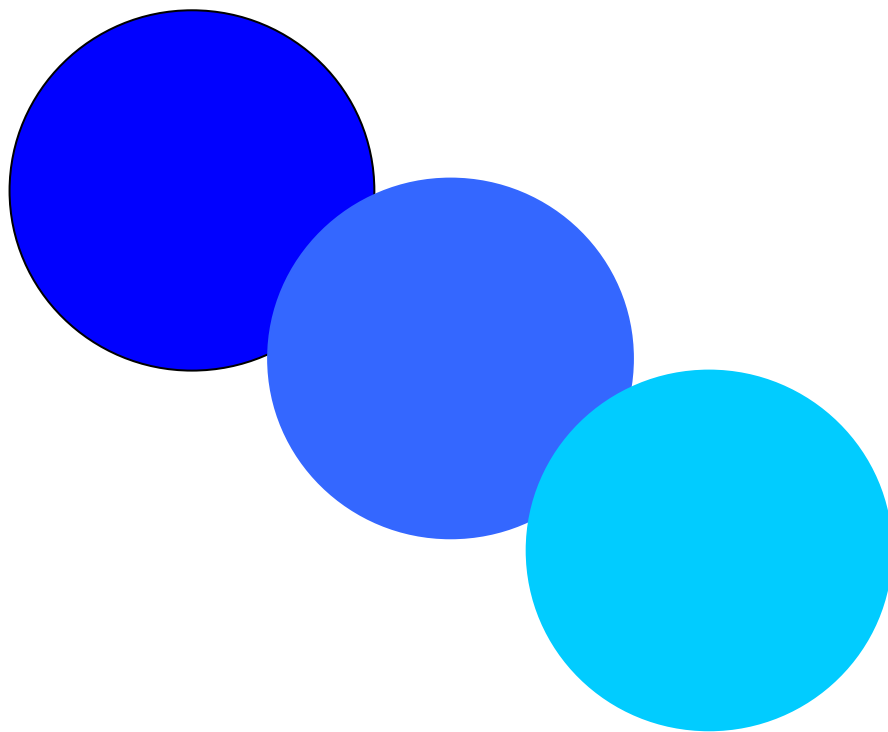# UNDERSTANDING SINGLE BAHÁ'ÍS

A LOOK AT THE CURRENT STATE OF NORTH AMERICAN SINGLE BAHÁ'ÍS BASED ON A LARGE ONLINE SURVEY

[PREPARED BY
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UNDERSTANDING SINGLE BAHÁ'ÍS

DURING THE SUMMER OF 2007, 709 BAHÁ'ÍS FILLED OUT AN ONLINE SURVEY ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING SINGLE IN THE NORTH AMERICAN BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY. THIS DOCUMENT SUMMARIZES THE MOST IMPORTANT FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY.

As the eminent sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow wrote in a recent book, "[r]eligious involvement is influenced more by whether people are married, when they get married, whether they have children, and how many children they have than almost anything else.[1]" This bears repeating. When trying to understand why people stay in or leave their religious communities and how active and committed they are, the nature of marriage and parenthood are arguably the most important factors.

It is not just for individuals, however, that this issue matters. Marriage is central to the vitality and survival of religious communities. Strong families, we are told by 'Abdu'l-Baha, are the building blocks of the entire world civilization[2]. Strong families create strong homes which are centres for all manner of Bahá'í activities, sources of encouragement and social support for the community, and shining points of attraction for the broader community.

Improving the way our communities think about and facilitate marriage – both before and after the wedding – promises to strengthen our human resources, enhance unity and love in the community, and unleash untold resources for the revitalization of all aspects of our community.

Indeed, it is hard to think about the core activities without recognizing the implicit understanding of "family" inherent in them: devotionals in homes, training and educating children and junior youth, and educating ourselves in service together with others. Without a foundation of family, and without succeeding generations who are brought up in the Bahá'í Faith, this vision cannot be achieved

It is also not only for the strength and vitality of the Bahá'í community itself that we need to understand this issue. The problems of helping young people find appropriate partners for marriage and create strong families are faced not just by other religious communities, but by society as a whole. In previous generations, paths to marriage were clear and supported by numerous community and religious structures. Today we see a new, undefined period of the life course: young adulthood. As the average age of marriage increases, a large void becomes evident as people struggle to find new ways to meet potential spouses. The advent of methods as varied as internet dating and speed dating (both of which were pioneered by religious communities) can be seen as attempts to fill this void.

There is, in summary, a society wide hunger for new, principled, models of finding marriage partners. This report is intended to be part of a conversation about how the Baha'i community can begin to develop, and offer to the world, such models.

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[1] "After the Baby-Boomers: How Twenty and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion." 2007, Princeton University Press

[2] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 157

UNDERSTANDING THE SINGLE BAHÁ'Í

A growing body of sociological research has argued that traditional paths to finding a spouse are no longer as effective as they once were. In this changing world, how are Bahá'ís experiencing "singleness," how are they finding spouses, and how does this affect their religious experience?

In seeking to answer these questions we look at several important variables. These include:

- Beliefs about what qualities make a good spouse
- Expectations for marriage
- Methods of preparation
- Experience of being single in the Bahá'í community
- Role of family and friends in finding a spouse
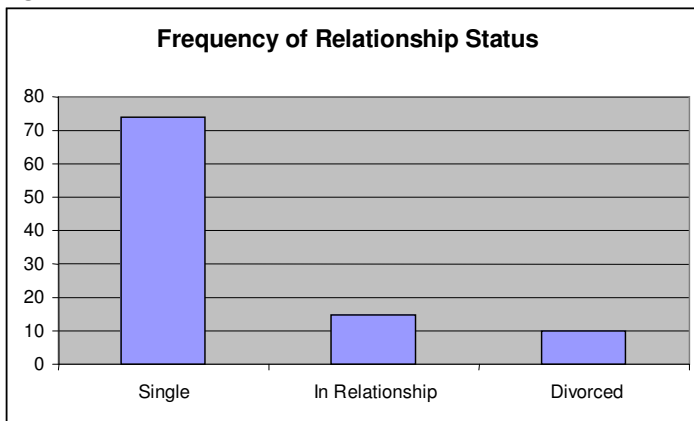
Purpose of the Report:

This report is intended to inform individuals and institutions about the findings and recommendations from a major research project in the North American Bahá'í community in the hopes that the recommendations can be considered for action, and that the research might stimulate further work on this important topic.

Between June 14 and July 16 2007, 709 individuals from across North America completed an online survey about the experience of being single in the Baha'i community. While the majority was currently single, a substantial number of participants were married or in serious relationships. A large number were also divorced. Beginning on June 14th a link to the online survey was sent via email to contacts of the first author. The recipients of this email were asked to fill out the survey and to forward the link to their contacts. Through this snowballing method, as well as postings on several prominent Bahá'í listservs, the 709 participants found out about, and completed, the survey. As with all snowball samples, the question of how representative the participants are of the larger population of North American Bahá'ís is an important one for this study. The results presented here only include those who are not currently married and were between the ages of 20 and 44, a total of 443 respondents.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the vast majority of non-married respondents are currently not in a relationship. We have no way of knowing how representative this is of the larger Baha'i community, though there is reason to think that those not in relationships would be more likely to fill out the survey. We do think, however, that the lack of Baha'is in relationships is part of the problem we hope to address here.
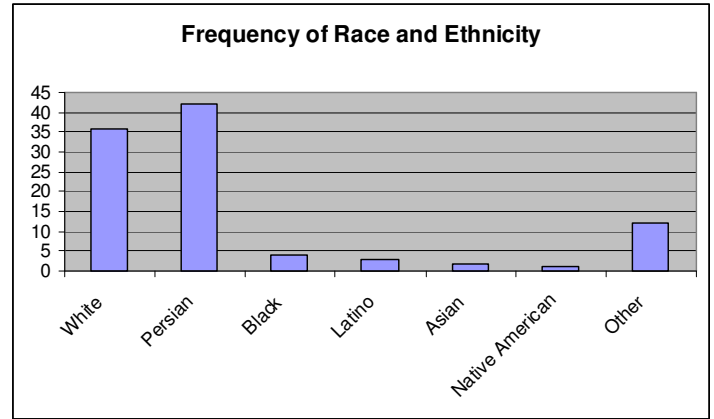
Figure 1.

In Figure 2. we can see the race and ethnicity of respondents. Comparing these numbers to the 2006 statistical report by the National Teaching Committee we find that our sample over-represents Persians and under-represents African-Americans. The NTC's report the gender makeup of the American Baha'i community as 51% women and 49% men, the same as the general population. Our sample is quite different than this. Women made up 62% of respondents while men made up 38%. It is worth noting that most studies of religious
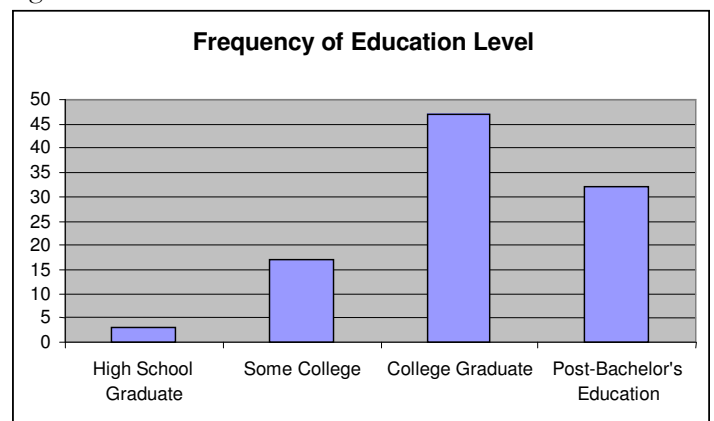
participation find women both consider themselves religious and are active in religious communities at significantly higher rates than men. Our numbers, then, may be reflective of gender participation.

Figure 2.

The education level of respondents can be seen in Figure 3. We are unsure how representative these numbers are of the overall Baha'i community, but they certainly are very different from the American population. In the Figure 3 we see that 79% of respondents have a college degree or higher. If we look only at those over 25, that number jumps to 86%. For Americans overall that number is close to 30%. The enormous difference here likely has several causes. The American Baha'i community is disproportionately middle-class and educated. Moreover, an online survey is much more likely to be completed by someone with a college background.

Figure 3.

In summary, our respondents differ in some important ways from the larger Baha'i community, especially in ethnic makeup and gender. Overall we do not think these differences take much away from our findings. In the analysis we controlled for issues of race and gender. In this report, we point out those places where these are important differences.
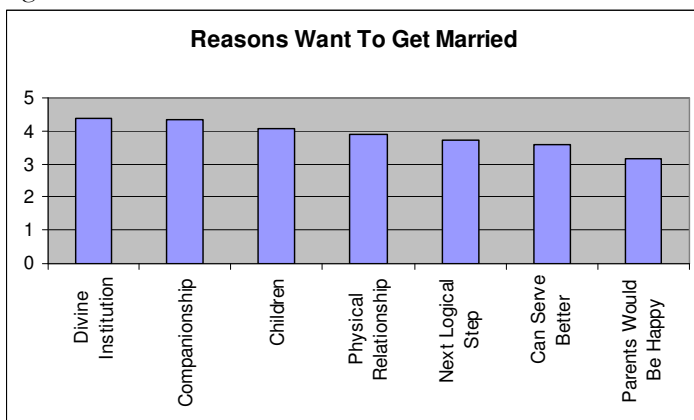
This study demonstrated a high level of interest in marriage among a diverse body of participants. The large number of respondents over a short time period, as well as the positive response to this and other marriage-related sessions at the Association for Baha'i Studies conference and other events, indicates the need for discussion and action.

The desire of respondents to marry is strong. When asked if they wanted to get married, 88% of the single respondents said 'yes' with another 11% saying 'maybe.' Responses to the question "why do you want to get married?" paint a picture of marriage as a valued and sacred institution. In Figure 4 we can see that the most common reason for wanting to get married was that it is a Divine Institution. Many respondents offered comments such as this: "Most important of all, it is a Law from God which should be obeyed since this union is one of the things that stays with you throughout all the worlds of God" (single woman).

Marriage is also seen as a vehicle for personal and spiritual growth: "Marriage, for most of us is an important stage of our development as people. It is the one time in our lives where we must open ourselves to another person" (married man). Another describes the situation from the other side: "I have a sense that my own personal growth is stunted; that I have not been challenged in my own growth by remaining single" (single woman). Intimacy and companionship are also described as important: "Marriage is a vehicle to a level of intimacy and mutual understanding not available to me through other avenues" (divorced woman).
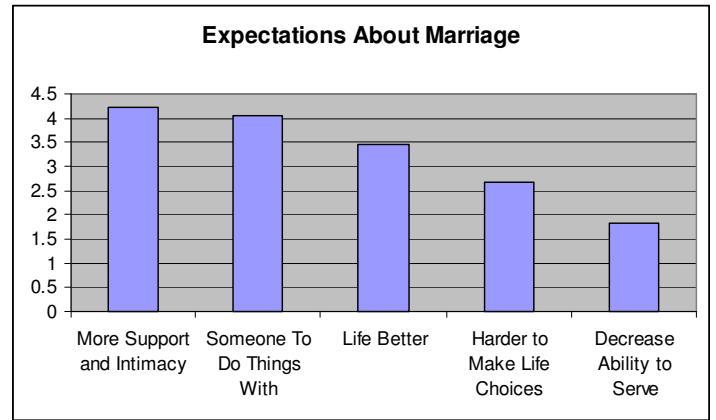
Figure 4.

In keeping with its importance to them, respondents had strong positive expectations about marriage (Figure 5). As can be seen in the table, singles endorsed a view of marriage in which the benefits of partnership greatly outweigh any drawbacks.
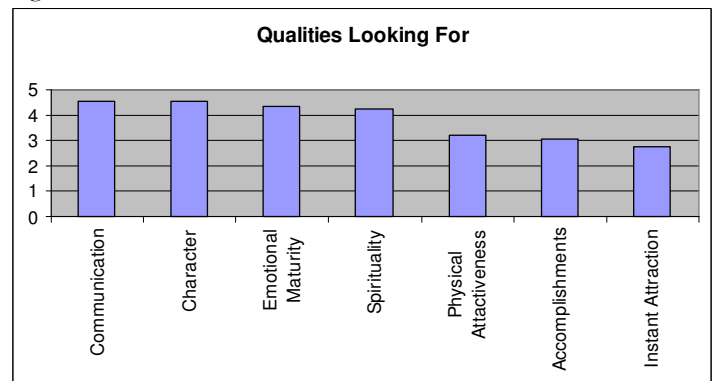
Figure 5.

This interest in marriage is tempered, however, both by frustrations as well as fears of bad relationships: "It is also scary because it is 'forever' and you see so many marriages breaking up" (single man). Other respondents emphasized the gap between their dream and the reality they anticipate: "I doubt whether I will ever marry because the Bahá'í vision of marriage and the reality seem very removed from each other" (single woman).

Singles identified a number of qualities as very important for future spouses (Figure 6). Also highly endorsed were a sense of humor, intelligence, similar goals, and parenting skills. While 48% say they would marry someone of another religion, 90% would not marry someone without a belief in God or spirituality. Education, involvement in Bahá'í activities, and age were not identified as particularly significant criteria for selection. Responses were very similar for both men and women. However, attraction may operate differently in real life, leading people to choose partners based on other characteristics.
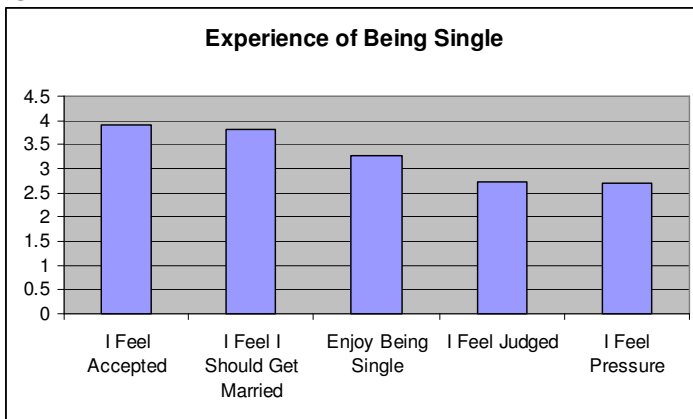
Figure 6.

EXPERIENCE OF BEING SINGLE

Many of the survey questions asked respondents about their experience of being single in the Bahá'í community. As can be seen in Figure 7, most single Bahá'ís reported a feeling of acceptance by their community. The overall responses to whether they enjoy being single or feel pressure to be married are both close to neutral, but this masks major gender, ethnic and age differences.

Figure 7.

Experience of Being Single

Perhaps not surprisingly, the older the respondent the more likely they were to say they felt pressure to get married. Increased levels of education were also associated with a feeling of pressure, though they were also correlated with enjoying being single and thinking singleness provided an opportunity for growth. There were also substantial differences between Persian and white respondents with Persians more likely to say they felt pressure and less likely to say they enjoyed being single compared to whites.

In the qualitative responses, we see a greater degree of frustration expressed about single life than in the quantitative responses. While some respondents were clear on the advantages of singleness – "I have more 'freedom' to do things and go places that I would like to go since I have no other person's wishes to consider, whereas they do" (single man) – others saw singleness as a negative.
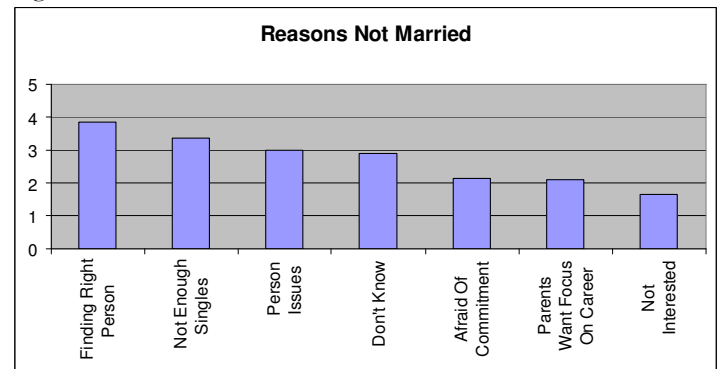
Singleness may be a time of lack of focus: "I don't really have a base for my life - I move around a lot and will randomly drop everything to go on a service trip or pursue new opportunities" (woman in a serious relationship). For others, singleness feels abnormal: "[Marriage] would mean that I am accepted. In many ways it would make me feel normal" (single man). Still others feel judged, disrespected or misunderstood by the community and married people: "I also think that if I were married, people would respect my time/space boundaries

more readily" (single woman). Another said, "Bahá'í married friends are oblivious to the challenges of being a single Bahá'í or a single adult. They simply avoid the issues that are in my face and either speak glowingly of their bliss or whine about the minor hassles of living with another person" (divorced woman). One final response indicates the depths of alienation felt by some singles: "I feel that being married and having children has a kind of prestige value in the Bahá'í community. You are even considered it seems more worthy if you are married and especially if you have children" (single woman). Taken together, these and many other comments indicate a need to look again at the role and treatment of singles in our communities.

As can be seen, then, in general Bahá'ís reported a feeling of community acceptance and ambivalence about whether they enjoyed being single. While pressure to get married was not universally felt across respondents, it was high among some sub-groups.

In Figure 8. we see some of the responses to a question about why singles thought they were not married (items were rated 1 to 5). The most commonly endorsed statements had to do with inability to meet potential spouses. A middle set of responses dealt with the need to overcome personal issues or fear of commitment. The least endorsed items had to do with lack of interest or parental pressure to start a career before marriage.

Figure 8.

Reasons Not Married
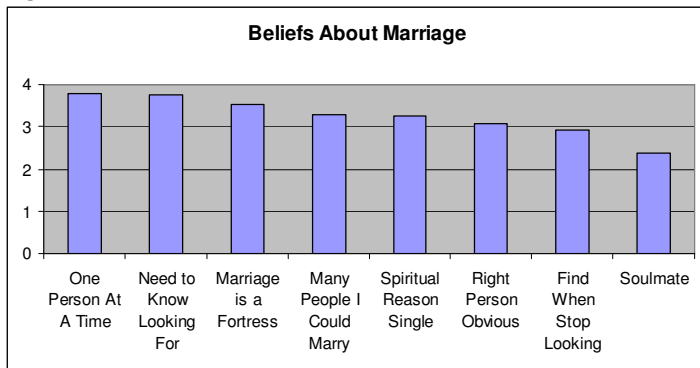
When these results are combined with the high level of interest in marriage we reported in the previous section, we see an overall picture of single Bahá'ís who want to get married, who believe in it as a divine institution, yet feel frustrated by two things: an inability to meet potential spouses, and a lack of guidance and support from the larger community. We turn to these two issues next.
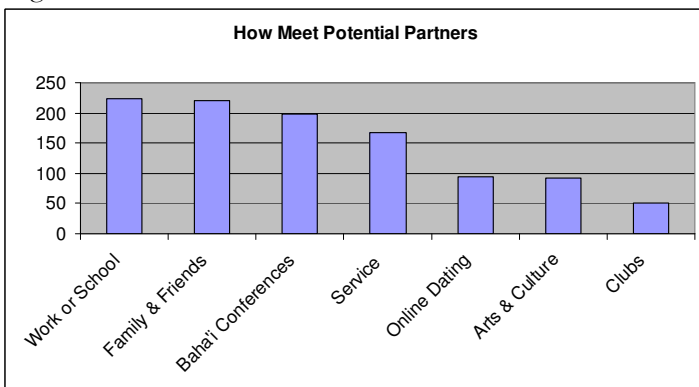
Respondents had a range of views on the processes by which they thought they would meet and get to know potential spouses (Figure 9). In general, Baha'i singles endorsed a view of finding a spouse that entails self-knowledge and monogamous relationships. While prayer and faith clearly play a role, the overall picture was of a more practical rather than mystical approach. Very few singles responded that they thought they have a soul-mate who God will guide them to.

Figure 9.

Beliefs About Marriage

One Person At A Time · Need to Know Looking For · Marriage is a Fortress · Many People I Could Marry · Spiritual Reason Single · Right Person Obvious · Find When Stop Looking · Soulmate

Of the 366 singles who answered this question, 73% say they make an effort to meet potential partners. Respondents participate in a wide range of activities intended to help them find a spouse (Figure 10). It is worth pointing out that while the most popular activities were traditional pathways, over 25% of singles reported having tried internet dating.
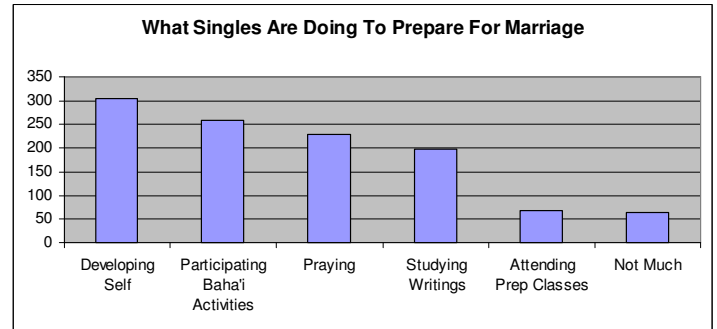
Figure 10.

How Meet Potential Partners

Work or School · Family & Friends · Baha'i Conferences · Service · Online Dating · Arts & Culture · Clubs

The respondents also reported a wide range of ways in which they are preparing themselves for marriage (Figure 11). The most highly endorsed items had to do with personal spiritual and emotional growth. Singles were much less likely to say they were engaged in preparation specifically focused on building relationship skills, such as attended marriage
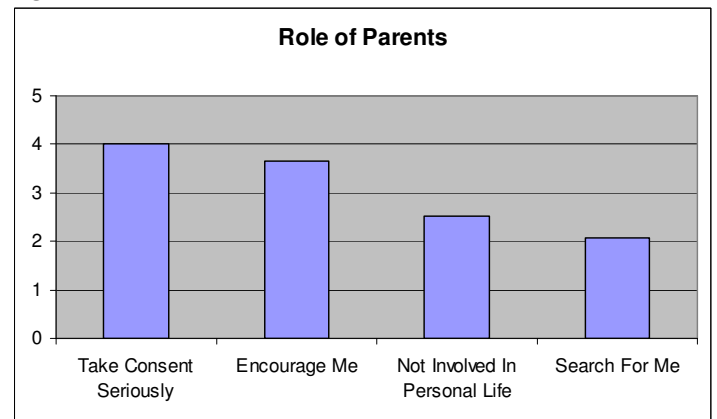
workshops or reading books on relationships. This may reflect less a lack of interest than a dearth of programming in the Baha'i community aimed at developing relationship skills.

Figure 11.

What Singles Are Doing To Prepare For Marriage

Developing Self · Participating Baha'i Activities · Praying · Studying Writings · Attending Prep Classes · Not Much

Parents are important in this process, acting sometimes as an obstacle but more often as a model or source of encouragement (Figure 12). Most participants felt that their parents understood and took seriously their responsibilities for consent, and believed that they would make wise, informed choices about consent. There were some indications of a tendency among Persians for greater parental involvement and of a culture of parental consent for those raised as Bahá'ís.

Figure 12.

Role of Parents

Take Consent Seriously · Encourage Me · Not Involved In Personal Life · Search For Me

In terms of length of courtship, a majority felt that not a lot of time was needed: 32% said they would need to know someone less than 3 months and 32% said 3 months to less than one year. This, plus 2% who said that time is irrelevant, gives us a strong 66% (2/3) who expect the courtship process to last for less than a year from introduction to marriage. However, 28% felt they would need 2 or more years.

LACK OF GUIDANCE AND MODELS

Participants identified the problem of having no pattern of relationship formation to follow, no guidance on what it means to investigate someone's character, and an unwillingness, resulting from the harsh scrutiny of the community, to expose their questions and budding relationships in this environment. The results are a confusing mixture of pressure without guidance, an obsession with the end goal without any attention to process, and a lack of space for honest dialogue and learning.

While some respondents did not want community or institutional involvement in their personal lives, more offered recommendations for ways that good marriages could be facilitated. These included increasing opportunities for singles to meet, more community understanding and non-invasive support of male-female relationships, and extensive marriage preparation activities covering character investigation, communication skills and sexuality. Respondents felt that these should begin working with children and continue for all stages of married couples.

In this section we refer to a different source of data. In the summer of 2005 the second author conducted a separate online survey of young adults as part of a project presented at the Association for Bahá'í Studies conference. This study did not focus specifically on singles, but the data presented here come from only the 264 non-married respondents. Like the survey of singles, this survey was unrepresentative in important ways, especially in its significant over-sampling of 'active' young adults. That these numbers represent the most active core of young adults should be remembered as it likely means underestimations in important respects.

This second survey covered many aspects of young adult perceptions of their communities, but several are especially pertinent for this discussion. First, the vast majority of respondents reported problems with creating romantic relationships as well as obeying the law of chastity. When presented with the statement 'I have struggled with forming healthy romantic relationships' 69% agreed or strongly agreed. When presented with the statement 'I have struggled with chastity' 68% agreed or strongly agreed.

These young adults did not, however, find their communities to be places where they could find support for these struggles. Fifty-five percent of respondents said they wished their communities were better at providing 'guidance and direction.' Fifty-seven percent wished their community was better at being a place for 'spiritual growth and enrichment.' Fifty-two

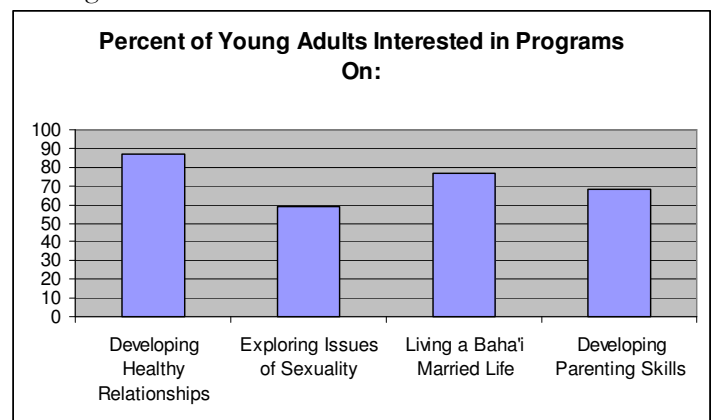percent want their community to be better at providing acceptance and support.

Perhaps even more problematically, given our previous discussion of the need for new models to fill the void left by major cultural and demographic changes, only 27% of young adults thought their community emphasized providing answers to moral questions and only 30% thought their community emphasizes helping its members find purpose and meaning in their lives.

The picture we have, from both surveys, is of single Baha'is reporting a large series of struggles and challenges and a desire for greater assistance and guidance from the larger Baha'i community.

In the second survey young adults were given an extensive list of possible programs and asked which they would be interested in if they were offered by their community (Figure 13). These programs included such varied topics as work, social justice, spirituality and teaching. By far the programs that respondents were most likely say they were interested in were those that related to marriage and family.

As can be seen in the table below, single young adults overwhelmingly reported interest in all the programs associated with marriage and family, with nearly 90% expressing a desire for community sponsored programming on developing healthy relationships.

Figure 13.

Percent of Young Adults Interested in Programs On:

5

That the health and future of their community is intimately tied up with the ability of their young to start families is something recognized by most religious and ethnic communities. The following recommendations, rooted in the results of this survey, are ways to more fully integrate this understanding into the North American Bahá'í community. Collectively, these recommendations can be seen as a call for a fundamental reframing of how we as Bahá'ís think about the process by which singles find marriage partners. More specifically, we argue for a shift in understanding of this issue to a community, rather than individual, issue. Finding marriage partners and starting families as not just in the interest of individuals, but part of the building of vibrant communities.

Educating and Changing Beliefs

1. Decrease Stigma: One of the major barriers for single Bahá'ís is the stigma attached to looking for a partner. This is at least partly rooted in a Bahá'í culture that highly values service and an outward orientation. An unintended result can be a feeling that looking for a marriage partner is selfish or reduces participation in community activities. Institutions can play an important role in de-stigmatizing the search for marriage partners by clearly articulating its importance to the health of the community. The stigma around looking for a marriage partner will shrink when the wider Bahá'í community embraces, and articulates, an understanding that marriage helps the entire community as well as individuals.

2. Study Gender Equality: At the heart of forming healthy relationships is a reconceptualization of historic patterns of gender relations. Study and practice related to male-female communication and interaction will not only help facilitate healthy relationships, it will assist the entire community to become more united and draw on its resources more fully.

3. Encourage a Culture of Learning: The world-wide Bahá'í community is currently engaged in developing a culture of learning and experimentation. Currently Bahá'ís lack a coherent model for finding marriage partners. Institutions can encourage principle-based experimentation in much the same way other religious communities do. Related to the recommendation of decreasing stigma, experimentation and developing Bahá'í

inspired models will likely be more successful if single Bahá'ís know that it is part of a larger process of community building.

4. Engage Single Bahá'ís: Those communities that do offer programs frequently do so without consulting single Bahá'ís as to their specific needs. That is, while some communities have developed marriage committees or created programs for singles, it has largely been done by married community members with little input from single Bahá'ís themselves. We suggest that such an 'expert' model will not be as successful as a consultative one in which all Bahá'ís, single and married, are collectively engaged in a community building endeavor.

5. Better Understand the Challenges of Young-Adulthood: Many survey respondents reported feeling as though their communities equated singleness with energy and time for service rather than offering guidance and support for the specific challenges of modern young adulthood. While single Bahá'ís often do have more time to offer service, respondents also expressed a strong desire for more support in the area of relationships.

Facilitating Courtship

6. Facilitate more open, exploratory and non-judgmental discourse in the communities about relationships, marriage, sex and sexuality. Address these issues directly rather than avoiding them.

7. Encourage casual, social get-togethers among young people and single people. Be supportive of non-community-centered or service-centered activities that will allow singles to get to know each other in lower pressure environments.

8. Implement activities throughout the community and in collaboration with other communities to facilitate getting to know potential partners.

9. Add activities to regular community events to allow all members to get to know each other.

10. Coordinate activities with like-minded community organizations or other religious groups to allow young people to meet and get to know each other across religious boundaries.

11. Ask single people to serve together in varied activities, together with married individuals.