

Social aspects of relationship security: redefining family and functional environments

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ABSTRACT

Family is one of the important socialising institutions of the society that has survived through the ages. There appears to be a change in the family, couple dyad and dynamics in rapidly modernizing India with increased educational, employment opportunities for women, migration for work and studies, and the entry of the nuclear family system. Two separate studies were done among 29 participants, between the ages of 18 and 45 to understand and conceptualize relationship security. A qualitative approach from a phenomenological paradigm was used to obtain rich experiences, understand it in depth, and maintain the uniqueness of the data. The present paper explores the expectations from partner towards the family, peer group and their influence on sense of security in the intimate relationship. Sub-themes emphasising on inclusion in peer group, transparency in work place, parents as a support rather than a directing system emerged from the data. This information could help in strengthening functional environments of couples in a relationship as well as raise awareness about the transitioning family in Westernizing India.

Keywords: *Relationship security, nuclear family, peer, social group, modernizing India*

In India, family is one of the most important institutions that has survived through the ages (Chadda & Deb, 2013). Being a predominantly traditionalistic society, where pre-marital relationships are discouraged (Abraham & Kumar, 1999) and family's influence in choice of partner is significant (Desai, McCormick, & Gaeddert, 1990 as cited in Ganth & Kadhiraavan, 2017) one cannot deny that collectivistic India was largely held together by the family system that emphasizes integrity, loyalty and unity. In the Indian context, commitment may not be limited to the mutual fulfilment of the couple but will extend to include all the family members.

Romantic love, love marriages-concepts commonly seen in Western cultures were not studied due to its lacklustre presence in the Indian society where families came together for more practical, political and economic reasons (arranged-marriages). With love and commitment

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in the emerging adulthood phase becoming increasingly prominent in India, the attitude and lifestyle of youth, owing to global factors (Gala & Kapadia, 2014) are taking away parental control and influence on their relationships. Increasing affluence, focus on education and availability of career options for both men and women and technological revolution in contraceptive methods have led to the postponement of marriage and parenthood, which were once the traditional markers of Indian culture and moving a step further towards individualism. A survey conducted among students in Gujarat showed that preference to stay in a joint family system post marriage was mainly sought after, more for financial stability rather than emotional support (Shah, 1960). Desai (1995) describes family as a link between continuity and change and that right from ancient times, family, caste, and community have dominated the entire texture of Indian society, both in the life of the individual and in the life of the community. In a survey done among college youth, the continued importance of familial values in determining relationship partner was seen (Sonawat, 2001).

However, with the internet creating a social space for networking (Mortimer & Larson, 2002), lengthened duration of time spent at work and educational settings (Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenberg & Verma, 2002) the influential role of the family in creating alliances or even approving them has come down. These trends are especially visible in the urban cities of contemporary India, including the city of Bangalore which is the context of the present study. While the main objective of the studies was to conceptualize relationship security, the transitioning importance of the family unit was evident among the participants. Relationship security was operationally defined as *“A perceived sense of safety, trust and stability in the relationship where expectations are met or will be met adequately within the boundaries of the intimate relationship”*.

METHODOLOGY

Since dating couples in India constitute a semi-underground population (Netting, 2010), purposive, non-probabilistic snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. Married couples were also approached through the same means. The participants were studied in two groups: i) pre-marital group from the age 18, the oldest participant being 32, ii) Marital group from the age of 23 to the oldest being 42. Being the most active agents of global change, middle and upper middle class youth and young adults (Netting, 2010) belonged to the first group. Twenty nine participants across three phases were either interviewed or participated in a focussed group discussion about what security meant to them in the context of a relationship. This included both pre-marital group (20 participants) and marital group (9 participants). A phenomenological approach was used to capture the essence of how adults in a pre-marital and marital relationship conceptualize security. While several broad dimensions emerged from the thematic analyses of the data, this paper will outline the social aspects of relationship security and how participants redefined the traditional roles of family in intimate relationships.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pre-marital relationships and the “parent factor”

A study by Bhandari (2017) looked at how Indian families currently try to position themselves in the context of pre-marital relationships in a more subtle manner. Upper class Indian Youth explore and embrace individualism within the boundaries of Indian heritage (Netting, 2010). For example, participant MB stated,

“This is my third boy-friend, and no, my parent’s do not know about him... I mean, why should they? My parents found out about my second boy-friend after the break-up... I was

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crying and all. This time, I want to be sure". (MB, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

Parents have always influenced relationship initiation in the case of arranged marriages and maintenance in the case of romantic love/ dating and love marriages. In the transition stage from dating to marriage, parental approval continues to appear to be important but not the only deciding factor for commitment in relationships. According to Donner (2011), the family does shape the middle class identification of modern India. The factors that families sought for in an alliance such as status, wealth, religion and structural compatibility is no longer central to relationship initiation, especially in pre-marital relationships (Bhandari, 2017).

Participant SM stated,

"I am of the marriageable age, and if I suggest the name of the boy at home also, mom will surely take me wedding dress shopping, they have been talking about marriage for long. I really like R, but, I am not ready... I want to study more, travel...if possible, even with R". (SM, personal communication, December 09, 2013).

Whereas Participant RR stated,

"When I was in college, I never dated. I mean I liked this one guy but he did not like me back in that one way I think, but we used to hang out. Also, he was too flashy for the kind of boy my parents will accept. They are very conservative Brahmins. So I thought, it's better for them to choose than for me to say something and them to say no". (RR, personal communication, December 16, 2013).

With increased financial independence of young individuals in urban cities, the fear of being denounced by the family in choosing a partner of a different caste, socio-economic background (De Neve, 2016) and other demographic factors appears to be no longer threatening. Young adults view pre-marital relationships as largely individualistic experiences (Bhandari, 2017), nevertheless there is some sense of structure brought on by the families of the two. With most participants living/ studying or working away from home, their functional environments were no longer a family-controlled space.

Participant RJ stated, *"So... I do like this guy, but I want him to be financially stable... then I will tell mom and dad. But as long as I am in Bangalore, we can plan and make this work without the pressure of you know... meeting his parents and all that.. Let me be sure first"*. (RJ, personal communication, November 21, 2013).

The opportunities to romance in the middle class pre-marital group are not often dictated by the parents, with increasing independence and environments where they are not present. Parenting style was also playing a role. Those with a more permissive style of parenting were more likely to approve of independence in their children than those with authoritarian or controlling parenting style. Understanding that the courting/ dating is a private experience that may not last for long, given the social and cultural significance of marriage, individuals desire to protect these experiences from the scrutiny of parents (Donner 2011, 2016; Lietchy 2003; Saavla 2012; Twamley 2014 as cited in Bhandari,2017). The family presents itself as non-confrontational and non-authoritarian and instead of rejecting a union of choice, it implements strategies to make their opinion count, and in due process decide the future of the pre-marital relationship. Dhariwal and Connolly (2013) found that Indian youth exposed to westernization perceive and demand more autonomy from their parents in choice of

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partner, and that family approval validated their choice (Dharnidharka, 2007), in other words, even perceived approval increased relationship stability and security (Felmlee, 2001).

Transparency and Social Inclusion

Peer groups defined one functional environment for the participants, more among the pre-marital group. Effort to include the partner in one's social group was emphasized by the participants as a contributing factor towards relationship security.

Participant MB said, *"He just preferred meeting his friends without me, and sometimes I wondered if they even knew I existed"*. (MB, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

Dharnidharka (2007), in her study reported that telling families and peers about romantic relationships influenced relationship formation and progression.

Participant ST stated, *"I like it when he takes me for family functions and all his friends get to meet me, when he shows me off... I feel special...like he is proud to be with me"*. (ST, personal communication, January 19, 2014).

Visibility in social functions, knowledge and awareness of peer group and their activities increased sense of security in the relationship. The increasing use of technology additionally creates an "away from home" space that also plays an influential role. For example, participants sharing about their insecurities mentioned social groups, networking spaces such as pubs, even office parties, where they have felt insecure when not present or included. It was also the "serious" relationship that was more publicly accepted and displayed, much more especially than "one-night stands.", and also more likely to be brought to the notice of parents.

Marital relationships and the 'parent factor'

Participants, especially the married one's were more likely to rely on their partners for support and expected the parents in more 'non-interfering' supportive roles where they encourage the independence of the new family unit and do not try to 'control' them. This is indeed notable, for often men and women resist surveillance from their parents, fighting for individual space and freedom, wherein the individuals felt more accountable to their partner than their parents. In the marital group, spouses had to agree to the degree of involvement from their respective families. Surprisingly despite the conditions in which they had got married, they expected their partner to respect, accept and care for their parents as well.

Participants also tend to subtly discipline their spouse so that their family, who provide the moral and operating framework, accepts them (Bhandari, 2018). Families play a role by providing or removing emotional and instrumental support for couples (Manning, Cohen & Smock, 2011). Depending on parents at an age of maturity was what Blatz in his security theory termed "immature dependent security", which is viewed as undesirable (Volpe, 2010).

Supportive peer group

Friends formed a functional environment where one confides in or seeks advice from. Telling a wider circle of friends was a reflection of the seriousness of the relationship, this also increased confidence in the relationship. Blatz's mature dependent security emphasized a state where individuals depend on others in their functional environment to supplement what they have already achieved independently. This is acceptable, desirable and prevalent in the context of relationships where there is "give and take".

SUMMARY

The family, therefore, has not been displaced by modern lifestyles but has been crucially reconfigured in everyday realities (Bhandari 2017). With the increasing independence that is encouraged in urban, collectivistic societies, the decision to date, marry, acceptance of partner and satisfaction in relationship is largely dependent on the stake-holders themselves, with subtle, yet significant influence from the social circle. Parental acceptance of relationship, knowledge of the same amongst close friends are considered important social elements, whereas, there appears to be change in the factors influencing choice of partner. The educated, middle and upper middle class group (sample), emphasize more on compatibility (individual-defined rather than parent-defined), than practical factors such as status, religion, economic status, etc.

Understanding these emerging differences, will help further research in India focus on helping young individuals deal with conflicts between their choices and the influence of their upbringing and culture. Psycho-education modules, sessions can focus on educating the current generation parents with young couples in their families, about the struggle faced by them and to deal with it more effectively.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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