



## Perceived marriage readiness: A cross-cultural exploration

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### Abstract

The high rates of marital problems that impact social issues have been attributed to the lack of marriage readiness. Several studies have tried to define and explain marriage readiness indices. However, there are various limitations due to how cultural factors very much influence this concept, as is the case in Indonesia, which is famous for its variety of cultures in every region. This study was conducted to compare perceived marriage readiness between Javanese people, representing the largest population in Indonesia and areas outside Java as the comparison group. Data was collected using open-ended surveys with 207 participants coming from all over Indonesia. The results were analyzed using thematic coding which describes marriage readiness factors and personal perceptions of marriage readiness among Indonesians. Implications for this study are discussed, especially for the evaluation and development of existing marital guidance programs in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** *marriage readiness, cross-cultural, qualitative, open-ended surveys*

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## **Introduction**

Family and marriage-related issues continue to occur in Indonesia, such as the increasing divorce rate in Indonesia (Central Statistics Agency, 2021), the still high rate of domestic violence (Catahu Komnas Perempuan, 2022), the high rate of child marriage in Indonesia (BPS, 2021), and the cases of stunting in toddlers that still need to be addressed (SSGI Ministry of Health, 2021). One of the factors considered to contribute to some of the family issues mentioned above is the lack of readiness for marriage. Previous studies have outlined issues arising from a lack of readiness for marriage, such as conflicts, economic problems, neglect of responsibilities (Sari & Sunarti, 2013), and low quality of child development (Sunarti et al., 2012; Tsania et al., 2015).

Marriage readiness is a state of being prepared or willing to engage with a partner, ready to accept responsibilities as a husband or wife, ready to engage in sexual relations, prepared to manage a family, and ready to raise children (Duvall & Miller, 1985). Marriage readiness is significantly related to pregnancy planning (Rahmah & Kurniawati, 2021), child development (Tsania et al., 2015), fulfilling family responsibilities and family developmental tasks (Sunarti et al., 2012), and can predict commitment and relationship maintenance behavior (Agnew et al., 2019). Factors that can influence marriage readiness include the quality of partner interaction (Holman et al., 1994), financial well-being (Ismail & Ahmad Diah, 2020), age, knowledge about married life, emotional intelligence (Fitria Ningrum et al., 2021), and premarital guidance (Azhari et al., 2020; Fitria Ningrum et al., 2021; Sundani, 2018).

Several studies on marriage readiness have been conducted in Indonesia. Ningrum, Latifah, & Krisnatuti (2021) investigated key factors influencing marriage readiness among students; Karunia and Rahaju (2019) studied marriage readiness in emerging adults (individuals aged 18-25) based on the marriage readiness criteria from Ghalili, Etemadi, Ahmadi, and Fatehizadeh (2012); Mawaddah, Safrina, Mawarpuri, and Faradina (2019) studied early adulthood marriage readiness (18-25 years) in Aceh using the marriage readiness measurement tools from Carroll et al. (2009). Although there have been many studies on marriage readiness, the measurement tools used adopt instruments from abroad, such as those from Ghalili et al. (2012) from Iran and those from Carroll et al. (2009) from the United States.

The concept of marriage readiness from the perspective of local people (Indonesia) is important to study because the concept of family is largely entrusted to the culture and traditions of society. Therefore, sources of good values in marriage are also found in culture, and it is essential to consider the cultural context of society in marriage research, including studies on readiness to enter marriage. For example, in Western culture, marriage is no longer seen as a significant event marking the progression into adulthood (Carroll et al., 2009). This view contrasts with Eastern culture, where marriage is still emphasized as an essential and significant event in life (Marphatia et al., 2017). Marriage quality is also found to have different foundations between individualistic and collectivist cultures (Nurhayati et al., 2023). Therefore, the determinants of marriage readiness for communities in Western and Eastern cultures may differ significantly. Placing marriage readiness in its cultural context aligns with the spirit of developing psychology based on indigenous cultures and indigenous realities.

Based on the above description, it is important to know the indicators of marriage readiness based on the perceptions of Indonesians since individual perceptions of marriage readiness greatly depend on contextual issues, including demographic characteristics (Holman et al., 1994). Indonesia itself has a richly diverse ethnic background. The largest ethnic group in Indonesia is the Javanese, comprising 40.05% of the total population; the second is the Sundanese, accounting for 15.50%; and other ethnic groups each account for less than 5% (BPS, 2015).

Therefore, this study aims to describe and compare perceptions of marriage readiness between Javanese people, who represent the largest population in Indonesia, and non-Javanese. This research aims to gain insights regarding personal perceptions and the determinants of

marriage readiness from the perspectives of Javanese and non-Javanese, thereby revealing the comparative aspects that could have implications for marriage guidance policies in Indonesia.

## **Method**

This study uses a qualitative research approach in the form of open-ended questionnaires grounded in a realist epistemology, by exploring our participants' subjective realities and beliefs. The open-ended questionnaires were created with the help of the PsyToolkit program and distributed via social media platforms. The sampling technique used is a self-selected survey, where respondents have the right to choose to join as respondents personally through research information shared on several social media platforms. The criteria for respondents are Indonesian citizens aged at least 19 years old, the legal marriage age in Indonesia.

### **Instrument**

The open-ended questions in this study are used to obtain comprehensive information on participants' perceptions of the concept of marriage readiness. Open-ended questions give respondents the opportunity to use their own thought frameworks (Tinnereim & Flottum, 2015). The questions are as follows:

1. What do respondents know about marriage readiness?
2. What are the signs of someone who is ready for marriage (according to you)?

### **Data Analysis**

All demographic data analysis is quantitatively performed with the help of Jamovi software. The qualitative analysis technique used in the research is inductive thematic analysis, where researchers explore themes that emerge from respondents' answers to find concepts and patterns of meaning in the data. The stages of analysis consist of (1) data familiarizing; (2) thematic coding; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; and (5) finalizing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Open-ended question responses are qualitatively analyzed through the stages of open coding and axial coding by three coders trained in qualitative research. Each coder analyzes independently and identifies themes that emerge from each participant (Cirgin Ellett & Beausang, 2002). The coding results from each coder are then compared and discussed until themes agreed upon by the coders emerge. These themes are analyzed and re-validated by a third party outside the coders to ensure the continuous comparison method is applied to ensure findings are consistent and credible. Questionnaire data is analyzed with the help of Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel programs.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Result**

A total of 207 respondents completed the open-ended questionnaire, ranging in age from 19 to 40 ( $M=27.4$ ,  $SD=6.23$ ). The majority of respondents were female ( $n=162$ ; 78%), Muslim ( $n=149$ ; 71.9%), and of Javanese ethnicity ( $n=122$ ; 58.9%). Complete descriptive information of our respondents can be inferred from Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Variables

Demographic variables	N	%
<b>Age</b> , (M=27.4, SD=6.23)		
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	162	78.3
Male	45	21.7
<b>Religion</b>		
Islam	149	71.9
Catholicism	46	22.2
Others	12	5.9
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Javanese	122	58.9
Non-Javanese	85	41.1
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	68	32.8
Unmarried	139	67.2

*Concept of Marriage Readiness*

Most respondents, whether from Java or outside Java, and whether married or unmarried, believe that marriage readiness refers to mental and financial readiness. Mental readiness includes emotional readiness, cognitive readiness, maturity in thinking, and social readiness, especially being ready to delve into roles within the family.

*"Ready to commit to marriage. Ready to take on responsibilities as a wife, (as) a mother."* (PS)

For unmarried respondents, financial readiness is the main indicator of marriage readiness compared to mental readiness. The opposite trend is shown by married respondents, who consider mental readiness the main indicator of marriage readiness compared to financial readiness.

*"Capable in terms of economy, responsibility, maturity in thinking and behavior, and also how to build comfort in communication."* (MD)

*"Marriage is not just about the age being ready to marry, but in my opinion, what is more important is mental readiness, readiness to accept new things that have never been seen or happened before, especially if we as women, who usually take care of ourselves more after marriage, must be ready to take care of the husband's needs, interact with both families, relatives, and others."* (RE)

Emotional mental readiness is also more dominantly found in respondents from Java. Besides mental and financial readiness, respondents, especially those outside Java, consider physical readiness an important indicator of marriage readiness.

*"Someone's readiness to live a household life in terms of material, spiritual, and physical aspects."* (B)

*"Marriage readiness includes things that need to be prepared for marriage. Both in terms of general marriage knowledge, marriage knowledge especially in religious recommendations, physical and mental readiness, and family support."* (A)

Some respondents also mentioned spiritual readiness. For instance, one respondent mentioned that marriage readiness means being ready to adhere to religious teachings and dedicating oneself to the family according to religious teachings.

*"Marriage readiness to serve the husband according to Islamic teachings. Adapting to new things encountered in the built household. Mental readiness to face unpredictable situations ahead. Remain steadfast in Islamic teachings in living the marriage."* (RY)

*"(Marriage readiness) as an effort to complete religion."* (SRR)

*"Marriage or running a household is not an easy matter, it requires commitment from both partners in terms of physical and spiritual readiness. Especially in Catholic religion, marriage is once in a lifetime, and that truly makes us think wisely in choosing and determining a partner."* (MD)

A small number of respondents consider age as an indicator of someone's readiness to marry. The benchmark is a minimum age of 20 years for women and above 25 years for men.

*"Mature age >20 years for women, >25 years for men. Stable financial status. Stable emotions (can control emotions well)."* (PS)

#### *Characteristics of a Person Ready for Marriage*

We explored the question of the concept of marriage readiness by asking respondents about the characteristics of someone who is considered ready for marriage. In line with the answers to the question about the concept of marriage readiness, the majority of respondents identified mental readiness characteristics such as maturity, independence, and emotional management ability. Additionally, the majority of respondents identified financial readiness, such as being well-established, having a stable job, and having savings.

*"Physically (mature)- sexual organs are mature. Psychologically, and mentally ready to accept the consequences of choices and maturity. Financially (at least having independent income) not dependent on parents."* (D)

*"Already mature in behavior, has a job and is independent."* (L)

*"Behaves like an adult, not childish. Can make decisions. Brave to meet the partner's family and express the purpose of the relationship going forward. (Someone who) has savings, has a stable job and works hard, can distinguish which is more priority."* (RE)

*"Someone who can emotionally control themselves, can appreciate and recognize others' efforts, can behave maturely when people around us make mistakes, not easy to judge and criticize."* (MDJ)

Some respondents also emphasized the importance of having skills such as conflict management, communication, problem-solving, and decision-making for someone ready to marry. Commitment is also one of the important points mentioned by respondents. A person ready for marriage can build commitment, be faithful, and be sincere.

*"Mature physiologically, knows and loves oneself, financially stable, able to handle conflicts together, thinks about married life, loves the partner, has aligned understanding, ready to maintain commitment and loyalty, and ready to take care of each other and complement each other."* (NDA)

*"Financially stable, able to handle conflicts together, consciously knows and loves oneself, responsible for chosen commitment, realistic about life, loves the partner sincerely."* (PT)

Some respondents believe that a person ready for marriage is someone who has a clear vision, mission, goals, and principles. On the other hand, respondents also mentioned the importance of a person ready for marriage having knowledge, being educated, and being knowledgeable in religious knowledge, parenting, and financial management.

*"Because I am Muslim, in my view, it is necessary to learn and understand the fiqh related to marriage first, so that when we have a family, we already know what we should do in building a family and what we should not do to create a good family." (SA)*

*".....Besides that, other preparations are also needed, such as attending premarital seminars to gain marriage knowledge, and also deepening parenting knowledge. Discussion and communication with the partner about life after marriage is also important to do before marriage." (NYA)*

As with the concept of marriage, some respondents place importance on the role of religion in marriage readiness. They believe that a person ready for marriage should also be spiritually ready and adhere to religion.

## Discussion

This study explored Indonesians' perceptions of marriage readiness by comparing Javanese and non-Javanese. This categorization was made considering that Java represents the largest ethnic population in Indonesia, whose values are often referenced for marriage readiness in Indonesia, compared to other non-Javanese ethnic groups that have not received much special attention. Through thematic analysis of respondents' open-ended questionnaire responses, we identified several themes that emerged from Indonesians' perceptions of marriage readiness.

In line with the definition of marriage readiness formulated by previous experts, the concept of marriage readiness is characterized by an individual's mental readiness, both emotionally and cognitively, to establish a marital relationship and delve into the role of a husband or wife in the family (Duvall & Miller, 1985). Financial readiness also emerged as an important indicator frequently mentioned by respondents. This is consistent with previous research findings by Ismail and Ahmad Diah (2020), who cited financial well-being as one of the main predictors of an individual's marriage readiness. Other predictors that emerged in respondents' answers included age adequacy, marriage knowledge, and emotional intelligence (Fitria Ningrum et al., 2021).

There were not many differences in the concept of marriage readiness found between Javanese and non-Javanese respondents. However, we found that physical readiness was more frequently cited as an indicator of marriage readiness by respondents from outside Java. This refers to an individual's physical maturity, marking their readiness to engage in sexual relationships. On the other hand, Javanese respondents emphasized emotional maturity in marriage readiness. This difference can be attributed to Javanese family values that prioritize emotional aspects such as peace, warmth, and harmony, interpreted as the absence of hatred, seeking compromises to minimize conflicts within the group (Koentjaraningrat, 1962; Subandi, 2011). Previous findings also indicated that marriages in Java often endure based on harmony and mutual respect rather than love or intimate relationships (Nurhayati et al., 2023).

A key concept not widely found in Western literature related to marriage readiness, but is quite evident in Indonesian respondents' answers, is related to spirituality or the role of religion in marriage. Most respondents mentioned the importance of spiritual readiness in the context of marriage. Spiritual readiness refers to adherence to religious teachings on marriage, having religious knowledge to live a marriage, and viewing marriage as an effort to perfect religion. Although the majority of respondents were Muslim and associated Islamic values with the concept of marriage, several Catholic respondents also mentioned the importance of religion, considering that in Catholicism, marriage is intended to be once in a lifetime.

Several previous studies have identified how religiosity can predict someone's readiness for marriage (Maton et al., 2005; Pargament et al., 2005), although in Western culture, relational commitment plays a much more important role than religious affiliation (Mosko & Pistole, 2010). Unlike Western culture, religion in Indonesia plays an important role in both material and non-material aspects of a family. Religion significantly shapes traditional family values, such as having children and the roles of husband and wife in the family (Rosifah et al., 2019). This is also reflected in the prevalence of religious values in respondents' answers regarding the concept and characteristics of a person considered ready for marriage.

Furthermore, the elaboration of respondents' answers indicated various characteristics considered ideal for being deemed ready for marriage. Characteristics identified by respondents included conflict management skills, communication, problem-solving, and decision-making abilities. This is consistent with previous research findings that identified predictors of marriage readiness such as interaction quality (Holman et al., 1994) and premarital counseling, which generally includes communication and joint problem-solving skills (Azhari et al., 2020).

This study on perceptions of marriage readiness is an initial exploratory study of the concept of marriage readiness. It will later be included in the development process of a marriage readiness measurement tool for Indonesians tailored to the marriage concepts promoted in premarital counseling. Further research is needed to obtain a more comprehensive picture of marriage readiness through local and general approaches. By refining the concept of marriage readiness both indigenously and generally, it is hoped that premarital counseling can be optimized to improve the quality of marriages in Indonesian society.

## Conclusion

The perception of marriage readiness among Javanese and non-Javanese people was obtained through thematic analysis, revealing several common themes in marriage readiness, such as mental, financial, physical, and spiritual readiness to take on the role of husband or wife in a family. In general, there were not many differences found between the responses of Javanese and non-Javanese respondents. However, one aspect that differed was how Javanese respondents emphasized emotional readiness over physical readiness as a predictor of marriage readiness. This can be attributed to the emphasis on emotional values in the traditional Javanese family concept.

## Suggestion

Due to the limited number of non-Javanese respondents, ethnic groups other than Javanese were classified into one category, implying that the cultural implications of other groups still need further elaboration. We recommend a wider sample distribution to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the role of culture in the concept of marriage readiness.

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