relationships?

What do you think about relationships without commitments?

Have you heard about one-night stands?

What do you think about one-night stands?

How do you think, what kind of personal qualities should a Kyrgyz young woman have?

How do you think what kind of personal qualities should a Kyrgyz young man have?

How do you think, what is the optimal age at marriage for women? And for men?

Individual In-depth Interview Questions

Part 1. Socio-demographic information

Could you tell me about yourself?

How old are you?

Where are you from?

Do you work or study?

Who do you live with?

Part 2. Personal relationships

Could you tell me about your family?

What is your relationship with your family like now?

Could you tell me about your friends?

Who would you say was/were the most influential person/people in your life while you were growing up? In what way did she/he/they influence you?

Part 3 Intimate Relationships

Are you in a relationship now? If so, for how long? Could you tell me more about it?

Who was the initiator of your relationships?

How often do you see each other?

Where do you usually meet each other?

What kind of activities do you usually do together?

What kind of feelings do you have towards your partner? How do you express your feelings?

What do you like about your partner? What don't you like about your partner?

How do you think what kind of feelings does your partner have towards you? How does she/he express them?

Could you tell me how intimate your relationships are? Do you have physical intimacy? Could you tell me more about it?

What do you value the most in your relationships? What would you like to change in your relationships?

What do you expect from these relationships?

How do you think does your partner have similar expectations from your relationships?

What do your parents think about your decision to have a relationship?

What do your friends think about it?

What kind of attitude do you expect from your family, friends and community towards your choice of having a romantic and/or sexual relationship? Is your expectation different from the one you have faced?

Who do you usually advise with regarding your personal life issues?

If the person is not in a relationship at the moment of the interview:

Have you ever been in a relationship before? Could you tell me more about it/them?

How long were you together?

Where did you meet each other?

What kind of feelings did you have towards each other?

How intimate your relationships were?

Did they involve physical intimacy? If yes, would you mind telling me more about it? If no, why did you decide not to have them?

What did you value the most in your relationships?

What did you want to change about your relationships at the time you had them?

What kind of expectations did you have from those relationships?

How do you think did your partner have the same expectations?

Did your parents know about your relationships?

What about your friends?

Why did you break up?

If the person has not been in a relationship before:

If you have not been in a relationship before, do you want to be in a relationship? If yes, what kind of relationship do you see yourself in?

If no, why don't you want to have them?

Part 4 Previous romantic and/or sexual relationships

Would you mind if I ask you questions about your previous romantic and/or sexual relationships? I want to remind you that if you do not want to answer the questions, we can skip them.

How many relationships did you have before?

Could you tell me more about them?

Part 5 In case of Sexual Inexperience

I would like to ask some questions regarding your decision not to have sex so far. I want to remind you that if there are questions you do not want to answer, we can skip them. It will not be a problem.

Why didn't you have sex previously?

In what circumstances would you like to have your first sexual experience? With whom? Why do you think so?

Part 6 Plans for the future

Would you mind sharing with me what kind of plans do you have for future?

For instance, how do you see yourself in upcoming 3-5 years?