Happily Ever After: Beliefs about Marriage in San Marcos La Laguna

Erin Magee
Loyola University Chicago

Introduction

“Somos iguales.” I am sitting in the dark, brick-walled kitchen close to the fire, sipping on a cup of sweet rosa de jamaica tea as I hear the rain fall heavily on the tin roof above my head and the clapping sound of tortillas being freshly made when these words are pronounced. It is the first week of my stay with my host family and I am still a novice in this house, experiencing that tender stage of sheer awkwardness by living with perfect strangers and slowly testing the limits of my Spanish knowledge. My host mother is telling me about her experiences with her mother-in-law, thus crossing the bridge of having my first serious conversation with her. She tells me that she and the mother of her husband are socially equal, smiling wide with great pride and contentment as she says so.

It was these two simple words that initially sparked my interest in the social (specifically within the family) implications of marriage beliefs and practices in San Marcos. My host mother's delight in her amicable relations with her mother-in-law struck me as out of the ordinary (considering our commonly held belief that a mother-in-law has the potential to be the most difficult person in the world to fall well with and accomplishing such a feat should indeed entail great satisfaction).

After this conversation and as I began making myself known in the Marqueño community, my interest in familial relations continued to evolve; however, the major reason for my intrigue of the family in San Marcos was still largely credited to my homestay. My experiences with them in the first few weeks of the program opened up a multitude of research opportunities. Coming from a small nuclear family of but four people in addition to my extended family being spread throughout the country, I found myself a fish out of water when thrown into a world where I was in a household of five younger brothers and sisters and where virtually everyone I met was a cousin, uncle, or aunt. When my host-grandmother—the mother of my host-father and the woman that mutually reciprocates a deep love with my host-mother—started making more regular appearances in my household, I remembered the conversation where I first learned of their closeness.

Purpose and Objectives

Although seemingly unrelated, it was this initial discussion with my host-mother and observing her interactions with her mother-in-law that was the catalyst for my project idea. I started to both hear and observe how much deeper matters concerning marriage can emanate from sentiments associated with family-in-law. It seemed as though my host-mother partially attributed the happiness of her marriage to her in-laws’ acceptance. I started to wonder exactly what it was that comprised a marriage in San Marcos because it was becoming evident that it was a truly complex aspect of this contemporary Mayan community.
The purpose of my study was to explore the different definitions and conceptions of marriage and how (and/or if) there is a difference in these perceptions between married and unmarried people; I wanted to specifically focus on generational differences between those that are courting and approaching the stages of making the decision to marry and those that already are married, in order to understand a more holistic view of Marqueño marriages.

Landing on this specific topic was a long and lengthy process that involved much design and re-design as I continued to gather more data. My early objective was to use the opinions of married and non-married couples as a sort of compare/contrast description. I wanted to investigate the differences between the uncorrupted perceptions of marriage from those who are unwed and those who have had experience with having been, or who currently are, married. My goal was to see the difference between what people view as ideal qualities of marriage and what the realities of marriage are.

While I stuck to the concentration on the two distinctions between the younger generation and older generation throughout the course of my research, I encountered a number of problems with my initial aim. My objective became more difficult to pinpoint as my center of focus became more blurred during the course of my research; I started to discover that there was a lot of grey area within the realm of the “not married.” Unclear identification of being “not married” involved several categories, including single, dating, united, engaged, living together, and having a civil union. Such categories of relationship status are relatively recent in development and will be discussed later as evidence for change and transformation in marriage attitudes, but it complicated the lines that I had drawn.

Additionally, the difference between what is idealized and what is actualized in a married couples’ relationship was also very indistinct. Although I hypothesized that experiencing a marriage would change a person’s initial view of what a marriage was, I did not encounter someone who was, in fact, influenced by harsh realities of being married. Actually, these harsh realities that I assumed existed were simply unheard of—it seemed as though people knew exactly what to expect prior to being married. Thus more lack of clarity in my results presented itself; there was no line to be drawn between fantasy and reality. Although later conclusions about this notion will be discussed later in this paper, it did render my preliminary project idea unfeasible.

In light of these revelations, I redeveloped my initial objective. In addition to simply documenting the different definitions of marriage of those who have experienced it and have yet to experience it, the aim of my study morphed as I attempted to see the general trends of change in practices, thoughts and opinions on marriage between a younger and older generation.

**Key Issues and Themes**

The words that were uttered by my host mother presented to me one of the major issues I wanted to investigate throughout the course of my research here, and that is what the influences are that mold the Marqueños’ opinions what comprises a marriage. My host-mother’s need for approval from her husband’s mother is an example of parental and familial impact on the dynamics of the relationships between their child and his or her spouse. Over the course of my two months here, I discovered that along with parents and family, other major dictating forces on beliefs and conceptualizations of marriage are: the desire to
have children and raise a family, religion (specifically Evangelism and Catholicism), and the tradition of the “compromiso” as a sort of commitment contract. However, these forces are ever changing and molding as the younger generations are adapting and applying modified versions of these notions to their relationships with the opposite sex. As such, their parents’ expectations are also becoming ever more evolving in an attempt to keep pace with the distortion of these traditional marital values.

**Methods and Limitations**

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I gathered my information through a variety of interviews and observation. Over the nearly two months of my stay in San Marcos, 27 people were interviewed both formally and informally. In addition to these question/answer settings, I used questionnaires, pile sorts, and cognitive maps to supplement my knowledge of the major patterns and trends which were brought forth in said dialogues. Although most of my data collected was from personal encounters and discussions, several opportunities of short observations of both courting behavior and actions between married couples, including a more extended time allocation study of a married couple, both enhanced and helped guide the bulk of information gathered from my interviews.

Although I was fortunate enough to make friends with an individual willing to translate from Kaqchikel to Spanish during interviews with elders and members of the community who do not speak much Spanish, a major limitation of my study was the language barrier and the fact that I do not speak or understand Kaqchikel. It did not seem to be a big problem in terms of interviews, but it was indeed a major hindrance in my observations. The subject matter of my research is obviously very personal and intimate to the persons being studied and, as such, they spoke in their primary language during these encounters, making it difficult for me to place my observations in any real context. Also, the nature of some of the behavior that was necessary to observe is not one that is easy for the ethnographer to watch, much less take extensive notes while observing, without being noticed by the subjects and making them feel, at the very least, uncomfortable.

A final limitation to my observations was the void of wedding ceremonies in San Marcos during this time of year. An informant told me that the majority of civil unions and church marriages occur during the months of December and January during the festivales patronales. While much of my research encompassed individual beliefs on marriage, these ceremonies would exhibit a more general belief on marriage as well as portray the ceremonial and formally structured aspects of a marriage. I was lucky enough to attend both a civil union and a wedding in the Evangelical community in the neighboring village of Santa Cruz, but I must realize that my data and conclusions from these events might not be entirely applicable to the community of San Marcos.

**Background Information**

Before delving into the bulk of my research, I want to introduce a bit about the development of relevant issues to my topic: a brief overview of where my research was conducted and a history of courting and marriage practices.
The Site: San Marcos La Laguna

San Marcos La Laguna is one of the 12 municipal districts of Sololá. It is located on the west side of Lake Atitlán and is bordered by the town of San Pablo to the south, by Santa Lucía to the west, and Jaibalito (one of the sub-districts of Santa Cruz La Laguna) to the north. The Marqueños have the unfortunate history of their town being moved, evicted, or destroyed a total of four times until the people settled on the current location in 1881.

Initially, it was located on the opposite side of the lake near present-day San Lucas Tolíman. A priest gave the people a church that was essentially abandoned up until that point because the people stuck to their traditional beliefs and practices. The disappointed priest prophesied that the people would be eaten by lions suspected to be living in the area. Women started disappearing when they would go to wash clothes in the river and the townspeople agreed to communally move out of fear that the prediction was coming true.

The people moved across the lake near present day Santa Cruz. A flash flood completely decimated the town and the few remaining Marqueños evacuated to the present day Jaibalito. However, another flood occurred not long after and destroyed the town again. They moved to a land on the northwestern portion of the lake. Upon the discovery that the land belonged to a family in Santiago, they were forced to leave.

The mayor of Sololá was nice enough to grant the land of the present day San Marcos to the people. Once again a flash flood occurred and because of their location on the floor of a flood valley, the Marqueños found themselves devastated once again. The people moved up the hill into the two terraces of the mountains and have remained there ever since.

The move into the terraces geographically divided the town into two barrios. The western terrace is called Xelemá, but is generally referred to as barrio two. The eastern terrace of barrio one is also known as Chuinemaba. A new area, barrio three, is recently developed and is located in between the two main residential barrios and is characterized largely by its appeal to tourists. The introduction of tourism has revolutionized the economy as it has provided many jobs for people and has strayed from being an agricultural economy. The main language spoken in San Marcos is Kaqchikel, but Spanish is widely spoken as a second language and is becoming more and more popular in light of the existence of tourism as a “go-between” language.

Within the barrios, a common residential division is the sitio. The sitio is a complex formation of houses where nuclear families are clustered together. Most often, these clusters are composed of extended family which serves as the basic social unit for most Marqueños. San Marcos has the distinctive feature of being a matrilocal society; neighboring towns of San Pedro and Santa Cruz are characteristically patrilocal. This means that the sitio is usually comprised of sisters’ families, congregating where their parents (more importantly, their mother) live. However, depending on circumstances such as economy and religion, a couple may choose to live somewhere else, such as with the husband’s family.

Evolution of Courtship and Engagement Practices
One informant proposed to me that you cannot have a marriage without courting. In order to understand the daily functions of a marriage, it is necessary to know about how that marriage came to be—the period of courting.

The process of meeting one’s future life partner has undergone a great amount of change, even up until very recently, but the practice was once incredibly traditional. San Marcos’ traditional courting practices are actually an example of a less structured system of courting in comparison to other surrounding towns. In Santiago, for example, the practice of courting was such a big stage in a person’s life that the girl had a special shawl she wore when she was of age that was individually and custom made. These shawls played an important role in the actual dating because it was a means by which the boy reeled a girl in, literally using it almost like a fishing line.

But San Marcos has its own traditions. Before water systems were placed in each household, adolescent girls were sent to the stream or to the lake to fetch the daily water supply for the house; “water fetching provides the backdrop for most of the courtships between the young men and women.” (Becker and Richards 1976:202). However, the installation of the “chorros” initially did not completely change the manner in which courtship was practiced; it just now did not involve the primary step of attraction which occurred at the lake or the stream.

The primary “dating” scene was one that took place in the afternoon or on Sundays when the girls were usually at a breaking point from their duties and the boys were done with the work for the day. When a boy found a particular girl attractive he often talked first to her friend or a cousin of the same age in an attempt to get to speak to her. Doing this was an important step because it established his attraction and interest in her. This is emphasized by random occasions of coy words proclaimed in passing and using the “go-between” usually sealed the deal.

After this encounter, the boy would strategically place himself on the road so as to ensure that he would encounter her and be able to speak to her when she passed. It was during these times that he would proclaim his undying love, affection, and loyalty to her. After enough of these encounters where it is obvious that the girl reciprocates these feelings, the boy makes an official declaration to his parents of his desire to be with the girl. Although the father might not agree at first, the boy’s words usually win over.

The next process involves informing the parents of the girl of the potential engagement. The boy and his parents visit the family of the girl, bearing gifts that generally consisted of one Quetzal (the currency of Guatemala), something to drink, and usually bread. The father of the boy would usually speak of the worthiness of his son to have their daughter’s hand in marriage, generally addressing the father of the girl. He tells him of all of the good qualities that his son has and that he will be able to care for the girl. It is customary for the girl’s father to be skeptical and turn the boy’s father down. A second visit is always necessary and he comes bearing more gifts this time around, but the boy is disputed once more, whether or not he actually feels that the boy is unworthy. It isn’t until the third or fourth time that the father will accept the proposal. After this, the boy’s family provides the goods for a celebration.

Even though having potable water didn’t initially drastically change courtship practices, dating and engagement has definitely changed, all within the past 20 or so years. One of the major distinctions is the use of the cancha and the campo as a means for socialization. Both are sports fields where an equal number
of boys and girls can generally be found. This place is seen as a sort of common ground for both genders to go and flirtatious encounters often occur here. Girls will go to the field and watch the boys play and the boys, in turn, will often use their sporting abilities as a way of showing off to the females via exhibition of their athletic skills.

The boys used to wait for the girls in the streets while they were doing errands; the street is still very much used as a dating arena and when most people answered what the courting practices consisted of, the vast majority said that a date was simply walking on the street with the person that you were interested in. The difference is, however, that it now mostly happens at night involving the practitioners sneaking out of their houses and lying about their whereabouts to their parents. There are many dark places in San Marcos as there are not many street lights—it is very easy for a couple to stroll about, identities unrecognizable to those who might pass them. On my way home from interviews late at night, I would see two people huddled under the same umbrella in a dark corner outside a tienda; such sightings are a regular occurrence.

The notion of the daters lying about their whereabouts leads me to the point that nowadays “todo es escondido” or, “everything is hidden.” Because parents used to play such an important and, arguably, a pushy role in courtship where the first person you were even interested in often became your spouse, it might seem as though teenagers have wanted to escape from the pressures and have more say in their romantic affairs. Dating and courting in a secretive fashion allows for them to have the mindset that they are acting freely and of their own accord in such affairs. Also, as one informant told me, “it’s exciting!”

At the same time, many parents suspect that it is going on. Because it is such a small town, word gets out especially if a pesky cousin or sibling sees a couple huddling in a dark corner together. The title of “escondido” is really a paradox because it’s not entirely hidden. And, as stated before, sightings of couples on the streets are a frequented affair; people pass by and the couple is more often than not left undisturbed. As such, the notion of a “hidden” form of modern courtship is more of a psychological mindset on behalf of participants than a reality (informal, internalized sanctions, perhaps).

The Marriage

It is an indubitable consensus that the technical definition of a valid marriage ceremony (in terms of status, not mentality) is one that is performed in either the Catholic or the Evangelical church. When I was researching, I found that there were many stages of being in a relationship with someone that lead up to the technical status of ‘married’ in the church. These four phases are: “estar juntos,” unidos, civil union, and marriage in the church.

The first phase, “estar juntos,” or being together, is the part of the relationship where the two people first meet. Most informants defined the “noviazgo,” or the courtship stage of a relationship, as walking together on the streets. A typical “date” (although the term “date” does not exactly exist in the Marqueño culture) is when the pair simply walks together and may or may not have a conversation. In older times, this was often during the day (Sunday being a major day because most people are free of the usual work activities) where the afternoon strolls were very blatant and explicit. In current times, however, the setting for this stage of a relationship is becoming less public and is done more in the dark, taking advantage of the surreptitious nature of night. Although there are a few street lights, the walkways in all three barrios
contain an infinite number of dark corners and nooks for couples to have more “privacy.” Therefore, the “estar juntos” stage of the relationship is a more recent development as it is largely characterized by the notion that was previously mentioned, that “todo es escondido.”

After the pair has established somewhat of a lasting connection with each other, they are officially seen as being together, or “unidos.” This is the stage where a couple makes their relationships officially known (if it is not already known) to the families and this is where they enter the stage of gaining parental approval for a more lasting relationship with each other. It is now when the process of partitioning for the hand of marriage begins. Although it is not as formal as it used to be, it is still very common for the boy’s family to bring the girl’s family gifts and it is very typical to celebrate the engagement. In the past, this stage was also combined with the courting and “noviazgo” stage, but a greater distinction between dating and being “promised” or “united” is developing.

One informant told me that she and her partner are “unidos” but they are not, in fact, engaged. They live together and have children together, but there is no legal bond between the two and there is no official declaration of their intentions to form a legal bond in the future. Although not uncommon, the case of this young informant has just recently come into being. Even though declaring oneself as being “united” to one’s partner is typically viewed as being engaged and promised to him or to her, there is a level of further clarification that is necessary because some do not view themselves as being officially engaged.

Before a couple can be married in the church, they must legally be married by the country of Guatemala. What is distinctive about the civil union is that “the couple is not permitted to separate without a legal divorce” (Aranada 2005:109). The process of the civil union is very uniform throughout the country, but what is unique about San Marcos and the rest of the Lake Atitlán region is that the ceremony is performed with a combination of Spanish and the native Mayan language (in the case of San Marcos, Kaqchikel). I was fortunate enough to be able to attend a civil union ceremony in the neighboring village of Santa Cruz La Laguna and although it was not in the town where my study took place, I was told by a friend of one of the couples who was from my town and also attending the ceremony that it was very similar to a civil union in San Marcos.

The civil wedding is a lengthy process, going on the better part of two hours, that consists of several readings from the laws of Guatemala which stated the expectations of the married couple (tenants include a listing of the major responsibilities for each person and how the couple is expected to contribute to the greater society) and also a listing of the consequences should a situation such as infidelity occur. The readings are interjected with short speeches from the mayor who mostly discusses the importance of the “compromiso” as being the basis of the marriage (this notion will be discussed later on in this essay). The couple is then invited to the desk of the mayor where they take the official vows; they stand holding a decorated wooden stick that represents the law of Guatemala with their right hands. After citing the vows, they sign the official wedding certificate. The mayor invites the couple to share a hug and asks the audience for “great applause” as everyone sits down; a celebration of soft drinks and some small snack (usually sweet bread) is served and people are invited to give words of encouragement to the newly united couple.

The final stage is the actual marriage itself. Although they are now legally married, no one considers them actually married until the ceremony within the church happens and their marriage is sanctioned by
God. The nature of the ceremony is largely dependent on whether the couple belongs to the Catholic or the Evangelical church. A major hindrance to my study was my inability to attend a ceremony of either faith in my own town, but I was able to attend an Evangelical wedding ceremony in Santa Cruz. The ceremony began with a long series of music, praising God. After each song, the congregation would pray; this pattern continued for about an hour and a half. The couple was then invited to the front of the church and sat in chairs as the pastor spoke about the importance of marriage. This speech was notably shorter than that of the mayor’s in the civil wedding and the vows took place shortly after.

Once the couple was pronounced husband and wife officially, they stood in front of the congregation. With the couples’ faces staid and devoid of expression with music playing loudly in the background, people from the crowd started to make their way to the front and embraced the couples, whispering to them advice for their future lives together. This is a common occurrence within marriages in other Guatemalan villages as well. The advice given correlates to the commonly accepted gender roles of the “compromiso,” including reminding the husband to work hard and respect his wife by not speaking to other women on the street while the woman is told to keep a clean house and to pray for her husband and children (Aranada 2005:106).

Case Studies

Through my interviews, I encountered four major themes of influence in how the marriage is defined. The basic subject matters are: parental and familial influence, the desire and need to have children, religion, and the importance of commitment. I will relate several short examples from each category to illustrate the tenants of each theme and its importance to the definition of marriage. All informants will remain anonymous and no names will be used in order to protect their privacy.

Parental and Familial Influence

Going back to the conversation with my host-mom, I discovered that the traditional layout of the sitio could be the possible explanation for her gratification. San Marcos is typically a matrilocal society, meaning that a couple will live where the mother’s mother lives, not the father’s mother. Due to certain circumstances such as economic instability or a death of a parent, some families will live with the family of the husband’s family. While I would rather not reveal the conditions under which my host-parents do not live with the wife’s family out of respect for their privacy, the fact that they live with the mother of the husband puts a different type of stress on my host-mother to humor her mother-in-law.

The fact that my host-mother was now acting as her husband’s mother by taking over his mother’s previous roles in his life puts tremendous pressure on the wife to perform her tasks responsibly especially since they live together. What these tasks are will be discussed more in depth later on, but her domestic role is taken very seriously in order to impress and please not only her husband, but the rest of the new family. While this patrilineal example is not incredibly widespread in San Marcos, wife/mother-in-law relations are a recurring theme. Even if the man moves to his wife’s family’s sitio, his mother still feels very protective over him and wants to ensure that he is well taken care of. One informant told me that when the couple becomes engaged, the approval from the husband’s family is also very important. With a warm chuckle, he leaned in and told me that his parents did not think his wife was a good match for him because
his mother was scared she would not be able to take as good of care of him; he then said that after thirty-six years of being married, she has been a very responsible wife.

When a man moves with his wife’s family, it completely uproots the basic familial structure for both his family and her family. When he leaves, he no longer plays the same role to his family as he once did; he can still be asked for help and more than graciously performs many of his old jobs (such as helping to carry leña (firewood) up the hill) for his family, but his loyalty now belongs to his wife and her family. Just as my host-mom had to act to impress her mother-in-law, when a man moves in with the wife’s family, he is expected to work and make money to help maintain their sitio.

In addition to the living style of married couples, family influences why people marry each other and how they conceptualize it. One elderly informant told me that getting married is a sign of respect for your parents because it shows your desire to carry on with what they can no longer do since you are no longer a child; this respect is shown by raising your own family. He said that while love for the spouse is important in causing a marriage, marriage is first a respect for the parents.

Finally, parents do display a lot of control over potential marriages—if they do not like a potential spouse for their child, they can disapprove and getting married would be a lot more difficult because of the importance of family once the couple is actually married. One young informant has been in a relationship for three years but her parents only know about the past two. She explained to me that although she feels a little guilty for having hidden it for so long, it is actually out of respect for the parents. She knows that she needs their approval and she did not want to present a boy to her parents until she was certain that he was acceptable.

Procreation

A major reason that people get married in San Marcos is to rear a family. It is becoming more and more common for people to have children before they are married, and many people see marriage as a logical step after a baby and not the other way around. Many of the people that I spoke to had a child before they got married, and of those couples, several had multiple children before they got married. One of the couples that I interviewed currently have three children, the youngest being still a baby and the oldest being eight years old, and they are still not technically married. One of the younger informants who is not yet married told me that people use their children as a reason for marriage—because they have children together, they choose to get married.

In the laws of Guatemala that are read during the civil union ceremonies (these are pretty uniform throughout the country), there is a tenant listed that discusses the need to procreate and have a family. In addition, both the Evangelical Church and the Catholic Church find that starting a family is necessary and imperative in a marriage. Opposed to getting married because of already having had children as just discussed, some people use the desire to have children as a reason to get married—the desire to procreate catalyzes the pursuit of a marriage. Most of the people who felt this way had been married for some time—they were of the “grandparent” generation and were also of very devout Christian faith. An extreme case of this was in an interview with a very pious Catholic woman. She told me about how she knows what happens in the United States. Stifling a chuckle as she chastised me, I listened to her speak of her knowledge of
people wanting to have children and just be friends and never get married. She said that it is not the case in San Marcos. “Here,” she said, “people get married to have babies—they get married to raise their children together; this is the most important thing.”

Along with this importance of one’s own nuclear family, starting one’s own family is also a sign of respect for the parents. In the Becker and Richard’s ethnography, it is stated that a baby is expected within the first year of the pregnancy (1976:203). Procreating, therefore, illustrates the desire to continue on with life by giving life to a next generation. As the elderly male informant put it, it is a sign of respect for the parents because repeating the rearing process shows an appreciation for your parents raising you.

Finally, the birthing and naming process is incredibly important in a marriage. When a woman is giving birth, it is one of the few times that a man explicitly shows affection toward his wife when other people might be present. He holds her hand, strokes her forehead and wipes it dry and speaks words of encouragement to her. He does what she needs him to do for her willingly and graciously (Becker and Richards 1976). The naming is also very important to married couples. One female informant identified a marriage with a sense of equality, saying that one time she felt truly equal to her husband was during the naming of their children. She proudly told me that they decided on the names of their kids together.

The Church: Religion’s Role in Spousal Relations

One incredibly dominant response for why people get married and how people define marriage was centered on religion, and more specifically, the Christian faith. In San Marcos, there are two predominant sects of Christianity—Catholicism and Evangelism. It is under the umbrella of these two faiths that when a marriage occurs, it is officially considered a marriage. Not one person I spoke to identified as being married if it was not officially within one of these two churches.

Catholics view marriage not just as a commitment, but as a spiritual connection; under the marriage in the church, the two people become one and that bond cannot be broken. It is a sacrament and is sanctified by the church. Catholics believe that the law of the church is the ultimate law. It becomes a more complex relationship than simply two people wanting to be with each other; the relationship extends to the couple wanting to be together with God as well. As such, they cannot separate from each other because it is not just their decision to separate—God is now involved. The priest that I spoke to explained that the law of God is more important than any law of the country, and as such, it is important for the couple to stay together. When asked what the church expects of married couples, he simply said, “Do not separate from each other.”

Evangelists believe that marriage unites a couple together as a contract between the spirits of those getting married. It is a very precious thing that should not be broken because God wants people to be together under His law and will. Breaking a covenant such as marriage is disrespectful and sinful because it is trying to control the will of God and do his job because only he can separate a couple. It is similar to Catholicism in that both hold true to the idea that there is an outer force that influences the marriage. Evangelism stresses their belief that a marriage between a man and a woman serves to praise God in every way possible—this is done by spreading the faith to their future generations and thus procreation is heavily stressed in the Evangelical faith.
From the perspective of the lay people and moreover the focus of my study, Christianity was central to how they went about their marriages. One man that I interviewed said that he met his wife when they were just sacramental workers at the church; he said that the main reason that he wanted to marry her was to be a part of the church together with her. In addition, several responses to the survey included the desire to be members of the church together; this idea seems to be largely characteristic of Catholics. An Evangelical woman who seemed to be the archetype for other Evangelical females, stated that marriage is a glorification of God and that the reason she married her husband was to strengthen her own faith in God. A defining aspect of the marriage is to believe together, to pray together, and to raise the children in the faith together.

Both faiths share the communality of being permanent and fixed. One informant described it as the ultimate relationship. It is inescapable. This leads me to the next and apparently the most important part of a marriage, the “compromiso.”

**Compromiso and Commitment**

The reason that all of the above tenants seem so intertwined, connected, and seemingly impossible to separate them into different ideologies is because of the main basis of the marriage—that is the compromiso. A cognate to English, “compromiso” can be translated to mean a compromise, a promise, a commitment. In terms of the law, this notion is somewhat of a contract between the two people involved in a marriage where each person has certain responsibilities and duties that they are expected to perform. Culturally, though, the “compromiso” runs much deeper in that it is the foundation for the marriage and thus is arguably the basis of society itself.

One of my initial frustrations with my interviews is that people simply stated that they defined marriage as the “compromiso” and when I asked them to expand or to clarify this idea, they would get confused and uncertain how to answer; some people simply responded that “así es,” or “because that’s how it is.” When I finally started to formulate my questions to avoid this simple answer, I began to unravel the true complexity of this idea that runs so deeply into their perception of marriage which formulates their belief system on the basic social unit of spousal relations.

**Compromiso** can be seen as the umbrella term for all of the aspects of marriage previously discussed. The reason that religion, procreation, and parental influence all are mutually reinforcing aspects of a relationship is due to the greater notion of the dedication to each other as a cultural normative. Essentially, “spouses are expected to uphold their end of the bargain by fulfilling their respective duties” (Aranada 2005:117). When asked what their responsibilities were as spouses, the men’s answer illustrated that they were to be the bread winners for the family—they work hard, earn money, and bring this back to the home for their families. In turn, all women responded that they were to cook, clean, take care of the children, do the laundry, and to use these goods that the husbands provide their wives with.

Although it appears to be a very simple issue of defined gendered roles, it is important to understand that the notion of responsibility is the foundation for the compromiso and, moreover, lays the groundwork for a successful and happy marriage. Marqueños define a marriage based on the extent to which these duties are performed and the basic philosophy of the compromiso is upheld. One informant who has been
married for thirty-two years told me that she loves her husband because he is a good man—he is responsible and has been able to earn enough money for them to build the house in which we were sitting. When I asked her what her role is as a spouse, her answer indirectly gave me insight into the Marqueño perceptions on *compromiso*; she explained that although she played no part in earning the money to build their home, she strongly reassured me that it is just as much hers as it is his because she is the one that maintains the household. Although there is a very distinctive line to be drawn between men and women’s roles, there is also a very strong sense of equality and of pride in upholding one’s end of his or her commitment; for those who are married, performing their duties contributes to their sense of identity.

These basic elements of the marriage contract permeate into the realms of all other factors of marriage. When a family grants permission for their son or daughter to marry, they are looking for someone who they think will be able to perform these expected duties. Because raising the children is essential to how a woman performs her duties and providing for children is an aspect of the man’s responsibilities, procreation is obviously very influential in the *compromiso*. Finally, religion and the commitment provide each other with mutual emphasis. The *compromiso* provides a means by which the couple addresses their religion because their roles in their marriage enhance what their church tells them about marriage; religion allows for a more complete understanding of their dedication to each other because it places the ideologies of said relationship into a real context—that of faith and spirituality.

**The Changing Face of Marriage**

*My* focus on two different generations of people in different stages of the marriage process revealed not that people’s perceptions of marriage change once they are married, but that Marqueños in general seem to be changing their approach to marriage. Instead of it being an evolution of beliefs on the individual level, San Marcos is in a transitional and evolutionary phase in terms of how the greater population conceptualizes a marriage. While the sample size was not very extensive due to time constraints, the variation of those being sampled was very diverse and illustrates a good demographic of the population.

**The Neophytes: Opinions of the Jovenes**

In order to really see these changes, it is necessary to narrow the focus to the younger generation. After sorting through my data, it seemed that demographic that showed a differing opinion to the “traditional” beliefs on marriage were those individuals between the ages of 18 and 29. My pile sorts and questionnaires provided good hard data that explicitly showed these changes in opinions.

The first change is age of a marriage. Most of the people who belonged to the older generation said that they got married at an earlier age (often before they even reached twenty years old). The questionnaire revealed that the older generation feels that an appropriate age for a marriage should be no later than 22. The younger generation, however, feels that they should be getting married at an older age; many responded that being at least 22, as old as 26, some even older, is a good age to get married. One of my informants has been “unida” with her partner for three years; she is 26-years-old and she does not want to get married yet. She explained to me that she wants him to finish school (he is two years younger) so he can have a good job to provide for her and their family. They already have children together and live
together, but the ideologies of *compromiso* are so socially dictating that they are waiting to take the plunge into full-on and permanent commitment. Her case shows the state of transition—the tradition of responsibility and duties are still very prevalent, but the current generation is morphing their approach to the *compromiso*; by waiting until they are better educated with stable work, they are hoping to better ensure their ability to fulfill their responsibilities to their fullest potential. The actual philosophies of the *compromiso* are not changing; they are just being put off until later on.

For my pile sorts, informants were given a list of words that repeatedly appeared in interviews as being important to the definition of a marriage. Younger people tended to associate marriage first with love, companionship, and equality, whereas the older generation tended to associate responsibility and stability as being important. Their desires to wait to get married or even to have a serious relationship show the increased importance on how the couple feels emotionally. This is not to say that love and companionship are not important to the older generation or that responsibility and stability are not as important to the younger generation, it simply emphasizes the slowing pace of the relationship. An interview with a mother and a daughter heightened this sense; the mother told me that she got married very shortly after first meeting her husband because he was a good and a responsible man and that was all she needed to know; as an aside, she said that she also loved him. I asked the unwed daughter how she would decide who to marry, she gushed at me about how the boy would have to be someone she can laugh with and talk to, and then said he should be a hard-worker.

A second example of the changing beliefs on marriage is that younger people are expressing their desire for more control over their own relationships. Going about courting in secrecy gives young people a sense of controlling who they are dating and who their future spouse will be. Innocent flirtations that go unknown to the parents are exhilarating. Because of the more casual nature of these encounters, they feel as though having an interest in the opposite sex is a gradual step as opposed to a giant leap into their futures as spouses. This ties into people waiting until they are older to marry; when they have more casual relationships when they are younger, it makes it more difficult for their parents to push for a marriage because parents still want to ensure that the person their child is seeing is a suitable life partner. Although parents do not approve of this form of dating, they are essentially powerless to stop it from happening because it is not an explicitly romantic relationship. These casual relationships are able to be maintained in the public eye under the guise of a simple friendship. The questionnaires showed that younger people do things together outside of the home whereas older people said they rarely go out in public with each other. Playing sports or being active members of a church community are both activities that are common for young people to do and therefore make it easier for a young couple to maintain a clandestine relationship.

Young people level their wishes with those of their parents by placing a greater emphasis on the civil union; with the union, parents cannot argue because it gives a sense of promise and permanence to the relationship seeing as how the couple cannot separate without a legal divorce. At the same time, young people feel happy in a union because they do not live with the pressures of the fixed nature of a marriage within the church. One couple interviewed has been in a union for three years and have no desire to get married in the foreseen future. The young 24-year-old man explained to me that they are good how they are—they are together, have a family, and they are happy. He looked at me, straightforward and serious,
and asked, “So why should we get married? We are good how it is.” When I asked him how their parents felt and what expectations they have, he heartily chuckled when he told me simply that they want them to get married. He continued on, saying that what his parents really want is for his (the informant’s) children to have parents who can care for them. He told me that his parents should be happy that all they have is a union because when he has a better job and can better provide for the family, they will get married in the church.

Separation and Difficulties

When my initial purpose was to see the difference between an unmarried person’s thoughts on marriage compared to the thoughts of a longtime married person, a question that I asked the already married people concerned the most difficult aspects of marriage and how the couple overcomes these hardships. The majority of people of whom I asked question said that there were no problems in marriage; my survey confirmed this when those who had been married and who belonged to the older generation all stated that “there are no problems in marriage; there are only discussions and there are always solutions.” Not one of them believed in divorce as being a solution for these “struggles.” In fact, one informant said that a marriage allows for “a sane life free of problems and difficulties.” At the same time, however, my observations seemed to contradict these answers greatly; I witnessed several seemingly heated conversations between married couples that would definitely not appear to be of the blissful state of marriage.

I initially concluded that many people were simply trying to cover up the fact that a marriage is not perfect—I brushed it off on me being a perfect stranger to many people and assumed that they would not want to divulge such a personal problem to an outsider. Further confusion and frustration arose when I sorted through the answers from people of the younger generation—several respondents answered that problems were caused by not having enough money to take care of the family or alcoholism and/or drugs. At the same time, many people in this younger generation did not view divorce as being a solution to these problems.

The existence of difficulties between couples was something that I expected to find, but the way people thought about these difficulties was anything but expected—perhaps due to my own cultural biases. In the United States, we view disagreements and arguments as having the potential to end a marriage; in San Marcos, a divorce is simply not viewed as a solution. The things that we would normally view as hardships within a marriage are just not seen that way at all. Even though married couples admitted to having “discussions,” their confusion to my next question about how they get through them can be attributed to the mindset that there really is nothing to overcome. If there are no problems, then logically, there is no divorce; divorce is not seen as a solution because there is nothing to solve.

This, however, does not explain the younger generation’s stance on problems within a couple. Unlike all of the members of the older demographic, young people did not say that there are always solutions and there are only discussions. Although divorce is more accepted amongst this generation, it is still evident that divorce is not seen as a solution; however, there is a recognition of problems, so how does this group solve these problems? There are two ways, I think, that solutions are sought.
Young people avoid the commitment of marriage all together or for a longer period of time than what used to be. Waiting until later ages to get married ensures that these problems will not arise, especially if one gets to know his or her partner very well before they are completely committed (dedicado) to each other. The gap between the civil union and the marriage in the church is becoming ever larger, some couples not ever crossing that bridge of being “officially married.” Although a legal divorce is needed for a civil union should a grave problem occur, this process is much easier than a divorce in the church and is not taken as seriously by the rest of society. Having just a civil union is viewed almost as the next best thing to a church marriage and as such, is slowly being taken more seriously.

The other way these problems are solved is not to avoid the commitment, but the problem itself. Waiting to get married until a steady and well paying job is maintained or until an education is completed avoids the major problem of not being able to provide for the family. An informant told me that her husband drinks because he does not make a lot of money and gets upset that he is unable to be a more responsible man; the correlation between the two problems can thus be more easily avoided through education and a steady job. Obviously these methods do not eliminate these issues or completely avoid them, but there is a sense of being proactive amongst the younger peoples in an effort to eliminate them from their own relationships.

Parental Expectations: Advice from the Experienced to the Beginners

One of the questions that I regularly asked my informants during my interviews was about the advice that they had for those who wanted to get married, especially for in the future when their children want to marry. The answers provided some support for my findings; they illustrate a sort of transitional phase of marriage beliefs and conceptions in San Marcos. The answers given depicted both a desire to remember traditional tenants of marriage as well as recognition of a change in their beliefs.

The first piece of advice that married couples had for younger people is to respect parents. Specific advice in this category included ideas such as having the parent both approve and like the person that you are introducing to them, as well as learning the skills that your father teaches you as a boy or that your mother teaches you as a girl so that they can do these things well once they are married. This advice shows the tradition of parents having a lot of influence in a relationship and it also shows the importance of responsibility hard work that is associated with marriage.

The second advice commonly given had to do with religion; these married couples stressed the importance of believing and praying together. Religion is of undeniable importance and is one of the most salient influences on the perception of marriage. One woman who told me this as advice also told me that the reason that she married her husband was to simply be a part of the church with her husband and for her, that was the only real difference between the civil union and the church marriage. Being recognized by the church legitimizes the marriage on a societal level because it is only viewed as a true marriage if it is within the church; it also actualizes it on a more intimate level because of the shared knowledge that they are joint members of the church. This is a traditional sentiment that is being carried on in younger peoples.

Another suggestion from parents is to be comfortable with your partner for a long time before considering a marriage. One informant said that she wants her son to know the woman for at least two
years before a marriage. She said that she rushed into marriage and is still trying to understand what it means to be married after thirteen years; knowing your spouse for an extended period of time allows for the couple to truly understand the gravity of a marriage. This recommendation emphasizes the notion of a more gradual and thought out marriage as opposed to an early and almost forced marriage. The idea of comfort and familiarity shows the increasing importance of companionship and emotional security in a marriage.

Many parents want their children to have steady work before they are married. Many of the people interviewed feel that being able to provide and maintain a family is of the upmost importance in a marriage and having a good income prior to the marriage makes the man more desirable as a husband and the relationship run a lot easier. Along with this, a few said that women should also work before marriage. Doing so allows for more financial security and an unmarried woman has no true commitment to being completely domestic. This shows, again, the change in approach to the compromiso as people want to be better prepared for such a permanent and ultimate commitment to another. The woman working goes back to the ever-so-silent thoughts on divorce, that should the man not be able to provide for his family, the woman has a back-up and can more easily become independent.

Finally, the majority of people interviewed highly encouraged people to go to school and get an education before marrying. In one very emotional interview, a woman broke into tears; we had made some small talk earlier and she learned that I am 20-years-old, the same age she was when she married. Tears silently rolled down her cheeks when she told me that she got married so young and her father could not afford for her to go to school; she exclaimed how wonderful it is that there I was, doing research and getting an education. Most of the people who belonged to the older generation spoke of how they were unable to go to school so finishing education before marriage is incredibly important for the younger generation. Holding off on a marriage to finish school allows for increased economic opportunities for both the man and the woman. This illustrates that the perception of marriage is taking on an individualistic focus.

Conclusions toward Future Research

Based on my findings, there are two things that I would find particularly interesting should further research be conducted in this subject area. The first would be a deeper look into the opposite of my topic: divorce. It was something that I was only able to surface and was something that was very hush-hush amongst a lot of the society. It does, however, exist, and research on how divorce is practiced, when it occurs, and the frequency with which it occurs could be intriguing. Another thing that could be looked at would be the factors that contribute to the changes in courtship and marriage beliefs. It would have been too difficult to pinpoint, but the general division between the generations where the changes were evident correlated to the introduction of tourism to the area. Tourism undoubtedly altered and completely uprooted the society of San Marcos and it was interesting to see that it potentially changed how people perceive marriage; whether there is an actual relationship between tourism and evolution of beliefs would be a riveting study.

During my brief stay in tranquil San Marcos, I became good friends with an expatriate who has lived here for nearly nine years. When I initially told him of my topic choice and the dynamics of the research I was to perform, he simply laughed at me. He exclaimed that he had lived here for eight years now and still
does not understand how the local people view courting and marriage; it could take a lifetime for anyone to truly grasp it, if he or she is lucky enough to even come close. I realize that given the short time that I was able to perform my studies, I merely touched the surface of such a deeply-rooted cultural concept. At the conclusion of one interview, an informant warmly and gratefully spoke of her respect for my exploration of an aspect of the Marqueño culture, often forgotten about, as being incredibly important, perhaps even the key, to the social workings of the town. My hope is that this ethnography opens up a bit of understanding and appreciation of this contemporary Mayan culture for whoever the reader is.

Works Cited


