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Marriage among U.S. international students : meanings and aspirations.

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MEANINGS AND ASPIRATIONS

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ABSTRACT

MARRIAGE AMONG U.S. INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS:

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Although there exists a breadth of literature on Americans' marital aspirations and experiences, there is a significant lack of research available on U.S. international students' marital aspirations, specifically. In this study, transnational and gender theories are employed to analyze in-depth semi-structured interviews with 21 international students studying at a university located in a mid-size, midwestern city in the United States. The study reveals that the majority of international students maintain that marriage is important to them while they are living and studying in the United States. However, the study also finds that the cultural pressures of their home countries, including gender-related expectations, religious affiliation, and the importance of parental input, remain key influences on their marital aspirations. This paper suggests future directions of research focused on unique romantic and relational aspirations of international students in the United States.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

While people across the globe tend to delay marriage (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015; Cherlin, 2014), Americans are increasingly pursuing cohabitation before or even instead of marriage (Cherlin 2005, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Crouse, 2012; Wilcox et al, 2010). Despite these evolving trends, marriage has remained a highly valued aspiration within the United States (Cherlin 2005, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Crouse, 2012; Wilcox et al, 2010). Specifically, young Americans' aspirations illustrate a shift away from traditional marital practices while marriage remains to be a significant life event and a desirable outcome (Kline et al., 2012; Scott et al., 2009; Wilcox & Marquardt, 2011). Although there exists a breadth of literature on Americans' marital aspirations and experiences (Crouse, 2012; Mishra, 2018; Qian, 2017; Wilcox et al, 2010), there is a significant lack of research available on U.S. international students' marital aspirations, specifically. Transnational and gender theories are useful in analyzing respondents' narratives, providing new ways in which to study martial aspirations among this select group of global youth. The applications of transnational social fields discourse introduced by Gargano (2009) to my study furthers the investigation of international students' experiences and perspectives toward marriage. As such, this research draws on these theories in analyses of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 21 international students studying at a university located in a mid-size, midwestern city in the United States. This research, therefore, extends the existing literature on U.S. international students' romantic and relational experiences by contributing an exploration of their marital aspirations.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

Transnationalism and Gender

As a theorist creating a "limited" discourse for international students through the lens of transnational social fields, Gargano (2009) introduces the idea that international students with their unique transnational experience develop multi-dimensional identities as they have to negotiate the values and beliefs brought from their home countries in the context of a new host country. When international students come across the globe from their home countries to the United States, they do not relinquish the ways in which they were socialized that may directly affect their aspirations toward marriage and family. According to transnational theory, newcomers to a host country do not surrender their cultural values (Kagaba, 2018; Olwig, 2003); nor do they abandon their conceptions of the gendered structures that exist in their home countries (Koyama, 2015; Levitt, 2011). As Olwig (2003) explains in her study of migrant aspirations, newcomers do not just "perceive places of origin in terms of their transnational character, but just as much in terms of the particular cultural values and social ties that the migrants and their families practice in relation to these places" (p. 788). In other words, not only do foreigners transfer their original socio-cultural values and beliefs, but they also retain their perspectives that were brought from their home countries through "transnational activities" such as international calls, travel, and social media (Faist, 2000; Mirón, Inda, & Aguirre, 1998).

Traditional and cultural beliefs that newcomers bring to their host country may have an effect on interpretations of marriage and marital roles (Kline et al., 2012). In turn,

traditional views have evolved in the context of modernity. While traditional gender beliefs in marriage refer to a husband as the main provider or "breadwinner" in the family (Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Wilson, 1987) and a "child-bearing" wife as the main caregiver and a "homemaker" (Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1992), egalitarian gender beliefs in marriage assume equal distribution of responsibilities between a wife and a husband (Coontz, 2005; McHugh & Frieze, 1997). Furthermore, traditions influence transformations in the modern day and age. De-traditionalization represents the shift from the long-practiced common rituals in certain communities under the influence of globalization and modernity; however, "traditions do not wholly disappear" (Giddens, 1994, p.100). Thus, the shift to a later age in marriage (Cherlin, 2014) for women may serve as an example of de-traditionalization since women traditionally were expected to marry at an earlier age (Oppenheimer, 1988), while the global tradition of marriage persists. Although newcomers' traditional gendered views on family and faith tend to be maintained when they relocate (Koyama, 2015; Levitt, 2011), the influence of modernization and globalization may impact how their traditional views are adapted to the evolving demands of modernity (Nilan, 2008).

De-traditionalization is also echoed in a 'hybrid pattern,' that is, an adaptation of cultural traditions in various countries where parents make decisions about their children's spouses. This process of choosing a marital partner has been modernized as both parents and children give their input on marital partner choice as the response to global demands; the parental influence as a tradition does not disappear (Giddens, 1994) but shifts to be more mutual and balanced. In some studies, scholars have been able to predict the length of a successful relationship between married partners based on the degree to which family

and friends approve the romantic partner (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993; Felmlee et al., 1990). Age seems to be another factor involved in the level of influence parents may have on their adult children's decision-making of a marital partner, where older age is linked with less consideration of parental input (Cherlin, 2014).

Established research has begun to delve into the gender-related expectations that exist in marriages across cultures. Building on transnational theory may assist in interpreting international students' experiences, specifically; transnationalism claims that the home country's socio-cultural gender influences inform how women and men are socialized and develop their gender identity when they have relocated to the host country (Koyama, 2015; Levitt, 2011). Evidently, there is a variety of complex ways in which gender affects the roles, aspirations, and expectations for marriage across cultures (Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1992); however, this paper focuses on three primary areas: age-related pressures, financial stability, and hypergamy (colloquially known as "marrying up").

According to some literature, age-related pressures to marry have been recorded as more common for women in past decades (Qian & Preston, 1993), mainly due to fears – reinforced by socio-cultural gender expectations – of not being able to secure a partner as an older woman and thus being unable to bear children (Lowenstein et al., 1981; Primakoff, 1983). Nowadays, there is still a prevalent pattern of women marrying earlier than men (Furstenberg, 2010; Oesterle et al., 2010; Settersten & Ray, 2010), possibly due to the perpetuation of traditional socio-cultural expectations for women, who believe they must marry before reaching 30 years of age or they will 'miss their window' (Arnett, 2004; Willoughby, 2010).

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The research shows that financial stability is an important predecessor for marriage as couples tend to set up a solid economic foundation for their future families (Willoughby et al., 2015). For men, there is a traditional gendered expectation to be financially stable (Wilson, 1987). Qian (2017), using data from the 1980 U.S. Census and 2008-2012 American Community Surveys, examined the change in assortative mating. She found that in 2008-2012, 59 percent of U.S. women (down from 73 percent in 1980) married men with higher incomes than their own. Interestingly, Qian (2017) also finds that women are more likely to marry up in income when they marry down in education. The assumption for men's financial eligibility has been historically prevalent and persists in contemporary cultures worldwide (Bridges & Boyd, 2016; Raley & Stokes, 2011; Wilson, 1987). Nevertheless, this trend is less common in the United States as both women and men tend to select partners of a similar social class (Cherlin, 2009; Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006).

However, hypergamy has been a noted concern for women in international marriages rather than in American marriages (Bélanger & Linh, 2011; Jones & Shen, 2008; Lloyd, 2000; Pawlowski & Dunbar, 1999). In transnational marriages, hypergamy has been a key factor for women from less affluent countries when selecting partners that typically hail from more prosperous countries (Bélanger & Linh, 2011; Lloyd, 2000); this may explain why women are more likely to marry a person from a different country (Jones & Shen, 2008). As international marriages are gradually increasing in number across the world (Bélanger & Linh, 2011; Jones & Shen, 2008; Seah, 2012), they can also be considered empowering for women due to their transformative influence on power dynamics within transnational communities, where more egalitarian views are prized compared to that of their home countries (Bélanger & Linh, 2011). While men continue to

be evaluated according to their financial comfort and status, women are subject to their own set of gendered expectations such as age upon marriage, hypergamy, and child-bearing. Although the relationship between transnationalism and gender has been well-documented (Koyama, 2015; Levitt, 2011), gaps remain in illustrating the connection between these issues and international students' experiences and aspirations toward marriage.

Young Adults' Aspirations toward Marriage

Literature on American residents shows that despite increasing tendencies toward cohabitation instead of marriage, generally marriage remains a highly valued endeavor (Cherlin 2005, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Crouse, 2012; Wilcox et al, 2010). Research on young adult Americans, specifically, demonstrates that young people in the United States continue this trend of desiring eventual marriage and actively seeking a marital partner (Scott et al., 2009; Wilcox & Marquardt, 2011). This illuminates marriage as important among the majority of this population (Hippen, 2016). In her longitudinal research evaluating attitudes toward marriage for emerging adults, Hippen (2016) concludes that U.S. college students "desired and placed importance on marriage and long-term relationships… with most attitude change [towards marriage] occurring in a positive direction" (p. 51).

While it is clear that the literature generally identifies marriage as important to young adults, it is helpful to also explore the meaning that U.S. young adults assign to marriage and family, including the benefits of having an established support system and parental partnership. The majority of young adults in the United States tend to value marriage, at least in part, for offering a great deal of support and closeness (Shulman,

Rosenheim, & Knafo, 1999). Creating a support system – one of the meanings that young adults in the United States assign to marriage – assists couples in dealing with transitional and stressful life circumstances (Brock & Lawrence, 2010; Sullivan & Davila, 2010). In addition, existing literature reveals that tackling parenthood is important for American young adults as they aspire having children in the future (Nock, 1998). Women and men equally aspire to get married and have children; however, as recognized by both women and men, women express stronger feelings than men in regard to those aspirations (Erchull et al., 2010).

Despite a great deal of literature on U.S. young adults and some research on American college students' aspirations toward marriage, there seems to be a little examination of international students' experiences, aspirations, and beliefs about marriage. While most research on international students addresses academic and cultural challenges that accompany adjustment to living and studying in the United States (Andrade, 2006; Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Galloway & Jenkins, 2005; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Kwon, 2009; Yakunina et al., 2012; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), few studies mention international students' experiences, aspirations, and beliefs toward romantic relationships (Yan & Berliner, 2011a, 2011b, 2013).

While examining Chinese international students' personal and socio-cultural challenges and stressors in the United States, Yan and Berliner (2011a, 2011b, 2013) acknowledge that their student participants from China had marital and dating problems. For example, Chinese women expressed more concern about the difficulty in finding a romantic relationship partner as well as age-related pressures to enter marriage. Yan and Berliner (2013) conclude that the majority of Chinese international students perceived that

"marriage in America was difficult to achieve and easily fell apart" (p.69-70). While existing literature explores Chinese international students' marital experiences, aspirations, and beliefs in the context of stressors and challenges, the more focused research of diverse international students' experiences, aspirations, and beliefs toward marriage is absent in the present body of research.

A decade ago, Gargano (2009) stated that "international student voices and the complexity of their experiences are strikingly absent from the discourse" (p.341). This research seeks to fill an existing gap in the literature by investigating U.S. international students' experiences and perspectives on marriage. This study demonstrates how international students' aspirations toward marriage are molded through transnational and gender lenses. This way, I present international students' aspirations toward marriage in addition to generational, cultural, and other factors that could contribute to the interpretations of marriage among my interviewees.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

The goal of my study is to bring the lens of international students into the literature on marital perspectives by exploring their experiences, opinions, and aspirations toward marriage. To do so, 21 international student participants were recruited on campus at a nationally accredited college in a mid-size midwestern city in the United States.

Recruitment

In order to recruit international students, I used purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods. With purposive sampling, subjects are chosen due to certain common characteristics (Patton, 1990). The participants of this study had to satisfy the following criteria of selection: minimum age of 18, status of international student, and at least one experience of romantic relationships. The flyers containing selection criteria and my contact information were distributed throughout the campus by means of distribution through the third parties and by myself.

Furthermore, I received support in distributing information about my study from the International Student Center (ISC) at the same university. As I collaborated with international students' advisors, they offered to send an email containing the flyer of my study to all international students on the roster in this specific institution. In addition, the flyers were distributed either via ISC office or by myself: I went to the events targeting international students and passed out the flyers there as well. International students were recruited from summer and fall international student orientations, multiple workshops,

sponsored events, and other networking opportunities. Recruitment via flyers proved to be inefficient, as only one out of 200 recipients contacted me. Thus, I recruited international students for my study by talking to them in person while distributing the flyers at the events described above. This recruitment method assisted in obtaining the vast majority of the participants in this study.

Interestingly, it was quite challenging to recruit women, while I had no problem recruiting men. First, I noticed that at each and every event, among international students, there were at least twice as many men than women. Furthermore, there were some events where there were international men students only. I then checked with ISC to see the statistical data on the gender distribution of international students at this university. According to ISC, in 2017 – the year preceding the interviews – there were 189 women and 368 men. In addition to the fact that there were more international men than international women at this college, international women were reluctant to agree to participate even after I talked to them. Thus, I had to apply the snowball sampling with women which resulted in obtaining four of the nine women participants in this research. One woman interviewee, who was recruited via the flyer, introduced me to her acquaintance. This was the first person recruited via snowball sampling. Each new woman was introduced by the previous interviewee and continued until there were four "snowballed" participants. Thus, snowball sampling created a fourth degree of separation between these participants and me. The gender ratio of the participants in this study is three to four (nine women to 12 men) which indicates oversampling of international women at this university, where the ratio is nearly one to two (189 women to 368 men).

In-depth Semi-structured Interviews and Sample Characteristics

To analyze international students' perspectives toward marriage and family, 21 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and brief surveys on demographic characteristics were employed in this study. While conducting the interviews – as an international student myself – I had the advantage of an "insider's" perspective in relation to my participants. According to Fetterman (1998), "semi-structured interview is most valuable when the fieldworker comprehends the fundamentals of a community from the 'insider's' perspective" (p.38). However, I was also an "outsider" in some ways – as a graduate student in Sociology and as an international student not from any of the respondents' country of origin. The interviews in this study lasted 75 minutes on average, with the shortest taking 47 minutes and the longest three hours. The interviews covered such concepts as romantic relationships, marriage, culture, religion, and parental influences (see Appendix 1).

Surveys on demographic characteristics showed that among the 21 interviewees in this study – nine women and 12 men – there were Agnostic, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim participants. These international students came from 18 countries representing seven world regions: Middle East, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Northern Africa, East/Central Africa, Western Europe, and South America. All participants, excluding one bisexual woman, were heterosexual. The age of the participants varied from 18 to 49 years old, with the majority of the interviewees aged between 25 and 29. In this study, four interviewees were married, one was engaged, and the rest of the 16 participants had never been married. The majority of the participants in this study were graduate students (18 out of 21); the remaining three interviewees – Joy, Kurt, and Samir – had an undergraduate student status when the interviews were conducted. Interestingly, 20 out of 21 students'

parents appeared to be married and one student's parent was widowed. To protect the international students' identities, pseudonyms were created for the participants of this study and their countries of origin were not disclosed (see Table 1).

To analyze my data, I used Atlas.ti – a software program for data analysis in qualitative research methods – to create codes and memos in each interview transcript. In Atlas.ti, "line-by-line [and] segment-by-segment" concrete coding and "focused" or "in-line coding" were used to analyze data from the semi-structured in-depth interview transcriptions (Charmaz, 2014, p.51). Upon completion of each of the interviews, I coded data using Atlas.ti to identify common patterns and counter-narratives. I also continuously performed the comparative and analytic-inductive methods in coding my data (Charmaz, 2014). The most common patterns that emerged are reported and analyzed in detail in the following section.

Table.1. Characteristics of the participants

	Interviewee's Pseudonym	Gender	Region	Age group	Religion	Marital Status
1	Evgeni	Man	North Africa	25-29	Islam	Married
2	Valentino	Man	Southeast Asia	30-34	Buddhism	Never married
3	Stephane	Man	Middle East	45-49	Islam	Married
4	Kurt	Man	Southeast Asia	21-24	Christianity	Never married
5	Matteo	Man	North Africa	30-34	Islam	Never married
6	Edgar	Man	North Africa	25-29	Christianity	Never married
7	Idris	Man	Middle East	25-29	Islam	Never married
8	Fabio	Man	Southeast Asia	25-29	Christianity	Never married
9	Pablo	Man	South Asia	30-34	Islam	Engaged
10	Preston	Man	South Asia	25-29	Christianity	Married
11	Canan	Man	South America	25-29	Christianity	Never married
12	Isadora	Woman	South Asia	30-34	Hinduism	Married
13	Irene	Woman	Middle East	30-34	Agnosticism	Never married
14	Jasmine	Woman	Middle East	25-29	Islam	Never married
15	Joy	Woman	Southeast Asia	18-20	Buddhism	Never married
16	Bridget	Woman	East/Central Africa	30-34	Christianity	Never married
17	Gracie	Woman	Western Europe	25-29	Christianity	Never married
18	Tessa	Woman	North Africa	25-29	Islam/ Agnosticism	Never married
19	Sarah	Woman	East/Central Africa	25-29	Christianity	Never married
20	Samir	Man	Western Europe	21-24	Agnosticism	Never married
21	Chelsey	Woman	Southeast Asia	25-29	Christianity	Never married

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

A vast majority of international students in the study considered marriage to be an important chapter of their lives. International students' aspirations toward marriage seemed to be shaped by external forces such as religion, culture, traditional beliefs, and parental input. In addition, the participants' narratives revealed the presence of gendered pressures affecting their transnational experiences.

US International Students' Aspirations Toward Marriage

All international students in this study, with the exception of one, considered marriage to be important and hoped to get married at some point in their lives. This may be related to the fact that 20 out of 21 international students' parents were married at the time of interviews as indicated in their brief background surveys. Evgeni, speaking from his own experience of marriage, elaborated, "For me especially, I think marriage is very important, and for any other international students just live in a new country by yourself [pause] no [pause]. Marriage is very supportive." Irene expressed similar feelings, connecting marriage also to the prospect of having a family: "I want to get married at one point. ... I'm living in another country by myself, no family just alone. ... I have friends but at the end of the day, you [are] going home and you like 'I wish someone was here.' You have someone that you feel like he's supporting you… I'd like to have a family." Accordingly, participants like Irene and Evgeni identified marriage as an opportunity to

secure a support system through partnership and recognized the importance of marriage for successfully adapting to life in a new country.

In addition to international students' conceptions of marriage as a key milestone, all but three interviewees were receptive toward the idea of marrying a foreigner. The majority of international students in the study (18 out of 21), including the ones who were married or engaged at the time of the interviews, reported that they were or would be open to the idea of marrying a person from a different country. Moreover, two participants stated that they would actually prefer to marry a person not from their home country because of the perceived benefits of a culturally blended partnership. For instance, Irene exclaimed, "I actually prefer to marry someone from another country. … My brother … married someone from another country. He was living in Austria, I mean, Australia and he married a woman from Spain. So, they [Irene's parents] were fine." For Irene, her brother served as a role model whose happiness with his significant other despite their differing cultural backgrounds provided an example for how international marriage could be successful and satisfying. Furthermore, the validation of her parents' acceptance of this international union seemed to give her extra encouragement and freedom to explore partners outside of her country and culture.

Like Irene, Fabio also identified similar benefits related to having a partner from a different country. He stated that in his home country, international marriages are "greatly welcomed" due to the common belief that children born in culturally blended families have "superior genes," meaning a greater capacity for "attractiveness," "talent," and "intelligence." These factors, including aspirations of improved relationship satisfaction

and successful child upbringing, provided Irene and Fabio incentive to be open to marriage with a partner from another country.

Despite these perceived benefits, three participants – Isadora, Valentino, and Kurt – remained doubtful of the advantages of marrying a person from a different country. Their skepticism stems primarily from the perceived disadvantage of the non-native partner's insufficient knowledge of the language and customs of international students' home countries, and the strain this could put on the relationship with the extended family. Isadora, Valentino, and Kurt each identified knowledge of their native language as a key quality for their consideration of a marital partner since shared language is recognized as the means for establishing an intimate link to their families back home. For example, as Valentino stated, parents in his home country "want their children marry someone who can, who is able to speak their language." Meanwhile, Isadora shared that, "meeting someone [from a different country] who comes across like someone like really nice...But in cultural things … maybe I would *prefer someone from my country.*" Kurt, in line with Isadora's sentiment, stated "as I grow older because of my love for my family, I would want them to be able to get to know my wife and considering that if she is not a [person from my home country], it will be harder for them to get to know my wife." In other words, ensuring their partner's ability to communicate with their parents was seen as vital to creating a successful family relationship beyond their immediate coupling. The familial expectation of adult children having a marital partner from their home country, due to the importance of cultural and

linguistic similarities, seemed to be internalized by these three participants, thereby limiting their marital partner options[1].

Notably, there was the presence of a counter-narrative to the common pattern of marriage being important to the international students interviewed for this study. Out of 21 participants, Sarah asserted that marriage was *not* important to her personally, and that she did not plan to pursue marriage or any other committed partnership in the future; however, Sarah did not reject the idea of marriage itself, sharing that she understood the draw for others. In her words, "Marriage for me is [pause]. For myself it's not important. I feel that if you [other people] have been together for a long time and [they] have children, … then maybe marriage is a good idea because it just gives the kids that unity." Sarah recognized that culturally, marriage is a choice typically related to establishing the longevity of the relationship and providing a secure family unit for the best interests of children. Despite understanding a widespread aspiration toward entering marriage, Sarah was different from the 20 other interviewees in this study due to her resistance to the common desire for marriage. This was evident through her distaste toward developing a committed romantic partnership which could be related to her past personal experiences. However, for purposes of confidentiality, further details cannot be disclosed.

The Relationship between Religion and Marriage

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[1] Four out of five married/engaged participants had their spouses from the countries of their origin, including Isadora. Although the other three married participants did not report familial expectations of obtaining a spouse from their home country, two out three remaining married participants have spouses from their country of origin. The only engaged participant in this study has a fiancée from his country as well.

The fact that marriage appeared to be important for 20 out of 21 participants could be explained through the lens of interviewees' religious affiliations, as they can have a direct impact on its worshippers' perspectives toward marriage. The majority (17 out of 21) of the participants disclosed that their religious beliefs directly impacted their marital aspirations: nine Christian, seven Muslim and one Hindu. The remaining participants said that their religious beliefs did not have any effect on the importance of marriage. These few identified their religious views to be either Agnostic or Buddhist (two participants each).

For the majority of the participants (17 out of 21), religion influenced their socio-cultural conceptualization of marriage because of the influence of sacred texts and cultural practices. Kurt very descriptively explained how importance of marriage directly connects to his religious affiliation:

> "Marriage is *very important* for me ... and this has a lot of *Biblical* implications for me too. Because ... a man should leave [his] family and hold fast to [his] wife and also it is a reflection and a metaphor for Jesus Christ love for me, as I am promising my wife that I will love her unconditionally and I will even give up my life for her. This is a picture of Jesus Christ love for me and his unconditional and unwarranted sacrifice for me. So, growing in my marriage would also mean to me that I'm growing more [pause] in *more likeliness* to Jesus Christ."

Kurt's statement illustrates the influence of Christianity on his marital aspirations by reflecting his deep religious beliefs about living life in accordance to the Bible to make himself closer to his Savior.

Jasmine similarly explained the direct connection of her marital beliefs to her religion: "In my religion [Islam], there's a saying for my Prophet that the marriage is completing your religion. So, anyone who want to complete any part of his life or his religion, he *should* get married. So, it's something very encouraging. Yeah, it's encouraged in my country." Likewise, Isadora described how her religion also supports and encourages marriage: "Hinduism does have effect on marriage because there's a lot of things about the marriage that is documented. Single people treat marriage as really important thing. Getting married in Hinduism is *followed* by our culture." Isadora's explanation is in line with what is practiced in Hinduism culturally, and it further reflects the interrelated nature of marriage and religion.

Based on how participants interpret marriage in the context of their religious beliefs and practices directly informs how they gauge the importance of marriage in their lives. For example, in accordance to the Bible, Quran, and Vedas – which many participants cited in conversations about their marital aspirations and beliefs – Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism promote the attainment of marriage and family as a means for spiritual fulfillment. Therefore, it can be gleaned that religious beliefs are intimately connected to a majority of international students' (17 out 21) interpretations of marriage, both in their home countries and in the United States.

Choice of a Marital Partner: Hybrid Pattern

I asked all of the international students if they needed a permission or any sort of approval from their parents regarding marital partners. All but one participant said they would need approval of their marital partner from their parents – not due to it being an obligation, but more as a sign of respect. Matteo explained, "For me, parental influence or

approval is really important because I respect my parents. And, I expect my family to accept my partner, and my partner accepts them as well. So, it should be a *mutual acceptance. …* My family approves or understands all my choices." Matteo indicates that parental contribution in choosing his marital partner is as important for him as a potential spouse accepting his parents, which extends the concept of a hybrid pattern to a mutual acceptance of the marital partner toward his parents.

In addition, international student participants (20 out of 21) consistently expressed consideration of their parents' expectations when considering marriage. Matteo also stated that his beliefs would hold true if he chose to marry a foreigner. Importantly, as previously mentioned, 18 out of 21 participants in this study indicated no objection to having a spouse who is not from their home country. Parents, according to the majority of the interviewees, generally seem to support their adult children's choice of marital partner. In most of the described cases, international students believed that their parents would be accepting if they chose a marital partner from a foreign country, and several participants identified strong relationships with their parents – established primarily through trust and respect – as a key reason why. As Irene explained, "My parents are okay with me if I choose anyone. Maybe because of the amount of trust they have on me. So, at least for me, it's not a problem." Indicated by their parents' support and willingness in allowing their adult children to study abroad, international students might experience more parental trust as compared to their counterparts studying closer to home. It may follow that these parents would also be more willing to provide flexibility to their adult children and to support their other major life decisions, including a non-conventional choice of marital partner.

Furthermore, 20 out of 21 international students reported that they generally have varying levels of freedom in choosing a marital partner, but in the end, it would be a mutual decision as the students would normally want to hear their parents' advice and opinion. These behaviors correspond to a 'hybrid pattern' that occurs when parents and their adult children are mutually involved in a marital partner decision-making process across the world. As Isadora, who comes from a very conservative culture, explained, "According to my family, I [was] supposed to marry a person who [my parents] defined as 'appropriate,' but they [said they would be] a little liberal if I [found] another person of the same religion... I did, I did [end up marrying a man who practices the same religion], *I had that freedom.*" Isadora (one of the five married participants) shared that she had a conditional freedom – but a freedom, nonetheless – in choosing a marital partner even though her parents did maintain some degree of control over her options in relation to religious affiliation. In other words, this conditionality should not be confused with receiving permission since the selection of her partner using this criterion involved a mutual decision between Isadora and her parents. Jasmine explicitly described a similar experience:

> "So, it's not a lot like [I] really have [to] get permission, but the parents just put their trust in their children. Most of the people are commonly in my country, that you choose your own partner, but, of course, you need your consent from your family. So, in general, they should have like a general agreement about this person, not in all aspects, like they might not like X and Y in this person, but in general he's an accepted person to be in the family, you know."

This illustrates both parents and their adult children have their unique inputs in a marital-partner selection process which corresponds to a hybrid pattern.

Those who asked for permission from their parents did so more for ethical purposes. For instance, Preston elaborated: "I did ask for their [Preston's parents'] permission, and my wife also did ask for permission, and we met both with our parents, and then they said 'yes.' Then they met … yes, we did ask for permission. But not that we needed it, I just think it is *ethical and moral* to do that." Again, this exhibited the "respect" factor that international students attribute to their parents when asking for permission and approval of their marital partner.

In addition, the existence of a hybrid pattern could be a result of a lesser parental influence towards international students' marital partner choices due to the increased age of the participants who are mostly 25 to 34 years old. As the adult children become older, parents tend to have less influence on their marital partner choice-making decisions in the cultures where traditionally parents have vital roles when choosing a spouse for their adult children.

Cultural Gendered Pressures on Marital Aspirations

While all participants in this study – except Sarah – desired to get married at a certain point in their lives, I found gendered patterns regarding marital aspirations, including considerations to timing (i.e. age-related), financial constraints, and hypergamy.

Nearly half of the women in this study (four out of nine) reported experiencing pressures from their parents and members of their extended families to get married sooner, whereas men in their communities were not as likely to experience age-related pressures. In her interview, Tessa emotionally expressed her frustrations with this double-standard:

"I had that [way of thinking] not because I wanted to, but because all the family members, all the time would nag, nag, nag: 'You are in an age to get married! *You*

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should get married! Look at your cousin! Look at your other cousin! And if you don't get married now, *no guy will look at you!* And you will be without. How will life be without the family?!' And then they nag in your head about this, and you feel like you will never be happy without marriage in your country."

In this testimony, Tessa identified not only a gender-specific, but also an age-related expectation to get married as quickly as possible. She implied the potential consequence that if she waited too long to marry she would "miss her window" in obtaining marriage and, by default, lose the opportunity to start a family. Despite Tessa's frustration with her family's incessant irritating comments, she seemed to internalize some of these traditional age-related gender expectations in marriage.

The expectation for early marriage among women also resonated among some men participants – Evgeni, Edgar, and Stephane – who stated that women are expected to get married earlier in their countries of origin. As Evgeni described, "Culturally, most people want to get married early, pretty much, especially girls...She can't bust 30 years without getting married. And in some places, it is a shame for a girl not to get married [at all]." According to Evgeni's explanation, not only is there a time frame in which a woman is expected to get married, but women who remain single throughout their lives (i.e. not married) are also stigmatized for their single status. As a result, this cultural pressure may cause damaging insecurities and anxieties in women who do not meet this expectation or prioritize marriage early in life.

Interestingly, upon moving to the United States, three out of four women who experienced age-related pressures to marry sooner reported feeling less pressured age-wise, which can be linked to more relaxed cultural environment in the host country, the United

States. Bridget, Chelsey, and Tessa claimed that they no longer believe they have to get married early now that they have felt some distance from their home country's traditional expectations about marriage. For instance, Bridget described her understanding of life milestones back home:

> "Growing up in my culture, so that was the way to go. You go to school, then, well, I felt like you *have to* get married and have kids *right* after. So, for me I feel like I still hold some of those values, you know, get an education, get a job, and now I really want to be independent (laughs). So, marriage for me is it's like, I would love to be with somebody … I feel like it's a legacy to have kids, but it's *not the end of everything*. Cuz my country, ... marriage and ... (whispers) you're done. That's the highest achievement."

As Bridget explains, in her country women are encouraged to marry early so that they can fulfill societal expectations for women's roles in the family, including child-bearing and rearing. Now that she has experienced studying and living in the United States, she feels that she has the freedom to wait on creating a family and pursue more personal interests, including her graduate education and professional prospects.

On the contrary, while none of the 12 men in this study reported the presence of age-related pressures to marry, the majority of them did report the presence of other kinds of cultural pressures. In their interviews, nine out of 12 men reported an urgency to achieve financial stability prior to committing to marriage. This pressure was associated with the gendered responsibility of providing for their family. In Edgar's words, "I think, this [marriage] is a very, very serious step. I have that little fear of commitment. Not because I'll be devoted to one person only, but because I'm sure that I'm *not* stable financially. So,

if I just proposed to any girl, I would be rejected based on my financial, I'd say, shortages, yeah." Evgeni shared similar concerns: "So, the problem of marriage in my country is not finding the right person but being *able* to marry… They *don't concern about finding the right person* but being able to get married like financially." As both Edgar and Evgeni note, men in their countries feel anxious about their ability to commit to marriage before reaching financial stability. Further, Edgar seemed to express the added concern that financial considerations are important to the woman he would propose to, indicating that finances are considered to be a key factor when choosing a partner.

Relatedly, both men and women in this study indicated that financial stability was important for a successful marriage. These women's narratives suggested that some women do consider finances as a prerequisite for marriage. As Tessa describes, "[couples] will keep being together until when the guy is maybe financially ready...Mostly the guy needs to be financially able to take care of his family." In other words, while financial stability is not necessarily required for a romantic relationship, it is a significant consideration when committing to marriage. Further, due to traditional gender roles and expectations, men are often expected to be the primary provider within the family unit, which would explain present anxieties among men across cultures.

One of the reasons why men feel the need to be better off financially is because, as half of the men participants stated, women in their home countries tend to "marry up." As Canan explained, in his home country, "Women are usually attracted to financial stability, … [they] marry someone who is going to be professionally beneficial like in their … field that they are developing or will marry somebody with a lot of money." Similarly, about a half of the women in this study (four out of nine) shared that in their cultures, it is common

for women to strive to find partners who would allow them upward mobility. As Isadora stated, "I've seen this in my culture where women tried … to marry a level up like a class. So, women will try to marry someone with a little higher class *mostly*." In other words, women participants expressed the tendency to seek partners of a "higher class," who are more likely to be financially stable. This standard translates as socio-cultural pressure for men to achieve a comfortable financial situation prior to proposing marriage to their partner.   Both women striving to marry up and men being required to achieve financial stability for their marriageability reinforce traditional gendered beliefs in marriage suggesting that men are the breadwinners of the family. Earlier mentioned testimonies of international students – the freedom both women and men have in choosing a marital partner and women feeling less pressured to marry earlier – illustrate that there is a shift from traditional beliefs suggesting de-traditionalization while the traditions of parental influence and marriage do not disappear completely. However, the pressures that the students reported to experience suggest that traditional gender expectations in marriage – financial pressures for men and hypergamy and child-bearing for women – still exist among my interviewees and back in their countries of origin.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This study presents an application of transnational and gender theories to examination of international students' aspirations toward marriage. The strength of my study is in expanding existing research on international students' aspirations toward marriage. In their research, Yan and Berliner (2011a, 2011b, 2013) identified challenges in mate selection for Chinese international students within the context of personal and socio-cultural stressors experienced upon moving to the United States; one of the ways in which my study differs is by furthering this existing body of research in moving beyond the stressors related to marital partner selection. Adding the voices of international students from seven world regions by analyzing their aspirations toward marriage, identifying their main interpretations of marriage, and expressing the external forces that affect formation of those aspirations are the major contributions of this paper.

While all but one participant in this study considered marriage to be important and aspired to get married eventually, it is important to acknowledge that parental marital status could have had a significant effect on those views. Existing research illustrates that marital status of parents has an effect on their children's preferences regarding marriage. Children whose parents are married express greater confidence towards the idea of marriage compared to children who had experienced parental separation or were initially raised in a single-parent household (Martin et al., 2003; Simons, Burt, & Tambling 2013). Also, 20 out of 21 interviewees' parents were married at the time of the interviews. The remaining one participant's parental marital status was "widowed." However, Joy still considered

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marriage to be important for her in addition to her willingness to get married at a certain point in life. As supported by prior literature, my findings suggest that parental marital status is an important contributor to international students' aspirations toward marriage.

Furthermore, another explanation for why all but one participant in this study considered marriage to be important and aspired to get married eventually could be tied to the effects of religion on the importance of marriage. Aspirations towards marriage as well as marital relationships and roles can be affected by religious views (Kline et al., 2012). Both Christianity and Islam promote the idea of marriage and family (Agius & Chircop,1998). Likewise, in Hinduism, since ancient times marriage was sacred and still is, and non-married person was considered to be "impious or incomplete" for Hindus (Coontz, 2005, p.86). Thus, the influence of religion helps to explain why 17 out of 21 participants − nine Christian, seven Muslim, and one Hindu − assigned significant importance to marriage in fulfilling their spiritual aspirations. This introduces avenues for future research investigating more fully the effects of religiosity on international students' aspirations towards marriage.

Next, all participants but one agreed that they generally had freedom in their choices of romantic partners or, as interpreted by them, they either had or would have had the freedom in selecting a marital partner. At the same time, almost all participants said they would consult their parents about potential marriage partners. This finding is in line with a "hybrid pattern" proposed by Cherlin (2014). Furthermore, it is important to recall that my interviewees were all allowed to come to study in a foreign country in the first place. This could suggest that my participants' parents are generally more lenient compared to parents from those countries who did not send their children to study abroad. Evidently,

as Isadora stated, she had freedom in choosing her husband, but she stressed that her experience was "different" because her parents were "more liberal" compared to other parents in her home country. Nevertheless, further research is needed to confirm this connection: for example, interviews with foreign parents of international and domestic students could fill this gap.

Elements of de-traditionalization are occurring in the international students' home countries with the cultures shifting from their traditional beliefs in response to modern trends while the traditions do not disappear completely. My participants shared these observations in regard to their home countries. All but one international student reported the existence of a hybrid pattern that involves elements of de-traditionalization in decision-making toward a marital partner. A hybrid pattern can be analyzed as a shift from the traditional practice of only parents selecting a marital partner for their adult children to a mutual decision of both parties, while the tradition of the parental input in marriage still exists. However, there are still some traditional views that international students retain as part of their transnational experience. The existence of gender-based cultural pressures, such as financial stability as the main factor for men's marriageability, and hypergamy, age-related pressures to enter marriage, and the expectation to have children for women signal the presence of traditional views on marriage. The fact that international students did not surrender their gendered views of traditional marriage that they obtained back in their home countries are best understood via transnational theory which states that newcomers tend to bring cultural beliefs and values attributed to their gender to the host country (Koyama, 2015; Levitt, 2011).

However, three women had experienced de-traditionalization of their socio-cultural beliefs about pressures to marry sooner as they moved to the United States. Once they had lived and studied in the United States, they reported to no longer believe that they had to follow the cultural expectation to marry early, which provides evidence of them going through the shift from traditional beliefs to more modern trends in timing of marriage. Moving to a host country may contribute to the emergence of de-traditionalization of a newcomer's original cultural beliefs, while the tradition of marriage itself does not disappear. Simply being further away from their parents and more traditional ideologies in their home country may allow students to be more open to egalitarian beliefs about marriage and gender. Furthermore, living in the United States, where traditional notions of marrying early are more contested, may also lead to de-traditionalization among these women. Nevertheless, it remains questionable if those three women participants would retain their transformed aspirations toward timing of marriage upon returning to their home countries. It is not guaranteed that these women would not feel pressured to marry as soon as possible again given that originally, they reported a considerable amount of pressure from their families to marry sooner when they had lived in their home countries. Because of these remaining questions, further longitudinal research exploring the effects of place on international women students' evolving, culturally informed aspirations is necessary in order to make this claim.

The international students in this study reported gender-based expectations, primarily pressures for women to get married early due to fears of not being able to secure a marital partner and have children as they continue to age. While the majority of women participants retained the belief that they needed to prioritize marriage earlier in life, three

women relieved themselves from this expectation. Additionally, women in this study gravitated towards hypergamy, while men reported that they are expected to maintain financial stability in order to be an attractive, eligible partner. In this situation, both women and men retained these beliefs and associated pressures. As such, gender-based expectations seem to play a compelling role to my interviewees' narratives about the relationship between traditional expectations and marriage.

It was also gleaned that these cultural pressures often caused unhappiness or anxiety for a majority of participants who felt they did not meet one or more of those expectations, at least in full. This study did not focus on unhappiness stemming from international students' cultural expectations; however, this research provides evidence that cultural pressures are still felt by international students despite their distance from their home countries. Future research could examine these potential links between cultural expectations and unhappiness, anxiety, and even depression in international students' transnational experiences.

The goal of this study is not to generalize from the experiences of international students, but rather illustrate the application of transnational theory through the lens of gender to international students' aspirations toward marriage. However, researchers who intend to obtain more generalizable data could conduct quantitative research surveying international students across universities in the United States. As Yan & Berliner (2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2013) produced multiple studies on Chinese international students, scholars may select a specific country or a region for further research. Selecting international students from the same region rather than country may prove to be beneficial in preventing the disclosure of the identity of students studying at the same institution. In case scholars

consider doing their research on international students coming from a specific country, to protect confidentiality of the participants, they should select participants from a country that sends a lot of students to study in the United States, just like Chinese international students in studies conducted by Yan and Berliner (2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2013).

This research, as an exploratory study, can inspire future considerations of international students' experiences, aspirations, and beliefs about marriage and other socio-cultural phenomena. While this study has a potential to benefit various groups in the United States who are in close contact with international students, including but not limited to faculty, staff, and administrators of international centers tasked with helping students adapt to life in the United States, my research also has its drawbacks. A low sample size of 21 international students, few participants representing each region, and the fact that all students studied at the same university in a mid-size, midwestern city in the United States restricted the generalizability of my data.

However, the goal of this research was not to generalize from the narratives of my participants, but instead give voice to this sample of international students through the lenses of transnational and gender theories. Furthermore, contributing to the "limited" discourse on transnationalism through the lens of international students' experiences, this study partially answers a question that Gargano (2009) in his study addressed for the future research: "how…[international] student experiences [are] shaped through ongoing interactions between the traditions, worldviews, and values of contexts of origin and educational spaces abroad" (p.343). In conclusion, my study may serve as a framework beneficial in informing avenues of future research – qualitative or quantitative – that seeks

to address remaining questions about marriage-related aspirations of international students

and potentially other underrepresented populations in the United States.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW GUIDE

Attitudes towards dating:
1. Dating related experiences, beliefs, and opinions.
    a. *What is dating like in your country of origin? Tell me about your dating experiences in your home country.*
        - Currently dating.
        - Initiation of dating in your country of origin.
        - Presence of a significant other in the home country.
    b. *How did you feel about dating norms in your country when you lived there?*
        - Parents' permission, strictness or leniency and how those affected the participant.
        - Anything else?
    c. *Are you currently dating anyone?*
        - Partner's citizenship status: international student, U.S. resident or U.S. citizen.

    d. *What do you think about dating in the United States? What are you experiences of dating in the United States?*
        - How would you compare dating in your country to dating in the United States?
        - Your dating approach in your country vs. in the United States.
    e. *Have your perceptions and opinions regarding dating changed once you moved to the United States?*
        - Tell me how that (those) change(s) occurred or how have they stayed the same?
        - Anything else?
2. Importance of dating
    a. *How important is dating for you?*
        - What is it about dating that is important?
        - Dating casually vs. with the intention to find a life partner.
    b. *Does religion have an effect on importance of dating?*
        - What is the effect of religion on dating in general?
        - Anything else?

Attitudes towards marriage:
   3.   Marriage related experiences, beliefs, and opinions
      a. *Have you ever been married?*
          - Are you married now?
             - Spouse's citizenship status: international student, U.S. resident, or U.S. citizen. *(If applicable)*
             - Tell me about your marriage. *(If applicable)*
      b. *What did you think or how did you perceive marriage when you were in your home country?*
          - What are your experiences and how your experiences fit with norms and expectations?
          - If not married, what is expected?
          - Parental influence.
          - Parents' approval of partner.
          - Anything else?
      c. *What is your understanding of marriages in the United States? What are your experiences and attitudes toward marriage in the United States?*
      d. *What is your marriage like now? (If applicable)*
          - Changes?
          - How do you negotiate?
          - How do people adjust?
      e. *How would you compare marriage in your country to marriage in the United States?*
      f. *Has your perceptions and opinions regarding marriages changed once you moved to the United States?*
          - Tell me how that(those) change(s) occurred or how they remained the same.
          - Anything else?
   4. Importance of marriage
      a. *How important is marriage for you, and why?*
      b. *Do you hope to get married at some point in your life? (If applicable)*
          - Would you consider marrying a person from another country, the United States or just your home country?
      c. *Do people in your home country tend to prefer cohabitation to marriage?*
          - Tell me about those norms or expectations.
          - Is cohabitation before marriage acceptable or is it stigmatized or even a taboo?

      d. *Does religion have an effect on importance of marriage?*
          - What is the effect of religion on marriage in general?
          - Anything else?

Transition from dating to marriage:
   5. Experiences and/or perceptions towards such a transition.
      a. *How do relationships proceed from dating to engagement to marriage?*
          - In your home country?

- What about in the United States?
- What is your understanding of how that works?
    b. *Tell me about your experiences or those of your friends.*
        - Similar interests/ Being in love / Educational attainment/Financial stability/Religion similarity/Certain class?
        - Anything else?

Attitudes towards premarital sex
6. Premarital sex
    a. *How do people perceive premarital sex in your country of origin?*
        - What are the norms or expectations? What do people actually do, as far as you know?
    b. *Do people openly talk about premarital sex in your home country?*
        - How do people talk about premarital sex in your religion?
        - Does religion affect your personal perspectives of premarital sex? In what ways?

    c. *Have your feelings about premarital sex changed once you moved to the US?*
        - Tell me more about that. Please describe your experiences.
        - Anything else?

7. "Hook-up" culture, that supports the practice of short-term, non-committal sexual encounters.
    a. *What is your attitude towards "hook-up" culture?*
    b. *Has your attitude towards "hook-up" culture changed since you came to the US?*
        - Please describe your experiences.
        - Anything else?

8. Is there anything else that we have not covered, but you think is important to discuss? If so, please share.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Assel Kuzembayeva

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EDUCATION

University of Louisville, Department of Sociology, Louisville, KY
    Master of Arts, Sociology, GPA 4.00
    2017 – Present; projected graduation date May 2019

Pennsylvania State University, Department of Statistics, University Park, PA
    Bachelor of Science, Statistics, GPA 3.35
        Minor in Sociology
    Degree earned May 2015

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Louisville, Department of Arts and Sciences, Louisville, KY

Instructor (Fall 2018):
- GEN 100: SSC (Student Success Center) Orientation

Graduate Teaching Assistant (Fall 2017):
- GEN 101: A&S (Arts and Sciences) Orientation
- GEN 201: Career Decision Making

PAPERS PRESENTED OR ACCEPTED AT CONFERENCE

Marriage-related Aspirations of International Students in the United States
    Theme of the conference: The North Central Sociological Association – Annual
    Meeting, Cincinnati, OH (March 29 – March 30, 2019) – session: *Cross Cultural*
    Perspectives on Marriage, Sexuality, and Gender. Paper was accepted.

International Students' Perspectives Toward Dating and Marriage
    Theme of the conference: The Graduate Student Regional Research Conference –
    Annual Meeting, Louisville, KY (February 27 – February 28, 2019) – session: *Oral*
    Talk Session III. Paper was accepted and presented.

Gender Trends in Attending Public Skating Sessions
    Theme of the conference: The Mid-South Sociological Association Annual
    Conference, Chattanooga, TN (October 18 – 21, 2017) – session: *Gender and*
    Work. Paper was accepted and presented.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND HONORS

University of Louisville, Department of Arts and Sciences, Louisville, KY
Graduate Teaching Assistant (Fall 2017 – May 2019) Student Success Center, College of Arts and Sciences.

Pennsylvania State University, Department of Statistics, University Park, PA
Undergraduate Fellow (August 2011 – May 2015) Recipient of the Kazakhstani Presidential Fellowship "Bolashak."

Boston University, Center for English Language & Orientation Programs, Boston, MA
Non-degree Fellow (September 2010 – May 2011) Recipient of the Kazakhstani Presidential Fellowship "Bolashak."

SERVICE AND LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

Association of Young Leaders of Kazakhstan – Almaty, Kazakhstan
Member (Spring 2009 – Present)

Sociology Graduate Student Association – University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
Representative of Graduate Network in Arts and Sciences (Fall 2017 – Spring 2018)

Graduate Network in Arts and Sciences – University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
Representative of Sociology Graduate Student Association (Fall 2017 – Spring 2018)

Meals on Wheels – State College, PA
Volunteer, Intern (Summer 2015 – Spring 2016)

Meals on Wheels – State College, PA
Volunteer (Summer 2014)

Center for Youth – Karaganda, Kazakhstan
Volunteer, Coordinator (Summer 2013)

THON (the largest student run philanthropy in the world) – Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Primary Chair (Fall 2012 – Spring 2013)

Kazakhstani Students Association – Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
THON Representative (Fall 2012 – Spring 2013)

Children Development Center – Astana (Nur-Sultan), Kazakhstan
Volunteer, Assistant to Social Workers (Summer 2012)

THON – Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Volunteer (Fall 2011 – Spring 2012)