

Husband–wife’s Expectation of Opposite–sex Spouse and the Construction of Gender Identity

Ahmad Izadia¹, Hamid Reza Reyhan Ebrahimib², Farzaneh Zilaiec³

^{1,2,3} *Department of English, Abadan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Abadan, Iran*

ABSTRACT

The study adopts social constructionist approach to see how gender identity is dynamically constructed in husband and wife’s expression of marital expectations from each other. The basic view is that the linguistic forms the couple use to describe their expectations of their opposite-sex spouses not only reflect but also reinforce and reconstruct their gender roles, through which in turn, construct their broader gender identity. The respondents to an open-ended questionnaire wrote their expectations and descriptions of their spouses. The responses were analyzed to what gender roles are perceived for both husbands and wives by their counterparts.

Keywords: gender identity, gender roles, husband-wife relationship, marital expectation, opposite-sex spouse

INTRODUCTION

From a social constructionist perspective, gender identity is dynamically and fluidly constructed and reconstructed in the gendered practice of social members (Fox & Murray, 2000; Blume & Blume, 2003). Family, as a social institution which “forms the foundation of human relationship” (Asoodeh et al., 2011), is a compelling ground for the (re)construction of gender identity. In the discursive constitution of gender identity, the role of language is central (Holmes, 2008). Language is now postulated to play a central role in not only reflection of social roles, one of which is gendered roles, but also a means to reinforce and reconstruct them (Gee, 2005; Mills, 2003). As two aspects of gender identity, husband-wife identities are hence reflected and (re)constructed in the language which is used in communication between husbands and wives in family institution.

Every individual has a perception of self-gender and opposite-gender. “The language people use signals at least some of his/her social identities including gender identity” (Holmes, 2008). Using linguistic forms to express expectations of other sex, particularly spouse, is a way to express opposite-gender perception. Similarly, describing gendered family-related activities reflects how individual perceive and reinforce self and other gender roles and identities. Adopting this view to gender identity and language, this study is an attempt to explore how Iranian male and female spouses reconstruct their gender identity through the linguistic forms they use to describe and express their expectations of their opposite-sex spouses. The study is a contribution to a better understanding of gender roles in Iranian society and how language is employed to reflect the perception of these gender roles and at the same time reconstruct them within the family and society.

BACKGROUND

Gender roles and stereotypes

Society places ideas concerning proper behaviors regarding gender roles. Each society has its own rules and expectations for men and women which are not only different between genders but also between cultures. Men have standards and specific career goals that they must live up to according to how others judge. Women have other standards and responsibilities to do. In Iran, the society does not expect women to hold positions like judge, miner, lorry driver, and so many others. Some of the positions (e.g. judge) are prohibited for women by law; while others are sanctioned by society's expectations. Until recently, the society did not have police women (www.womeniniran.com). Most jobs which are physically demanding are not considered appropriate for women. On the other hand, men are not supposed to be involved in careers that are labeled womanish. The judiciary system of Iran, after the Islamic republic, has banned men to become midwives and the jobs relating to women's sexual organs. Regarding payments in the jobs, women are perceived as low-expectation workers. Companies prefer women in most jobs where they have the alternative of men with the same qualifications, because women work for lower wages. The society does not expect them to be the bread-provider of the family.

Although in today's world the role of women has remarkably changed, and women are taking very active roles in all levels of the society, men still dominate. Still society assigns the big responsibilities to men. The primary role of a woman is regarded to be a "good wife" and then a "good mother".

The most frequent stereotypes of men and women are shown by Lueptow (1984) as follows: Men are stereotypically known as dominant, competitive, aggressive, independent, ambitious, self-confident, adventurous and decisive, while women are described as affectionate, submissive, emotional, sympathetic, talkative and gentle. Williams and Best (1982) found that these stereotypes are universal. They found that in 30 cultures the same stereotypes exist with only minor differences in the emphasis made on these traits. Concerning language, women are more reported as more talkative, conversationalist than men, using more tag questions and pragmatic particles (Holmes, 2008). While these typecasting categories may help in developing stereotypes, this study, however, views gender roles as a manifestation of gender identities, which are dynamically constructed in the gendered practice of individuals (Fox & Murray, 2000; Blume & Blume, 2003).

Husbands and wives engage in a variety of different communication behaviors related to gender. Spouses are not only different in how they act, but also in what they want from the other as a communicator. Hawkins, Weisberg and Ray (1980) found that husbands want their wives to interact in a more conventional manner. The construct conventional communication is defined as explicit verbalization in a low disclosure way by avoiding or glossing over issues. In other words, husbands want less verbal interaction. If one "glosses" over issues mutual meanings can never be discovered. Wives, on the other hand, want less controlling communication behavior from their husbands. Controlling behavior is usually exhibited when emotions are running high and negative, so just what is the matter may not be clear.

Regarding husband or wife expectations, which are the main concern of the present study, the common stereotypes are that women expect their husbands to express affectionate feelings towards them both verbally and non-verbally. They like to be given gifts on the important occasions of their life such as birthday, marriage and women's day. Furthermore, women expect their husbands to be financially productive and able to afford the life expenses. On the other hand, men expect their wives to provide

the best household, bringing up children, act logically in shopping and avoid extravagancy (Majalleh Khanevadeh, 2005).

Husband-wife relationship in Iranian families

Iran is a family-oriented society. Family (which is literally translated into khanevadeh) has long been appreciated and valued by Iranians. For Iranians, family is the most important social institution and children are the focal point of this institution (www.Parstimes.com). The women's role such as attending to men, giving birth and breeding the children is a sacred role which guarantees the continuity of the family.

Canonically, a man initiates the relationship and proposes a woman to start a conjugal relationship. Then the woman has the right to agree or disagree with him. Upon her agreement, the relationship has been built and the responsibility to live up to the partner's expectations starts.

The relationship between the couples and their expectations from each other has obviously undergone drastic changes through the passage of time. A typical family of, say, 50 years ago does no longer exist, except in some rural traditional regions. In those days, the role and responsibilities of women were only limited to doing the household and bringing up the children, generally without the help of their husbands. Their highest expectation was probably to be fed. As these women were generally illiterate and had no trade to work out of home, the question of their right to work does not apply. Currently, however, families have changed and the couples no longer practice tradition in a sense of 50 years ago.

Marriages, however, are still accomplished in a way that is more similar to traditional rituals; that is women has to wait to be proposed. Usually there is little or no pre-marriage relationship between would-be couples. The parents' agreement or disagreement places a great influence on the would-be couple's decision. The girl's father's permission is legally required for marriage conclusion (Milani: Encyclopedia Iranica). However, in recent society, marriages based on love before marriage have started to grow in the major Iranian metropolitans.

The roles are well defined in terms of gender and expectations are clear. On the whole, similar to most patriarchal cultures, earning a living is seen mostly appropriate for men, while child rearing has been as a rule in the domain of women (www.parstimes.com). Men are the bread-winners of the family and women are domestic queens.

Such notions, however, have changed drastically in recent decades and the phenomenal number of highly educated women both in Iran and outside and the worsening economic situation since the revolution has forced many women from all classes to seek employment outside the house. In addition to education and economic variables, other factors like, ethnic background, religious inclination, disparities among urban and tribal populations, and personal pre-dispositions mitigate and, at times, contradict the absoluteness of any typical characterization of the modern society (Millani, Encyclopedia Iranica). "Conventional allocations of power, space, and resources have been challenged, modifying gender hierarchies and inequities. Modernization, desegregation, women's rights movements, urbanization, changes in legislation, expansion of the communication media, adaptation to national and international pressures, and re-Islamization have affected notions of masculinity and femininity, refashioning the relationships between men and women" (Milani, Encyclopedia Iranica, p.405).

THE STUDY

Using an open-ended essay type questionnaire, the present study aims to find out what expectations a sample of Iranian couples have to the opposite gender and how they reconstruct their gender identity in general, and husband/wife identity in particular by the language they used to describe their expectations of their spouses. 50 questionnaires were distributed to 25 male (husband) and 25 female (wife). A total of 38 answered questionnaires, however, were responded and returned. Apart from the questionnaire, two couples were interviewed. All the participants were Iranian couples living in a condominium in Serdang, Malaysia. The majority have postgraduate education background. Among the 25 women, 5 women were house wives. They ranged between the age of 25 to 40. They were originally from different parts of Iran. The questionnaire was in Persian and comprised of 14 open-ended questions designed by the researchers to elicit respondents' answers on their expectations and perceptions in the different discourses such as family, society and workplace.

For each question in the questionnaire, the answers were collected, classified and analyzed. Then the language of male and female respondents were compared to find out the differences and similarities, and to explore how the participants of the study mark their gender identity in their answers.

ANALYSIS

Although the participants were asked to elaborate on the answers and provide the detailed information, the majority sufficed it to use single or double adjectives to describe their expectations to their spouses. In this part, results of data analysis are presented, and the respondents' expectations and language use in the family and society are also discussed.

Family

Family expectations/descriptions were categorized into husband-wife relationship, children and money matters. Regarding husband-wife relationship, which was addressed by items 1, 5, 10, 11, 12 and 14 of the questionnaire, women described and expected their husbands as, romantic, honest, flexible, family lover, perseverant, sociable, patient, benign, devoted while emphasized on adjectives like chaste, loyal and sober. The study supported the point that women are after more romantic relations than men. In this study, women, unanimously, expressed that they expect their husbands to 'express love' both verbally and behaviorally. They like their husbands to buy them presents in different special occasions and to remember their birthdays, and pronounce "I love you" frequently. By contrast, men preferred women to express love by their behavior. This finding is in line with much of quoted stereotypes.

Regarding house chores, all women expected cooperation from their husbands. The majority of men, however, tried to evade the responsibility and expressed that it is the women's duty and responsibility. This could be a clash of expectations between couples in modern Iranian families. The degree of the movement away from traditionalism among men differs. Educated and working wives are attempting to share the responsibility of household with their partners, while some men find it difficult to accept. No change is without challenge.

Concerning children, it was traditionally viewed that women take it for granted that they are the ones who are responsible and committed to bringing up the children. The findings of the study suggest that in the modern society women expect cooperation on the part of their husbands in breeding children. The women in the present study expected men to behave children complementarily; that is being serious, strict and effective. They said that women cannot be as strict as men to their children, due to their kindness, emotionality and permissiveness. These women recognized the father's role in the family as a

paragon to be followed by children. On the contrary, men expected women not to behave so emotionally to children and try to raise independent children. They also asked women to be patient, responsible and supportive to children. From men's perspective, the main responsible parent for children is mother. This could challenge the compromise in husband-wife relationship. Most men prefer the traditional role of fathers which affords the entire responsibility to women, whereas modern women who are mostly educated and working mothers do not seem to accept such a responsibility.

In relation to financial matters, as was predicted, all men accepted the role of bread-winner of the family and expressed no expectation from their wives. On the other hand, all women expected their husbands to provide the family expenses as well as their and their children's needs. Almost all men expected their wives to avoid being extravagant and squanderer. The Iranian society places the responsibility of providing family expenses to men. A man is expected to get married only after he sees himself able to afford the needs and expenses of a family. A proof of this point in the present study is the women's expression of their financial expectations. 90% of women said that their husband must (bayad) provide them a luxurious house, car, gardens and overseas journeys. This view assigns the main responsibility of the family to men. It is to note that the men in this study accepted this role and, in return, they just expected their wives to understand their financial situations and be 'frugal' and 'parsimonious'.

Society

As mentioned earlier, gender roles in Iranian society are changing. The families are set halfway between traditionalism and modernism. The results of this study supported this change, especially because it was conducted on highly educated couples, who can pioneer any change in the society. In answering the questions concerning the role of women in the society, including workplace, the majority of women declared that they would like to have a job outside home. Although Iranian men are legally entitled to either permit their wives to work or not to allow them have a social activity out of home, the majority of the women in the study stated that their husbands would allow them to work. Only three women said they would not like to work out, and one woman said she was not permitted to work out by her husband. Both genders expected their partners to behave decently in the society and work place. Men emphasized chastity and observing moral and social norms.

CONCLUSION

The study shed light on the concept of gender roles by attempting to investigate how a sample of Iranian couples reconstruct their gender identity as husband and wife by expressing their expectations of their spouses. Regarding the roles that both genders take up in the family and society, the study corroborated the smooth change from a more traditional society to a modern one in terms of gender roles. While some expectations emphasized more resemblance to gender roles in traditional society, the majority supported the fact that women are stabilizing their positions in their society and establishing a more prominent role both inside and outside the home. The roles that both genders play and wish to play or want their spouses to play are the manifestation of the identity they wish to enact through language. The findings of this study revealed that while it is difficult to defy a patriarchal characterization for Iranian families and society, this patriarchal feature is far distant from the traditional one. Increasing the level of education, economical conditions, communication with the more democratic nations and a host of other factors are bringing about this change.

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