

# Patterns of action in early marriage from a religious and systems theory perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This research aims to understand the social action dynamics of individuals involved in early marriage, using Max Weber's theory of social action, with a particular focus on systems theory and religion. The type of research used is a literature review. The literature reviewed in this study includes research reports, publications in books and journals on early marriage, as well as studies on systems theory and religion. Early marriage is a form of social action that generally arises from non-rational motives. The only rational justification is value-oriented rationality, which is driven by religious values, with the hope that marriage will protect the couple from immoral acts, such as adultery. From the perspective of Talcott Parsons' systems theory, early marriage can be viewed as a social phenomenon with ontological aspects. In the context of Niklas Luhmann's General Systems Theory, two families who plan to marry off their children agree to establish boundaries and foundations that govern their respective family members' marriage plans. These agreements are closed and binding only to the two families involved, not to the broader environment. The environment acts solely as a witness to the agreements between the two parties. When it becomes known that their children must obtain permission from the Religious Court due to being underage, they involve other elements of society to ensure that the marriage can take place. For prospective couples intending to marry at a young age due to religious reasons, it is crucial that they possess the necessary physical and psychological maturity to realize the true goals of marriage.

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## 1. Introduction

Early marriage, or underage marriage, refers to marriages involving adolescents under the age of 20 who are generally unprepared for the responsibilities of marriage. Hurlock explains that adolescents



who marry at a young age tend to face greater difficulties in adjusting to their new roles and often feel envious of their peers and surroundings. This indicates that teenage couples who marry young are likely to experience emotional pressure in their relationships (Sari & Nurwidawati, 2013). Kartono argues that one of the reasons adolescents choose to marry is the desire to live and be happy with their partners (Sari & Nurwidawati, 2013). According to BKKBN (2011), factors influencing early marriage among teenage girls include social, economic, cultural factors, and the place of residence. Teenage marriages often occur due to emotional reasoning; they believe they are in love and ready to marry. Another factor leading to early marriage is arranged marriages by parents, which commonly happen due to school dropouts or economic difficulties. In reality, early marriage brings both positive and negative impacts, affecting the personal and social lives of those involved.

In Indonesia, the legal minimum age for marriage is governed by Law No. 16 of 2019, which amends Law No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage. Article 7 states, "Marriage is only allowed if the man and woman have reached the age of 19 (nineteen)." At this age, individuals are considered mature enough to bear the responsibilities of being a husband or wife. However, many early marriages still occur where the individuals are not mature according to the law. The mental unpreparedness of early marriage participants has contributed to the increasing divorce rate in recent years.

Early marriage is not only about its negative aspects or the unhappiness that may come with it, but there are also some positive elements to consider. At a young age, individuals are generally more energetic, allowing them to manage work, household chores, and child-rearing with enthusiasm. Young women's health is often at its best, reducing risks associated with childbirth. Moreover, the interval between having children can be more flexible since age is not as much of a limiting factor. At a young age, couples tend to have more people around them—friends are still fresh in their memories, parents are not yet elderly, and they may even have healthy grandparents. Having a larger support network means more people can act as advisors in the marriage. Additionally, marrying young teaches important life lessons; young couples learn first-hand how to survive and take responsibility for creating a decent life for themselves and their partners.

Several studies have been conducted on teenage marriage. One such study by Milda Itares employed a qualitative descriptive method, aiming to first understand the factors that cause early marriage in Pontianak Barat District and secondly to examine the impact of early marriage on the husband-wife relationship. The study found six factors contributing to early marriage, including education, economic, psychological, environmental, and parental influences (Itares, 2015).

Another study, conducted by Elisabet, also used a qualitative descriptive method. It aimed to describe the factors causing early marriage and its impact on teenagers in Benuang Village, Toho District, Mempawah Regency. The results indicated that parental and personal desires significantly influenced the occurrence of early marriage, as the parents approved the child's desire to marry young. Teenagers should better understand the causes of early marriage and pay closer attention to the potential impacts (Elisabet, 2016).

This research is a literature-based study aimed at understanding the social actions of early marriage participants through Max Weber's social action theory, specifically focusing on systems theories and religion.

## 2. Method

The research method used in this study is a literature review. The literature review method involves a series of activities related to the process of collecting data from library sources, reading and taking notes, and managing research materials (Zed, 2008). The literature analyzed in this study includes research reports published in books, journals, or studies on early marriage, as well as discussions on systems theory.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1. Contributions of Systems Theory to Sociology

According to Buckley and Ball, sociology can benefit from systems theory in several ways: First, Since systems theory is derived from exact sciences, it is expected to unify social sciences with natural sciences; Second, Systems theory can be applied to social aspects ranging from the largest to the smallest scale, from subjective to objective; Third, Systems theory focuses on the diversity of

relationships between various aspects of the social world; Fourth, The systems approach tends to view things from a process perspective; and Fifth, Systems theory is inherently integrative (Ritzer, 2018).

### 3.2. Social Action and Social Structure from Max Weber's Perspective

For Weber, social action must be understood in relation to the subjective meanings it contains, with rationality being the key to analyzing the subjective types of meanings and providing the basis for comparing different types of social action. According to Weber, social actions can be categorized into two types: rational and non-rational actions.

Rational actions are further divided into two types:

- Instrumental rationality: actions based on conscious consideration and choice of goals and the means to achieve them.
- Value-oriented rationality: actions where individual values are seen as absolute and become the ultimate goal. Religious actions fall into this category.

Non-rational actions are also divided into two types:

- Traditional actions: these are based solely on customs, which tend to fade as instrumental rationality increases.
- Affective actions: these are dominated by feelings or emotions, lacking logical, ideological, or other rational considerations (Johnson, 1994).

### 3.3. Talcott Parsons' Systems Theory

Society is viewed as a system in which all social structures (and their individual elements) are "integrated" into one, each having different but interconnected "functions." This creates "consensus" and "social order," with all elements "adapting" to both internal and external changes within society.

Functions are defined as activities directed toward meeting the needs or requirements of the system (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004). Based on this definition, Parsons believed that four essential requirements must be met for a society to function. These four requirements are known as AGIL, an acronym for Adaptation (A), Goal Attainment (G), Integration (I), and Latency (L). For a society to survive, it must carry out these functions, as illustrated in Figure 1.



Fig. 1. Interrelationship between AGIL Components in Parsons Theory

- Adaptation: To survive, a society must be able to adjust itself to the environment and modify the environment to suit its needs.
- Goal Attainment: A system must be able to define its goals and strive to achieve them.
- Integration: Society must regulate the relationships among its components to function optimally.
- Latency: Every society must maintain, enhance, and renew both the motivation of individuals and the cultural patterns that create and sustain those motivations.

### 3.4. Action System According Talcott Parsons

Systems theory assumes the existence of a unity between interrelated parts. This unity typically has a specific purpose. In other words, these parts form a whole (system) to achieve a particular goal or objective (Wardana, 2014). Parsons' theory of action comprises four systems: the cultural system, the social system, the personality system, and the organism system.

- **Cultural System:** In this system, the most basic unit of analysis is "meaning" or the "symbolic system," such as religious beliefs, language, and values. At this level, Parsons focuses on shared values. The cultural system has the function of latency, meaning it maintains existing patterns or structures by applying values and norms in society.
- **Social System:** The social system refers to the interaction between two or more individuals in a given environment. However, these interactions are not limited to individuals but also include groups, institutions, societies, and international organizations. One example of a social system is a university, which has structures and interconnected components. The social system is always directed towards equilibrium (balance). It has the function of integration, which means it regulates and controls the components that form society.
- **Personality System:** The most basic unit of this system is the individual, who acts as the actor or agent. The focus of analysis in this system is on needs, motives, and attitudes, such as the motivation to seek satisfaction or benefit. The personality system has the function of goal attainment, which involves mobilizing all resources to achieve the desired goals.
- **Organism System or Biological Aspect of Humans:** The most basic unit of this system is the human being in a biological sense, i.e., the physical aspect of humans. This includes the physical environment in which humans live. The behavioral system has the function of adaptation, which involves adjusting to the environment.

As seen in the diagram above, an individual with a goal is referred to as an actor. No individual acts without a specific objective. The goal represents the entirety of a concrete future state that is desired, as far as it is relevant to the framework of action. It can be said that the actor is engaged in the pursuit, realization, or achievement of that goal. Hence, it is a process over time. Therefore, to facilitate this, the actor requires a set of tools, which can emerge either sequentially or simultaneously.

Analytically, the term "means" refers to all elements and aspects of things that can, as much as possible, be controlled by the actor in pursuing their actions. However, it should be remembered that the actor is not a purely active agent. There are norms, values, ideas, and situational conditions that can influence the actor, the set of tools, and the goals themselves.

Parsons provides the example of a student intending to write a paper. Although at first, they might not be able to imagine the details of the paper, they have an overall, general picture of its framework. This is called the goal. The "means" refers to the pencil, paper, and books. Meanwhile, situational conditions that cannot be controlled include the availability of books (Beilharz, 2005).

### 3.5. Niklas Luhmann's General System Theory

Niklas Luhmann, a prominent sociologist, dedicated over two decades to developing systems theory, becoming a key figure in the field. His work built on and extended elements of Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism by incorporating ideas from cognitive biology, cybernetics, and phenomenology. Luhmann distinguished himself from Parsons by focusing on "contingency" — the idea that everything could potentially be different, making it a central concept in his systems theory.

Luhmann is well-known for his concept of autopoietic systems, which are systems that produce and maintain themselves. He identified four main characteristics of autopoietic systems:

- **Self-Production:** These systems generate the essential elements that define them, like how the economic system produces money.
- **Self-Organization:** Autopoietic systems organize their boundaries and internal structures. They distinguish between what belongs within the system and what exists outside in the environment.
- **Self-Referentiality:** These systems refer to themselves to operate, such as how the economic system uses prices to make sense of its functions.
- **Closed Systems:** Autopoietic systems are "closed" in that they don't interact directly with their environment. Instead, they respond to representations of their environment — for example, the economic system only reacts to people's needs when those needs are translated into financial terms (Ritzer, 2018).

Luhmann applies these principles to society, arguing that society itself is an autopoietic system. It produces its core elements (communication), organizes its structures, and operates in a closed, self-referential manner. Individuals become part of society when they engage in communication, and anything not communicated is considered external to society, residing in the environment, potentially disrupting it. Luhmann also extends this logic to the "psychic system," or individual consciousness, which operates in the same autopoietic, self-referential way and relies on meaning that arises from

contingency — the possibility that things could be different. Without this possibility, meaning would not exist (Ritzer, 2018).

### 3.6. Religion and Social Action

Sociologically, human relations with religion can be seen from two perspectives; First, the dynamics and structure of society formed by religion, and second, the attitude of society (religious believers) towards religion (Arifin, 2009). Yusuf Al Qaradawi stated that there are four reasons why humans cannot be separated from religion, namely: *First*, there is a need for reason to answer big, very basic questions: where, when, and how?; *Second*, there is a need for human nature to grasp the true truth, the need to lean and kneel in the Almighty of God; *Third*, there is a need for mental health and spiritual strength so that oneself and one's soul can remain calm in facing various challenges and storms of life; *Fourth*, there is a need for ethical rules that serve as a common basis for living a peaceful, calm and serene life (Muslih, 2019). Religion provides moral rules for its adherents to be able to become a basis for living life and bless it, as well as providing a foundation for specific inner dimensions so that its adherents can make sense of life's journey even in the face of suffering, injustice, sin and emptiness of meaning (Hans Kung in Arifin, 2009).

Religion is a very strong and deep identity factor, which transcends state and national boundaries (Huntington, 2012). Why is that?, because in Durkheim's view, religion is related to morality and shared feelings, and no society will be able to survive without this shared morality and feelings (Turner, 2013).

In social reality, humans create a shared home that has meaning through the process of objectivation. Religious beliefs and institutions created by humans appear as independent and objective realities, which play a role in legitimizing the existing social order so that it appears legitimate and eternal (Berger, 1967). Religion is an important element in the process of constructing cultural identity, to ensure a sustainable life together in a pluralistic society (Bellah in Qodir, 2018). Religion becomes an important inspiration and reference for individuals to carry out social actions, which enrich cultural treasures. The relationship between religion and action is the subject of ongoing debate between those who fall into the categories of rational and non-rational. Durkheim's explanation is interesting, which really shows the importance of religious actions to stimulate individuals to participate positively in social life (Bellah, 2000).

Religion appears in a system of action related to two main issues, namely the conception of self (identity), and the ability to decipher motivational input from within a system that is outside of control (social situation). So, the role of religion in action systems is to provide a conception of identity or a set of symbols of identity, which is meaningful both cognitively and motivationally (Bellah, 2000).

More than 50 books, journals, and research reports, both domestic and international, have been gathered in this study. Almost all of them focus on the causes and effects of early marriage, while only a few address the patterns of its implementation. For the purposes of this study, journals and research reports have been limited to the causal factors and patterns of early marriage practices.

Low educational attainment is considered one of the main causes of early marriage. However, this can also be a reciprocal cause, as individuals forced into early marriage must drop out of school and leave the educational system. Most couples who engage in early marriage have only completed elementary school, while a smaller number have dropped out from junior or senior high school. An important issue that needs attention is the lack of information or knowledge about reproductive functions and family preparation, as such topics are not addressed at the elementary level. Additionally, economic conditions in the family are often considered a contributing factor; for poor families, marrying off their children is seen as a way to reduce the family's burden while also gaining an extra helping hand. Other contributing factors include the culture of arranged marriages, weak religious adherence, the widespread influence of information technology, and insufficient oversight from both family and community.

For underage prospective brides or grooms (under 19 years old), obtaining an official marriage requires a request for a dispensation from the local Religious Court. Various research reports reveal that nearly all parents seeking a dispensation cite the fact that the bride is already pregnant or has engaged in premarital relations as the primary reason.

When almost all such requests are granted, society tends to view the process of obtaining court approval as merely a formality—commonly referred to as "buying age." They proceed with wedding preparations as usual, seeing it as a necessary step due to the circumstances surrounding their children.



Confusion only arises when the court rejects the dispensation request. Nevertheless, families often insist that the marriage must go ahead, as canceling it would be a disgrace. In such cases, they may resort to persuading local officials or religious leaders, or even opt for informal "sirri" (illegal) marriages.

### 3.7. Early Marriage from the Perspective of Action Theory

This study on early marriage, viewed through the lens of action theory, focuses on analyzing the causes, driving factors, or motivations behind early marriage practices using rational and non-rational categories. When examining the contributing factors, it can be concluded that most early marriage practices fall into the category of non-rational actions, either traditional (customary, cultural) or affective, as they are not supported by logical or rational reasons. The only factor that can be categorized as rational is religion, but not due to low religious adherence. Instead, it relates to maintaining religious values to prevent falling into sin (value-oriented rationality).

### 3.8. Early Marriage from the Perspective of Talcott Parsons' System Theory

From Talcott Parsons' system theory perspective, early marriage can be viewed as a social phenomenon with ontological aspects. Parsons refers to structure and function within social systems. Hence, early marriage can be analyzed as part of the larger social structure and as a mechanism that influences the functioning of the social system. Ontologically, early marriage reflects the values and norms present within the society in question. Understanding the meaning and purpose of marriage, as well as the norms governing relationships between individuals, is part of the ontology of early marriage in Parsons' view. Moreover, early marriage can be linked to individuals' social roles within the system. According to Parsons, marriage is an institution that plays a key role in providing structure and stability to society. Thus, early marriage can be seen as part of social interaction that influences the structure and function of the social system as a whole.

When viewed through Parsons' AGIL framework, the pattern of early marriage practices can be explained as follows:

1. Those involved in early marriage will seek to adapt (Adaptation) to societal values and norms, including taboos that must be avoided within a community.
2. With various motives and attitudes, they will strive to achieve their goal (Goal Attainment) of marriage, utilizing societal structures to fulfill this objective.
3. The local community, under the leadership of its figures, will attempt to maintain peace and ensure that early marriage does not disrupt social harmony (Integration).
4. The community will endeavor to seek and establish new formulas within the configuration of values and norms that should be adhered to (Latency).

### 3.9. Early Marriage from the Perspective of Niklas Luhmann's General System Theory

When a family decides to plan a marriage for one of its members, the family adds another element to its family system: the family of the prospective groom or bride (Javanese: *calon besan*). These two families share responsibilities based on their respective roles and agree on the boundaries and foundations that govern the marriage plan, including what must and must not be done. These agreements are exclusive and binding only for the two families, not for the surrounding community. The community functions merely as witnesses to the agreements between the two parties.

If one or both members of the families (the prospective groom and/or bride) are found to be underage, the two families—now forming a new system—work together, sharing tasks to resolve their problem by involving other elements of the community, such as village officials and community leaders, to ensure the marriage of their children can proceed.

### 3.10. Early Marriage According to Islamic Teachings

According to the majority of scholars, the basic ruling of marriage is *mubah* (permissible), meaning it is neither obligatory nor forbidden. However, depending on the individual's circumstances, marriage may become obligatory, recommended, or disliked. In Islam, the purpose of marriage is to fulfill human needs (between men and women) in order to establish a happy household in accordance with Islamic principles. In general, the purposes of marriage in Islam are: (a) To achieve happiness and tranquility (*sakinah*). Peace and happiness are the desires of every person, and marriage is one way to attain a happy and peaceful life (Qur'an, Ar-Rum [30]: 21); (b) To nurture love and affection; (c) To fulfill sexual needs in a lawful and blessed manner by Allah

SWT; (d) To carry out Allah's commands; (e) To follow the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW; (f) To obtain legitimate offspring (*Pernikahan Menurut Islam*, n.d.)

In the context of religious factors as a cause of early marriage, two opposing reasons are found. The first is due to the low level of religious adherence of the individuals (prospective bride and groom), leading to illicit behavior, resulting in pregnancy. The argument that marriage can help control desires and protect one from sin, particularly adultery, is supported by a hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim from Abdullah bin Mas'ud RA:

“From Abdullah bin Mas'ud RA, the Prophet SAW said to us: ‘O young people, whoever among you is able to marry should marry, for it helps lower the gaze and protect the private parts. And whoever is not able to do so should fast, for it will be a shield for him (i.e., it weakens sexual desire).’”(HR. Bukhari Muslim) (*Pernikahan Menurut Islam*, n.d.).

It is important to note that the hadith assumes the condition of “ability” (*istiitha'ah*) or maturity, so that the goal of marriage—creating a peaceful and loving family—can be achieved (Siswanto, 2019). Both physical and psychological immaturity can lead to serious, far-reaching consequences (Munib, 2024).

#### 4. Conclusion

Early marriage is a social action driven primarily by non-rational reasons. The only rational reason identified is value-oriented rationality, particularly religious values, in the hope that the prospective couple can be protected from sinful acts such as adultery. From the perspective of Talcott Parsons' system theory, early marriage can be viewed as a social phenomenon with ontological aspects. Using the AGIL framework, the pattern of early marriage practices can be explained as follows:

1. Those involved in early marriage will attempt to adapt (*adaptation*) to the values and norms of society.
2. With various motives and attitudes, they will pursue marriage as their goal (*goal attainment*) and use societal structures to achieve this.
3. The local community, under the leadership of its figures, will strive to maintain peace and ensure that early marriage does not disturb the social harmony (*integration*).
4. The community will seek and establish new formulas within the configuration of values and norms that society should follow (*latency*).

From the perspective of Luhmann's General System Theory, two families planning to marry off their children agree on the boundaries and foundations governing the marriage. These agreements are exclusive to both families and do not involve the wider community, which only functions as witnesses to the agreements. When it is discovered that their children need a dispensation from the Religious Court due to age, they involve other elements of society to ensure the marriage can proceed.

For prospective brides and grooms planning early marriages due to religious reasons, they should ensure they have the physical and psychological maturity needed to fulfill the true purposes of marriage.

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