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Single-Parent Adolescents' Perceptions of Future Marriage and Family Expectations: A Qualitative Inquiry<sup>a</sup>

## Abstract

In recent years, as in many other countries, the number of single-parent families has been rapidly increasing in our country as well. Along with this increase, there is a growing need for qualitative research to understand better single-parent families and adolescents living in single-parent family environments. This study focuses on single-parent adolescents' priorities in emotional relationships and partner choices in family formation processes. The study was designed using qualitative research procedures and conducted with 15 single-parent adolescents. The data obtained through semi-structured interview forms were analyzed following qualitative data analysis. The first salient finding is that communication, trust, problem-solving skills, and anger management are essential for single-parent adolescents looking for a future spouse for a happy and long-lasting marriage. Second, single-parent adolescents value a peaceful and loving family environment for their prospective partners and seek similarities in finding meaning in life and sharing principles. Finally, the findings on coping with feelings of jealousy emphasize the importance of healthy communication channels. By providing essential perspectives on marriage and family structures from the perspectives of single-parent adolescents, this study may help professionals provide more practical guidance on these issues.

**Keywords:** Single-Parent Family, Adolescence, Partner Selection, Family Expectations, Perception Of Marriage.

## Tek Ebeveynli Ergenlerin Gelecek Evlilik ve Aile Beklentilerine Yönelik Algıları: Nitel Bir Araştırma

## Öz

Son yıllarda birçok ülkede olduğu gibi ülkemizde de tek ebeveynli ailelerin sayısı hızlı bir şekilde artış göstermektedir. Bu artışla beraber tek ebeveynli aileleri ve tek ebeveynli aile ortamında yaşayan ergen bireyleri anlamak için niteliksel araştırmalara gerek duyulmaktadır. Bu çalışma, tek ebeveynli ergenlerin aile kurma süreçlerindeki duygusal ilişkilerde ve eş seçimindeki önceliklerine odaklanmaktadır. Çalışma, nitel araştırma yöntemleri kullanılarak tasarlanmış ve 15 tek ebeveynli ergenle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formlarıyla elde edilen veriler nitel veri analizine göre incelenmiştir. İlk önemli bulgu, iletişim, güven, problem çözme becerileri ve öfke kontrolünün, tek ebeveynli ergenlerin mutlu ve uzun süreli bir evlilik için aradıkları eş özellikleri arasında yer aldığıdır. İkinci olarak, tek ebeveynli ergenler, müstakbel eşlerinde huzurlu ve sevgi dolu bir aile ortamına değer vermekte ve hayata anlam katma ile ilke paylaşımında benzerlik aramaktadırlar. Son olarak, kıskançlık duygusuyla başa çıkma konusunda sağlıklı iletişim kanallarının önemine dikkat çekilmektedir. Bu çalışma, tek ebeveynli ergenlerin evlilik ve aile yapıları hakkındaki bakış açılarına dair önemli perspektifler sunarak, profesyonellerin bu konularda daha pratik rehberlik sunmalarına katkı sağlayabilecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tek Ebeveynli Aile, Ergenlik, Eş Seçimi, Aile Beklentileri, Evlilik Algısı.

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## **1. Introduction**

Family definitions may vary culturally, socially, legally, and functionally, including single-parent, adopted, divorced, or dual-parent homes (Coleman et al., 2023, p. 2909). Mothers and fathers contribute significantly to children's social skills, emotional support, practical help, information, guidance, supervision, and self-concept (Amato, 1993, p. 24). This study emphasizes emotional and social development, focusing on single-parent adolescents (SPA). The transition to adulthood is necessary, considering generational value differences that influence family interactions. Family value differences can lead to adolescent conflicts and adjustment problems (Phinney & Vedder, 2022, p. 168). Positive relationships with family and social environment during adolescence provide mental health and emotional support (Moore et al., 2018, p. 1951). Severe relationship traumas may not occur in early adolescence, but temporary interruptions or increased emotional distance may occur, especially in mother-daughter dyads (Holmbeck, 2018, p. 167).

Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, as cited in Moore et al. (2018), various interactions exist among family, school, and peer microsystems (p. 1952). Interpersonal relationships established with social contexts and significant others (such as parents, peers, and partners) play a shaping role in adolescents' emotional relationships (Van de Bongardt et al., 2018, p. 13; Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019). While emotional relationships are defined as a developmental task for adolescents (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019, p. 9), they are also understood to be associated with social dynamics. Developing and maintaining healthy emotional relationships are closely related to interpersonal skills and family processes (Xia et al., 2018, p. 1510). The positive repercussions of a positive family climate on problem-solving skills during adolescence support positive interpersonal communication. These dynamics impact feelings of love in relationships, problem-solving skills, and the risk of relationship violence (Xia et al., 2018, p. 1500; Kansky & Allen, 2018, p. 1534; Simpson et al., 2018, p. 479). A positive family climate empowers adolescents against relationship violence and enhances problem-solving.

## **2. Literature**

While single parenthood is often perceived as challenging, there are also positive life stories where relationships within the family are established in healthy ways. People can become single parents due to reasons such as divorce, separation, or death, and they can also choose to create a single-parent lifestyle through avenues like adoption (Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020, p. 2223). As highlighted in this study, the transition to single parenthood can lead to some challenges as life conditions change and relationships are restructured. Children who are separated from one of their parents may encounter issues such as psychological distress, anger, decreased family attachment, depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of loneliness (Kroese, 2021, p. 70; Tang et al., 2018, p. 137; Garnefski & Diekstra, 1997, p. 201).

Single-parent family, often recognizing the necessity of nurturing children's social skills to confront social stigma (Baron et al., 2019, p. 765; Johnco & Rapee, 2018, p. 604), experience varying rules and roles within their structure (Murry & Lippold, 2018, p. 650). Consequently, transitioning from parent-child to peer relationships in these families can signify role ambiguity (Macfie et al., 2015, p. 35; Murry & Lippold, 2018, p. 651). Single parents, burdened with high responsibilities, may neglect self-care, leading to heightened stress and adopting a parenting

style marked by pressure and psychological control, thereby transferring negative emotions to children (Larson & Gillman, 1999, p. 21). Furthermore, children in single-parent family may grapple with emotional and behavioral challenges like blame, truth concealment, intense fears, or propensities towards violence, indicating coping mechanism deficiencies (Maurya et al. 2015, p. 1235). Concerns surrounding second marriages (Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2014, p. 1322; Garnefski & Diekstra, 1997, p. 201; Jensen et al., 2018, p. 479; Gath, 2022, p. 17) and parental economic inadequacy (Turunen, 2013) are also salient.

The dynamics between single-parent family structures and adolescents have been discussed in the literature regarding mental health, well-being, parent-child relationships, and social skills. Previous studies suggest that the experiences of adolescents in single-parent family may have implications for their development of adult relationships. The present study can be explained in line with two aspects of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory (pp.39-40). (1) It can be assumed that the processes of adapting to changes due to divorce have implications for the emotional development of these adolescents. (2) Growing up in a single-parent family can create different experiences for adolescents, especially in sharing family responsibilities. Similarly, these reflections will also emerge in shaping their emotional relationship models. Studies conducted with SPA in Turkey have primarily focused on predicting psychosocial processes such as life satisfaction and quality (Cecen-Eroglu & Dingiltepe, 2012, p. 1077), self-esteem (Demirbilek & Otrar, 2014, p. 1), and loneliness (Civitci et al., 2009, p. 513). From this perspective, the two dimensions supported by theoretical perspectives also express the original contribution of the present study to literature.

### **3. Methods**

This study explores the priorities that influence adolescents' perspectives from single-parent families on emotional relationships and decision-making processes in partner selection for marriage. The study sought to answer some questions: (1) How do adolescents describe their future spouses? (2) How do adolescents shape the processes of future marriage decisions? (3) How do adolescents describe a healthy family structure?

The research was conducted using a qualitative research procedure. Qualitative research provides an approach that enables the understanding of participants' behaviors, meanings attributed to events or objects, and their experiences, starting from the perspective that forms the focus of the study (Creswell, 2020, p. 73). The study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach (Smith et al., 2021, p. 45) due to its focus on exploring the perspectives of SPA on their future family and relationship processes. The descriptive phenomenological approach seeks to reveal the meanings individuals attribute to life events and the discovered meanings of experienced realities (Sundler et al., 2019, p. 735). Based on Husserl's descriptions of the synthesis formed by experiencing and attributing meaning, phenomenology refers to individuals' understanding and emotional transitions and the cognitive processing of symbols presented by real life (Husserl, 1999, p. 41). This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of KTO Karatay University with decision number 2022/11/05 on 02.01.2023. Informed consent was provided to every participant and parents.

### **3.1. Interview Form**

In conducting the literature review for the research problem and subsequently crafting the semi-structured interview form, the book "Marriage and Family Life" by Canel (2011) was consulted (pp. 136-147). Additionally, insights from five experts with doctoral-level education in social work, psychology, and sociology were sought to refine the interview form.

The interview form consists of two main sections. The first section includes descriptive questions such as gender, age, and living situation with parents. The second section comprises nine open-ended questions related to participants' perceptions of their future marriage processes, ideal partners, and family structures, aligning with the focus of the research. Furthermore, this section has a subsection consisting of a multiple-choice question where participants can indicate the qualities they seek in a future partner. The open-ended questions in the interview form start with introductory questions (e.g., "What kind of approach do you expect from a potential partner?") and progress to probing questions (Harding, 2019, p. 285) based on participants' responses (e.g., "How do you think parents should interact with their children and with each other?").

### **3.2. Procedure**

Before the interviews, SPA were informed about the research topic. Subsequently, their parents were also briefed on the subject, necessary information regarding the possibility of audio recording during the interviews was provided, and voluntary consent forms were signed. P1-P15 were used instead of their real names to protect the participants' privacy. Face-to-face interviews, which were recorded, lasted an average of 35 minutes each.

In contrast, open-ended questions were not conducted in-depth to avoid emotionally impacting the participants due to the study not adopting a clinical perspective. Therefore, the interviews were relatively brief. The interviews were concluded upon reaching saturation in participants' responses, characterized by repetitive answers. All data obtained from semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim.

### **3.3. Participants**

Participants were selected based on specific criteria (being between the ages of 15-18, having divorced parents, and living with either their mother or father) using purposive sampling, resulting in 15 single-parent high school students. Among the participants aged 15-17, seven are female, and eight are male. Four participants live with their father, while eleven live with their mother (Table 1).

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

The study followed the six stages of Collaizzi's descriptive phenomenological data analysis process. In explaining the data, Collaizzi's seven-step content analysis method as cited in Wirihana et al. (2018) was applied: (1) reading the written transcripts repeatedly to generate a general idea; (2) identifying directly relevant significant statements; (3) creating formulated meanings; (4) clustering common meanings from participants' statements into themes; (5) fitting the findings into comprehensive descriptions; (6) establishing the validity of the findings with participants' views; (7) providing feedback to participants on the results.

**Tablo 1:** Descriptive Information about the Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	The living situation with the mother or father
P1	Female	15	Living with mother
P2	Female	17	Living with mother
P3	Male	17	Living with father
P4	Female	17	Living with mother
P5	Male	17	Living with mother
P6	Male	17	Living with father
P7	Female	17	Living with father
P8	Male	17	Living with mother
P9	Male	16	Living with mother
P10	Female	16	Living with father
P11	Female	15	Living with mother
P12	Male	15	Living with mother
P13	Male	16	Living with mother
P14	Male	17	Living with mother
P15	Female	15	Living with mother

Collaizzi's final stage involves ensuring the validity of the detailed and narrowed structure of the phenomenon by returning to the participants (Shosha, 2012), but this stage was not conducted in this study. In analyzing the data, significant statements from the interviews were formulated, resulting in 3 main themes, 11 sub-themes, and 141 codes reflecting participants' ideas. Codes were then compiled to create a draft theme. "Definition of marriage," "Healthy family structure," and "social environment relationships" were initially identified as themes, with examples of sub-themes including reasons for marriage, characteristics sought in a partner, age difference, partner's value system, and exhibited approach, among others. The draft theme was reviewed based on intersecting points of participant statements. Codes with similar content were merged (e.g., decisions regarding career and household matters), and the codes, themes, and sub-themes were examined within the framework of the research problem to finalize them.

## **4. Results**

Adolescents who grow up in single-parent families have particular perspectives on forming a family that can be grouped into three main themes. The first theme is about the characteristics they look for in potential partners, and it includes partners' qualities and sharing household responsibilities. The second theme concerns their priorities when deciding about marriage, such as family structure of origin, worldview, feelings of jealousy, and peer approval. The third theme concerns their expectations for a healthy family structure, including their definitions of marriage, their expectations regarding family structure, and their quest for harmony within the family unit.

### **4.1. Characteristics of Partner Selection**

#### **4.1.1. Potential Partners' Qualities**

The most essential qualities that SPA expect to see in their future partners are trust, problem-solving skills, anger management, and shared values. In contrast, other qualities such as the desire to have children, financial situation, education, and political views also emerged. Additionally, the relationship of the prospective partner with their social circle and their harmony within that circle are sought as fundamental qualities in marital unity.

### *Mutual involvement in communication*

According to the participants' accounts, how couples communicate with each other is crucial for the success of their marriage. Trust is considered an essential quality for maintaining a healthy and happy relationship. Practical problem-solving skills are also necessary for couples to handle their issues. Furthermore, participants mentioned that managing anger is crucial to prevent arguments from escalating. In summary, the narratives emphasize the significance of couples having flexible mindsets and practical communication skills to succeed in their relationships.

"For me, a priority in deciding on marriage is that the prospective spouse does not say, 'I would never do that!' Having a prospective spouse who is not fixed in their ways is very important to me." (P14-Male)

"We must share a common perspective, even if we do not agree on every detail. For instance, while I may not be particularly religious, when raising a child together, differing views on parenting could cause conflicts."(P11-Female)

### *Common Values*

Typical values are seen to be primarily religious preferences. During the pre-marriage and post-marriage periods, the factor of religion can manifest itself as a compatibility process in particular issues. Some individuals may prefer to marry individuals who share their religious views to be able to look at domestic harmony and life from the same perspective, avoid compatibility issues, and not have disagreements in child-rearing.

"To decide marriage, I first look at the person's religious views, and I prefer to marry a Muslim." (P7 - Female)

"As I mentioned earlier, religious views and race are my most important criteria. We must have the same value structures."(P5 - Male)

Participants consider ethnic background as another standard value that can influence the process of harmony within marriage. Participants believe having a spouse with the same ethnic background will contribute, especially in passing traditional rituals to future generations and avoiding discord within marriage. Ethnic background is seen as an indicator of values such as love, respect, honesty, fairness, and tolerance, reflected in the family and thought to be transmitted to the child after marriage.

"The priority for me to make a marriage decision is that the prospective partner shares the same ethnic background as me."(P5-Male)

"This issue is important to me... Having different values between parents in the child's education can lead to conflicts."(P10-Female)

Becoming a parent is seen as an essential life goal. It is among the sought-after qualities as it constitutes one of the crucial decisions to be made within the marriage union. After the first steps into the marriage union, the couple's most significant desire is to have children. However, becoming a parent is an action that requires a lot of responsibility. Therefore, prospective partners are expected to have a parental profile that closely monitors their children's emotional and cognitive development.

"She should love and want children. It's essential for me that they both act like friends with them and show a certain level of authority."(P8-Male)

"I expect them to be highly engaged with our children, approach gently, and communicate calmly without yelling. They need to support our children in their education and leisure activities consistently. ...I desire a father figure who unconditionally stands by our children."(P4-Female)

One significant aspect emphasized when forming a marital union is the profession of prospective partners. The similarity in educational backgrounds between couples influences communication and decision-making language. Additionally, participants express a desire for their prospective partners to have a good profession. This is motivated by couples' aspirations for a good quality of life economically and to avoid potential disparities in status that could lead to discord within the marital union.

"My priority in making a marriage decision is for the prospective partner to have a good profession."(P10-Female)

#### *A Prominent Feature: Social Compatibility*

A sought-after attribute in a potential spouse is social compatibility. It is understood that the social circle is perceived as an environment reflecting one's personality. Notably, participants intend to form concrete justifications by observing the behavior of potential partners in social settings and evaluating these reflections based on their observations.

"I observe their social circle. I pay close attention to whether they are genuine or not. Naturalness is very important to me."(P6-Male)

"Even though we may be married, people should have their own space. Probably, the spouse I choose will also be someone who has regular and good social relationships."(P15-Female)

Furthermore, this environment allows for inferences that the communication style within the social circle will inevitably reflect on the emotional relationship. The time spent by prospective partners with their social groups affects the process of entering into marriage, and it is observed that young people tend to make decisions about their prospective partners based on their social circle references.

"Being social is a good thing in my opinion. It ensures that my partner is self-confident. I would prefer them to have a more educated and cultured social circle."(P7-Female)

#### **4.1.2. Sharing Household Responsibilities**

Sharing household responsibilities is considered a factor that can help couples demonstrate respect and love for each other, particularly by supporting problem-solving. At this point, it is understood that the priority is taking on shared responsibilities.

"I believe there should be a division of tasks and that it's a shared responsibility."(P12-Male)

Mutual understanding and effective communication processes are crucial in exchanging and sharing household roles. Additionally, the idea of specific tasks being performed by women and others by men, which is considered a reflection of gender roles, does not resonate much with the participants.

"It should be based on who is less tired. I believe the one who is less tired should do it."(P13-Male)

"In marriage, responsibilities should not solely fall on women. Tasks should be divided equally. Both partners should share household duties and live under fair conditions. This should be addressed before marriage."(P1-Female)

#### **4.2. Priorities Guiding the Decision-Making Process in Marriage**

The priorities adolescents consider when making decisions about marriage manifest themselves as family structure, worldview, boundaries of jealousy in the relationship, and approval from friends. Adolescents seek happiness, peace, respect, and understanding within the family structure of prospective partners. Additionally, they endeavor to understand the life philosophies of potential partners. Different views prevail in interpreting the feelings of jealousy and approval from friends.

##### **4.2.1. Expectations regarding the family structure of prospective partners**

Expectations regarding the family structure of potential partners are emphasized by adolescents in the selection of a spouse. The family of prospective partners reflects their personality and values. Therefore, individuals try to form an opinion about them by observing the family of potential partners.

"I want my children to grow up in a loving family environment, even if their parents are separated like mine. Respect between family members is crucial. I prefer a partner from a family with positive memories."(P11-Female)

"I want them to have a modern and open-minded structure. I don't like traditional patterns very much."(P14-Male)

The expectations of adolescents generally resemble the criteria individuals consider in partner selection, but there are some differences. For example, these adolescents place more importance on the happiness and harmony of their partner's family. This may be due to their experiences in their own families. Therefore, they want the family of potential partners to be happy and harmonious.

"I disagree with the notion that 'You are not marrying their family!' Occasional interactions will happen, so I prefer modern, understanding individuals with views like my family's. Family harmony will benefit our marriage."(P15-Female)

"Family involvement is inevitable in marriage, so their values matter. They should prioritize happiness over finances, act respectfully, and find common ground on other issues."(P13-Male)

Additionally, adolescents see it as necessary that the family of potential partners be respectful and understanding, as it is crucial for sustaining their marriage healthily. Expectations for the partner's family to be respectful and understanding represent prominent expectations in the findings. This value is seen as a result of their thoughts on how family conflicts could negatively affect their marriage.

"I expect them to respect my and my spouse's opinions and not be overly influenced by their family. Avoiding family pressure is crucial for a healthy marriage. Additionally, I prefer my spouse to come from a respectful family."(P1-Female)

"I prefer to avoid a conservative family dynamic. They must respect our family's decisions and our child's upbringing. Respect between my spouse and their family is essential." (P4-Female)

Adolescents do not want the family of potential partners to intervene in their marriage. This way, they try to maintain their independence in their marriage. This finding suggests that they may have made more effort to make their own decisions and build their own lives due to their parent's divorce.

"I prefer a peaceful family environment without conflict or interference in our relationship. Education is a plus, but kindness matters most to me."(P6-Male)

#### **4.2.2. The worldview of the prospective partner**

Potential partners' views on how to make sense of life reflect their personalities and lifestyles. Therefore, adolescents try to understand them by observing their philosophical outlook and principles. Finding common ground in views is a valuable criterion for making plans and significant decisions within the marriage.

"This matters to me. Our alignment on justice, truth, honesty, love, respect, and tolerance is crucial as we build a family and raise children. Differing values between parents can lead to conflicts in our child's upbringing."(P10-Female)

"I need to have the same cultural values and worldview as my spouse. I don't want to experience disagreements in the future." (P13-Male)

#### **4.2.3. The Boundaries of Jealousy in a Relationship**

Adolescents express their approaches to relationships through the lens of jealousy, but their interpretations show noticeable differences. Some adolescents perceive jealousy as an effect that increases the frequency of arguments and indicates systematic pressure applied to one of the partners.

"I cannot accept jealousy or strict rules, and I do not restrict others because everyone has their own will."(P1-Female)

"I prefer my partner to avoid jealousy and communicate calmly and rationally, as I believe all issues can be resolved peacefully. I find impulsive outbursts dangerous and distancing."(P6-Male)

Secondly, jealousy is perceived as a normal emotion inherent to life but requires healthy management. Establishing boundaries for jealousy suggests accepting this emotion while shaping relationship patterns. There is an emphasis on understanding and respect, highlighting the importance of not infringing on freedom in accepting the feeling of jealousy, stressing that understanding and respect are more critical for the sustainability of the relationship.

"Jealousy is significant, but it shouldn't be controlling. I believe in calmly resolving issues through conversation and mutual agreement."(P4-Female)

"Moderate jealousy can be acceptable, but excessive jealousy is intolerable. It's important to strike a balance."(P12-Male)

Thirdly, some interpret jealousy as an expression of love. Balancing the bond between jealousy and love requires considering various dimensions such as culture, upbringing, and parental attitudes. While this interpretation may seem superficial, it can help understand individual roles in marriage and emotional relationships.

"I think jealousy comes from love. The key is for jealousy not to go too far. If it does, I feel the need to intervene, and frankly, I'll nicely warn my partner."(P8-Male)

"...They should emotionally satisfy me and constantly treat me well. They should be very jealous and possessive of me."(P2-Female)

#### **4.2.4. Is Peer Approval Important?**

Peer approval is a significant criterion for adolescents; however, its significance varies depending on individuals' personality traits and friendships. Adolescents who value their friends' approval are willing to seek their opinions and listen to their advice. They perceive their friends as important individuals whose opinions matter, believing that their friends can provide valuable insights and observations to help evaluate whether a potential partner meets their desired criteria.

"Yes, it's crucial. Friends offer an objective viewpoint that love might blind us to. Their insights are valuable as I'll spend time with my partner and friends."(P1-Female)

"...I take what they say into account. I ponder over their remarks and try to observe. My friends' opinions do influence my thoughts and leave an impression on me."(P9-Male)

In contrast, adolescents who do not consider their friends' approval important evaluate their friends' opinions before making their own decisions, considering whether these opinions align with their views. They express that they value their friends' perspectives on their own lives but believe that decisions regarding a potential partner should ultimately be made by themselves. This finding highlights the importance of decision-making autonomy for adolescents.

"It's not very important to me. I consider and listen to my friends' opinions. But still, I act according to what I believe is right."(P7-Female)

"It's not important to me. After all, we won't live with them; they won't be their spouse. I consider their opinions and analyze them. I evaluate the rational aspects. However, the final decision is mine, of course."(P6-Male)

### **4.3. What is a Healthy Family Structure?**

When the views of SPA on healthy family structure are analyzed, expectations regarding the family structure, expectations regarding the family structure of the prospective spouse, the value structure of the prospective spouse, the approach exhibited by the prospective spouse, and the search for harmony in the marriage union emerge as sub-themes. In this regard, adolescents define the healthy family structure of their dreams and reveal their plans for a healthy family structure.

#### **4.3.1. Definition of Marriage**

The findings indicate that marriage is evaluated across biological and psychological maturity, economic independence, family model, seriousness and decision-making process, and creating a happy family. Participants perceive marriage as an institution that requires reaching biological and psychological adulthood. At this point, the emphasis is placed on having sufficient autonomy to make conscious decisions and to be responsible. It is understood that economic freedom is crucial in bearing these responsibilities. The economic independence of both the woman and the man entering marriage will contribute to individual life satisfaction and facilitate the coverage of household expenses.

"Marriage is serious. We might divorce quickly, but marrying requires careful consideration as we merge our lives. Seriousness is paramount in marriage."(P4-Female)

"Marriage is an action I will take after reaching a certain age and securing my economic situation."(P5-Male)

However, participants' views on marriage are shaped by the model they see in their families. Thus, some participants project their thoughts on the role of men and women in marriage based on their observed family structure.

"For me, marriage is, as much as I have seen in my family, the effort of a woman to make a man happy. Don't think this idea tortures me. I can truly carry out this process. In my subconscious, marriage is meeting the expectations of men."(P2-Female)

From another perspective, participants describe the marriage union as a structure based on love, respect, trust, and compassion. The similarity in existential interpretations suggests that happiness, respect, and love are keywords in defining marriage.

"Marriage is simply two people building a life together. It is the foundation of a happy and peaceful family environment."(P9-Male)

"Marriage is when two people unite their lives with mutual love, respect, compassion, and tolerance along similar life views."(P10-Female)

#### **4.3.2. Expectations Regarding Family Structure**

The expectations of SPA regarding family structure indicate that these individuals envision a home environment characterized by peace, respect, and love. Participants emphasized the importance of mutual respect-based communication as the key to resolving family issues and disagreements, indicating that their initial expectations regarding family structure revolve around establishing such an environment.

"A healthy family isn't flawless but mostly content. It's crucial to have the resilience to tackle issues when they arise and for spouses not to exhaust each other."(P15-Female)

"A healthy family structure is an environment where everyone, including parents and children, can speak respectfully and express their ideas freely. Peace within the family is crucial."(P12-Male)

Conflicts between parents in the context of marital union, when attempted to be resolved through unhealthy communication channels, can negatively impact children's perceptions of family structure. Participants attempt to express their reflections on how children perceive conflicts and how far they can keep conflicts at bay.

"Every family has inevitable conflicts, but the key is to resolve them respectfully and without causing harm. Parents shouldn't overly involve their children in conflicts or force them to take sides."(P11-Female)

"I envision a harmonious family where parents maintain positive relationships and shield their children from disagreements. Consider this: 'Would a child be better off witnessing their parents argue or dance?'"(P3-Male)

#### **4.4. Quest for Harmony in Family Unity**

Participants strive to explain harmony in the family through principles of equality, respect, and making decisions together. They know that couples can build family unity despite their

similarities and differences. The example of economic autonomy illustrates the principles of self-respect and respect for freedom.

"I value their opinions rather than their decisions. They cannot make decisions about my work life or intervene when I encounter an issue in my work environment."(P10-Female)

"This is my profession, and I'm trained for it. It's not appropriate for them to meddle excessively. They're free to voice their opinions, but the ultimate decision should be mine. Likewise, I refrain from interfering too much in their profession; it's not my place to do so."(P9-Male)

However, even when individual issues arise between couples, unity, solidarity, and cooperation are emphasized in decision-making. The mentioned solidarity is still based on couples' rationality and responsibility in decision-making.

"If I believe in my partner's mindset and approach things rationally, they will make a good decision. But if they haven't sorted out their own life yet, I don't think I can take them too seriously."(P7-Female)

"...If I or they are going to make an important decision, I prefer to do it by finding common ground and discussing it."(P13-Male)

## **5. Conclusion/Discussion/Suggestions**

Three main points stand out in this study, which focuses on exploring SPA's views on future spouse candidates and family structures. First, adolescents describe communication style, shared values, and harmony with the social environment as the characteristics they want to see in their prospective spouses. For adolescents, communication serves as a bridge to communication in marriage. For them, trust, problem-solving skills, and anger management are critical for a happy and long-lasting marriage. It is known that the development of interpersonal relationship skills is one of the elements that shape emotional relationships in adolescents, and the ecological perspective supports the importance of the social context for regulating relationships (van de Bongardt et al., 2018, p. 13). It is known that open communication and problem-solving skills between spouses are critical to resolving disagreements and conflicts (Zaheri et al., 2020, p. 165; Ahrari et al., 2020, p. 354; Du Plooy & De Beer, 2018, p. 165). Adolescents argue that compatibility with their prospective spouses regarding religion, ethnicity, and other fundamental values is essential. Shared values provide a framework for resolving disagreements and facing challenges together. Studies conducted with couples discuss standard features in variables such as religion, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geographical location (Kaslow & Robison, 1996, p. 153) despite differences and evaluate common values as protective factors that form the identity of the marriage (Karimi et al., 2019, p. 7). However, prospective spouses with a harmonious, respectful, self-confident social environment will contribute to the marriage union. The quality of the prospective spouse's relationships with their friends may give clues about the marital union.

Secondly, it helps us understand the factors adolescents consider in the marriage decision-making process and how they are reflected in relationship dynamics. It is understood that adolescents care about their prospective spouses' family environment being peaceful and loving (Xia et al., 2018, p. 1513). This may indicate that adolescents may be influenced by their own family experiences and expect their prospective spouse's family to contribute to the relationship positively. It is understood that they believe that elements such as communication

within the family, values, and the style of coping with problems are gains from the family (Kashina & Tkach, 2021, p. 1; Hasanah et al., 2019, p. 508), and they expect their prospective spouses to have a family structure with this approach (Burlaka et al., 2019, p. 1288). However, adolescents seek similarity with their partners in making sense of their lives and sharing principles. Although it is important to respect different views, compatibility of core values is critical for a sustainable relationship. Determining the boundaries of jealousy is also an essential issue for adolescents. It is understood that adolescents care about managing the feeling of jealousy in a balanced way in a healthy relationship (Couture et al., 2021, p. 210) and resolving it through communication. They want to manage and resolve this feeling by communicating openly with their partners. Adolescents will be able to eliminate insecurities such as jealousy and have more harmonious relationships by balancing their intense dependency on their emotional relationships and their desire to shape their identities in their relationships (Couture et al., 2020, p. 715). The differences of opinion regarding the feeling of jealousy that emerged in our study may be due to the inability to establish the balance between dependency and independence, which is a requirement of developmental periods. It is seen that adolescents care about their friends' opinions in deciding about the person they will marry. While this may be due to the desire for social acceptance (Kenny et al., 2019, p. 107) and the desire to have shared experiences with friends, studies indicate that factors such as personality characteristics, family environment, social environment, and cultural structure may play a role in determining the importance of friend approval (McDougal et al., 2018, p. 13; Ogolsky et al., 2019, p. 422). In the current study, it was observed that adolescents did not offer a consensus on this issue.

Thirdly, with the findings of this study, it can be understood how the values and expectations that SPA care about for a healthy family structure are determined and how the concept of marriage is defined. Adolescents define *marriage* as an institution that should be treated thoughtfully and carefully rather than a superficial commitment. This perspective shows that marriage depends on both romantic feelings and biological, psychological, and economic maturity. It would not be wrong to state that marriage is not only a legal union for them but also a union that aims to establish a happy family based on mutual responsibility, respect, and love. In addition, peace, respect, and open communication stand out in the family structure that adolescents expect to have. These searches for marital unity are connected to adolescents' adaptation behaviors and perceptions of family functionality (Cheung et al., 2020, p. 88). Adolescents who accept that family problems are inevitable argue that these problems should be handled calmly and logically. For children not to be affected by family conflicts, adults must act carefully and provide the necessary support. While this may indicate inferences from their own experiences, it may also indicate that they focus on the support environment that a healthy family structure must have and are trying to develop evidence. A strong relationship between parents is a protective factor for adolescent (child)- parent relationships (Kashina & Tkach, 2021, p. 1069), and the value of the holistic structure of the family system comes to the fore rather than the child constructing their relationships with each parent individually (Heshmati et al., 2021, p. 182). Finally, equality, respect, and joint decision-making seem to be the foundations of harmony in the family union. It is pointed out that important decisions should be discussed mutually on common ground and that unity and solidarity are essential even if there are differences.

The current study expresses the views of SPA regarding their future spouses and family structure as open communication, common values, relations with the social environment, sharing of responsibilities at home, and the importance of joint decisions in family unity. However, the study has certain limitations regarding its design and the characteristics of the study group. Suggestions will be made for future studies within the current study's limitations. First, participants from only one province were included in the study. This is due to the importance that researchers attach to face-to-face interviews and the fact that it makes it easier for adolescents to obtain permission from their families within the principles of honesty and openness. However, it is impossible to make predictions by including the working group's cultural and social environment dynamics. Since the view on marriage and family structure is closely linked to individuals' upbringing, social relationships, and their own experiences, the reflections of these factors will provide a broad perspective on the subject. Relatedly, gender, a sociodemographic variable, was not taken as an evaluation dimension in this study. Although different opinions were tried to be reflected in the presentation of the participants' statements to touch upon gender differences, these were not effective in shaping the themes. Secondly, it is not sure that violent or violent actions during the parents' divorce process were not included in the interviews by the researchers, thinking that this would go beyond the scope of the research. Therefore, future studies focusing on adolescents whose parents experienced violence during the divorce process may provide more inferences about their views on marriage and family structure. Third, participants' opinions are in line with their own experiences. To produce generalizable results, it is recommended to try methods such as maximum diversity in the sample or choosing quantitative methods. Finally, during the interviews, it was observed that adolescents were bored when answering open-ended questions and were more inclined to give short answers. Although researchers have attempted to detail the missing points with probing questions, it is thought that there is data loss. Therefore, conducting studies with adolescents in this direction with mixed methods, various questions and survey forms, and professional practices supported by fun activities to prevent them from getting bored while sharing their opinions will prevent data loss.

This study has practical implications for family counselors, social workers, psychologists, and youth workers. First, our study can guide relationship counseling processes by determining the factors SPA consider in marriage decision-making. Secondly, understanding the values and expectations that adolescents care about for a healthy family structure may be beneficial in eliminating prejudices or stigmatizing thoughts about growing up in a single-parent family. The emphasis of the participants in the current study on joint decisions and open communication, and their support with studies in the literature, strengthen the fight against negative thoughts towards single-parent families. Thirdly, it is about coping with jealousy in an emotional relationship and managing this feeling through healthy communication, an issue raised by the working group. Therefore, our study can be a resource for understanding the perspective and dynamics of healthy family structure before marriage. Finally, participants emphasize equality, respect, joint decisions, and open communication in addressing family problems. Therefore, it is essential to encourage joint decision-making processes and strengthen solidarity between families and adolescents.

As a result, this study was an essential step in understanding single-parent adolescents' views on future marriage, prospective spouses, and family structure. In particular, issues such as open communication, common values, relations with the social environment, sharing

responsibilities at home, and the importance of joint decisions in the family unit were emphasized.

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