

Religious Jewish Mothers' Perspective of Their Daughters' Continuing Singlehood

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Abstract

This qualitative study is an examination of the attitudes of national religious Jewish Israeli mothers toward their daughters' singlehood. The daughters were in their mid to late twenties, when the religious and social expectation is that they be married. The study is designed to explore the main issues faced by the mothers, including perceived difficulties and advantages of their daughters' unmarried status. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 middle-class mothers, whose responses underwent content analysis and revealed a combination of traditional ideas with modern, liberal, and feminist values: internal and external concerns on behalf of the mothers, together with listing advantages and mothers supporting the daughters not to rush into marriage. The findings reveal that confronting social expectations means coping with the old norms while being aware of new possibilities and opportunities. Limitations of the study are discussed.

Keywords: Israeli national religious society, singlehood, social expectations, tradition and modernity

1. Introduction: Israeli Jewish national religious society

The Jewish national religious population comprises approximately 20% of Israel's Jewish (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013). The national religious society is less liberal than secular society, and its traditions and collectivist values shun premarital cohabitation or sexual intimacy. Children, and especially daughters are expected to live at the parents' home until marriage, regardless of their age.

As a society, Jewish Israelis - both secular and religious - place family values in high esteem. In religious society this is basic to socialization, with the importance and centrality of the family being stressed in religious high schools, emphasizing the sanctity of family in Jewish tradition. Religious high schools have programs to prepare students for family life, focusing on values such as the central place of marriage and family in one's life, the importance of procreation, ritual purity, and obeying religious Jewish law (Hermann et al., 2014; Salzberg & Almog, 2008).

The religious establishment encourages boys and girls to marry at an early age, preferably in their early twenties. Postponing marriage is especially problematic for girls, as it could lead down two undesirable paths - risk of long (perhaps life-long) singlehood and perhaps having out-of-wedlock sexual relations. Singlehood, especially for women, is perceived in religious society as an inferior status, a personal disability, a problem, and a threat to married couples and to social order (Bartov, 2004).

At age 18, most Jewish Israeli men and women are drafted, with two years of military service for women, three for men. In addition to individuals who are exempt from service due to health or other reason, religious women are also exempt from serving. They can choose to serve in the army, do civic volunteer work, or do neither (<https://www.knesset.gov.il/mmm/data/pdf/m01705.pdf>).

Since the 1990s, religious society has been responsive to global social changes, with individualistic, feminist, and liberal values seeping in. This change and specifically the changing status of women is well observed also in other traditional societies in Israel (Abbas, 2010; Aboud-Halabi, & Shamai, 2016; Court & Abbas, 2015). One outcome of this gradual change is that young people are postponing marriage and parenthood, acquire an education and a profession, and attain a degree of financial independence before establishing a family (Hermann et al., 2014; Salzberg & Almog, 2008). Religious leaders, who represent more conservative values, are somewhat tolerant of personal aspirations, as long as these aspirations do not interfere with having a family. However, as when marriage

is delayed beyond age 25 or so, tolerance wanes, and is replaced with tension and confusion. The eventual condemnation is less severe for men, but places a heavy burden on women who may then feel excluded from their own community due to the social pressure to marry and to conform to traditional social expectations and norms (Friedman, 2017; Hermann et al., 2014).

This duality of modern and conservative values was the impetus for the current study, aimed at deepening the understanding of the experience of those who live it. The literature review yielded no previous works regarding the way parents of these young women feel and cope with their daughters' continuing singlehood. Friedman (2017) discussed the inability of religious society in general to accept those who do not conform to religious standards, often viewing unmarried, divorced, gay, and lesbian people as threatening the family structure and Jewish tradition. The "nonconformists" may pay a high social price for not toeing the line, facing possible rejection and fearing that they will not be permitted to maintain their religious way of life in the light of such lack of acceptance.

1.1 Research questions

Against this background, this study was designed to learn about the experience of mothers of single women in a community that strongly encourages marriage. The mothers were asked:

- 1) Are you coping with any difficulties that are directly related to your daughter's singlehood?
- 2) Are there any advantages you experience that accompany your daughter's singlehood?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The interviewees were 18 Jewish national religious mothers, all middle-class who lived in north of the country. They ranged in age from 46 to 58 years ($M = 50.38$, $SD = 3.43$); the daughters about whom they spoke were 25-31 years old ($M = 27.55$, $SD = 1.75$). Their Average number of children was 3.94 ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.05$). As for marital status – 16 were married, two were widows. All participants had an academic education, 10 worked outside the home, 5 were retired (early retirement), and 3 chose not to be employed.

2.2 Procedure and Research Instrument

After receiving ethical approval for this qualitative study from the Emek Yezreel College Ethics Committee, a semi-structured open interview was used, a tool that enables interviewees to expand and clarify their answers, and to give examples. Participants were recruited through the snow ball method, beginning with the researcher's connections. The interviews followed a two-question research protocol (Dor, 2013), and aimed to gain an in-depth look at mothers' personal feelings and experience relating to their daughters' singlehood.

The one-on-one interviews took place in the participants' homes, at their convenience. Each interview lasted 45-70-minutes, and was audio recorded. Participants gave their permission to be recorded, and were assured that their anonymity would be kept by using pseudonyms. They were also told that they could withdraw from the study at any stage.

Following the interview, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003) was conducted to derive distinct themes for each of the questions. To establish thematic reliability, two researchers separately began searching for systematic, recurring, visible, and direct content, next referring to it by frequency of appearance and the researchers' interpretation of the content to the interviewees. This was followed by dividing the agree-upon content into groups, identifying prominent themes, and giving each theme a name.

3. Findings

Content analysis of the answers to the research questions yielded both difficulties and advantages regarding the daughters' singlehood. For both questions, the interviewees added expressions derived from the realm of faith to their answers (e.g., "There's a time and place for everything," "with God's help", or "You have to accept all with love and hope for the best").

3.1 Question 1: Are You Coping With Any Difficulties That Are Directly Related to Your Daughter's Singlehood?

The answers reflected external and internal concerns related to difficulties:

External concerns

"In a good family, the children marry easily."

"Delay in marriage might insinuate a failure to socialize properly."

"I feel people pity me."

“A younger daughter in the family is not expected to marry before an older one.”

The mothers' perception of their family's reputation and good name in society is of great importance. As the statements above indicate, mothers consider their family's reputation to be of the utmost importance. Having an unmarried emerging adult daughter might jeopardize this reputation, as delay in marriage might suggest that there is a potential problem with the daughter or her family. In family events or in synagogue, mothers hear remarks and are asked question, but it is looks and hints that are truly difficult. According to the mothers who participated in the current study, it is not easy being part of a community that has clear expectations regarding every stage of life, in a society that gives you a feeling that you are under constant scrutiny, and expects certain things in a certain way. The participants claimed that although today's national religious society of nowadays is less rigid than it used to be, and also far less rigid than current Israeli Jewish Orthodox, it is still a society that can be very judgmental of those who do not meet expectations. The participants claimed that when people do not follow the accepted route (and woman who delays marriage is a case in point), they will have to handle social criticism that might put them and their family in an uncomfortable position.

Internal concerns

“Procreation is a mitzvah [religious tenet].”

“The life of a single person may lead to not fulfilling all religious obligations.”

“I don't want my daughter to see all her friends married, when she's not.”

“I want my daughter to be happy; I worry that waiting too long may delay her marriage for who knows how long, if it all. I don't want her to ‘miss the train’.”

All the mothers interviewed spoke about the religious way of life and about the obligation to act according to the rules of religion. It is their view that the best way to preserve the religious way of life is by getting married and having children. Women have their religious obligations and men have theirs, and postponing marriage might lead to difficulties in this manner, as women may take on tasks that are traditionally carried out by men. All the participants assumed that their daughters will marry one day, hopefully sooner rather than later, before they reach the age that society considers “too old.”

While hopeful, the mothers also have their doubts and worries about their daughters' prospects. As the daughters see their friends marry, the mothers try to protect them from frustration. One of the participants mentioned that when she was her daughter's age, she was a married mother of two. She was worried that waiting too long might jeopardize her daughter's chances, to find a partner.

3.2 Question 2: Are There Any Advantages You Experience That Accompany Your Daughter's Singlehood?

We identified a liberal, individual feminist perspective. Here are few quotes:

“My daughter is a student. She has to graduate first.”

“I trust my daughter to find a good partner.”

“I would be happy to see my daughter marry out of love.”

“I'd like my daughter not to jump into early marriage, to have better relationship with her husband than I have with mine.”

It is apparent that when invited to look at the positive sides of singlehood, the mothers explore this situation and manage to see new opportunities for their daughters. They see that their daughters have paths that were not open to them – opportunities to gain a profession, study, and attain a modicum of financial stability. The daughters also have the opportunity to explore possible marriage partners, not rush into early marriage, and combine family life with professional development, instead of focusing only on taking care of a family (as women were expected in the past).

In sum, singlehood is pertinent to religious mothers and of concern to them, as they do not want their daughters to miss the right time to marry and have a family. However, the mothers have also gained an openness to social changes and liberal/feminist perspectives which open new alternatives, and enables mothers to see advantages in relation to their daughters' status in the future.

4. Discussion

The current study focused on national religious Jewish mothers' attitudes toward their daughters' continuing singlehood. The national religious society encourages women to marry in their early twenties, and does not accept cohabitation and sexual intimacy prior to marriage. However, this society must also deal with changes, one of

which is that many young women postpone marriage to their mid or late twenties, and continue residing with their parents.

Semi-structured open interviews were conducted, with leading questions on the difficulties and the advantages that mothers' attribute to their daughters' singlehood.

Findings reveal mothers' internal and external concerns in relation to this issue, together with the advantages they see and the fact that they actually encourage the situation. The young generation might prefer to establish a career before establishing a family, and may find some aspects of singlehood enjoyable and fulfilling (Salzberg & Almog, 2008). However, the national religious society does not find this decision acceptable, and where social expectations are clearly defined, those who do not follow them, seem to be paying a social price: At an age that they are expected to be married, single women – in their mid-twenties or older – find themselves uninvited to social events, experience constant criticism from parents, and lose contact with their married friends (Salzberg & Almog, 2008). The external concerns that the mothers expressed include the price they themselves pay for their own daughters' singlehood: social doubts and criticism regarding their functioning as mothers and the quality of their daughter, as well as doubts regarding their family's reputation, and even pity. In relation to the internal concerns, it seems that mothers acknowledge those doubts and criticisms, and echo the social concern that their daughters fulfill their religious obligations and continue the Jewish way of life. They are also concerned about their daughters' future.

However, the centrality of the family in Jewish tradition is affected by liberal and feminist ideas. All participants were educated middle-class women who do not specifically call themselves feminists, but express ideas which call for women's success and for equal rights. They supported their daughters' right to carefully choose a marriage partner, even if this search takes time. They believe that their daughters have the right to explore, learn, earn, and reach positions in the society, enjoy life and establish a career before establishing a family. In a religious traditional society educated women might very well hold such views, however voicing them may be difficult, as forces in the religious society would probably object (Yadgar, 2006; Yanay-Ventura, 2011).

4.1 Conclusion

Jewish tradition holds the institution of marriage and the family unit in the highest esteem. Creating a family means maintaining sacred values, a message that receives high priority in the socialization of every boy and girl from a very early age. The participants in the current study clearly identify with this message and while facing social criticism for the challenge their daughters pose to it. At the same time, the mothers support their daughters' right for financial, vocational, and individual fulfillment. One expression of this agenda is by supporting their daughters' singlehood. This duality is apparently one of the expressions of the story of today's national religious society – with religious society located at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, it combines old with new, tradition with individual and modernity.

4.2 Research limitations

While this study adds to the body of knowledge about singlehood – a significant issue in religious society – it is not without limitations. First, this is a sensitive issue, and although the semi-structured interview allowed personal expression, we may assume that not all interviewees always revealed their true feelings. Second, the mothers belonged to a particular sector, and consequently, any attempts at broader generalizations should be approached with caution. Third, the participants were not asked about their perceived level of religiosity. They were regarded here as a homogenous group, but they may differ in views and in religious identity, in a way that may affect their answers. Fourth, the interviews were conducted in a single region and among educated middle-class women. Mothers of single women in other parts of the country, or of a different socioeconomic background, could provide different answers, perhaps leading to additional results and conclusions. Finally, based on the present research it is not possible to determine whether singlehood is a choice made by the daughters, nor it is not possible to determine whether the mothers truly identify with the advantages relating to their daughters' singlehood. Quite possibly, some of the positive attitudes they expressed are their way of handling the difficulty, using cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Future, in-depth studies should contribute to answering these questions, helping continue the line pursued in the present study, a study that contributes to the understanding of changing family norms. Based on the literature review, and to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study of the values and experiences of Jewish religious mothers of young single women in which their authentic voices were heard.

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