In his 1999 article *The Prayer of A Married Man Is Equal To Seventy Prayers of a Single Man: The Central Role of Marriage Among Upper-Middle-Class Muslim Egyptians*, Bahira Sherif proposes to explore the central role that marriage plays in the life course of Muslim men and women. There is some hinting that he will take a life course perspective, but he never really deals with theory as a predictive force. Instead, he presents ethnographic findings which show the primacy that marriage has in the life course of individuals. This is more in line with the sociological or sociogenic approach to human development. As is, unfortunately, common in much of the ethnographic work produced today, there is little discussion of theory at all. Researchers tend to be inductive, looking out into the world and describing it, rather than using some kind of theoretical framework and predicting what may happen. In this case, as in others, the outcome has little value beyond its descriptive impact and even that does not have the punch Sherif suggested that it might.

Most of Sherif’s argument (used loosely here) is that it is important to analyze non-Western traditions related to marriage formation and family structure. There is the implicit suggestion that, in doing so, we will see a world that is considerably different from our own and recognize that our views about marriage’s role in human development should be modified. In some ways, Sherif is successful in making that point. Clearly, marriage has a high level of importance in the life course of upper-middle-class Muslims that is not shared by, say, Whites in the United States. Because marriage is “at the heart of social and religious life” (p. 619) in contemporary Cairo, few Egyptian men and women do not marry. Marriage is not something simply hoped for by Egyptian parents and youth; it is practically a requirement for adequate life course development. Sherif even points out that marriage in this culture is almost a religious duty. In many ways, it is the defining act in the life of Egyptian youths. Young women and, surprisingly, men do not even leave home until they marry creating a situation of advanced liminality in those rare instances where the youths do not take a spouse. Ironically, for any kind of development as an “independent person” to take place, young Muslims must become dependent on a spouse.

Needless to say, the high expectations for marriage (i.e., having children) create strictures on what constitutes appropriate family development. The vast possibilities to analyze the effect of these cultural expectations on timing of Muslim family events, on men and women who ignore the cultural edict to marry, and on the processual aspects of Muslim family life are abandoned by Sherif. Even his statement that the study “does not seek to imply that all Egyptian Muslim marriages follow the exact same path to family formation” (p. 619) points to some interesting life course potential if he just studied these Muslim marriages that formed differently. Clearly there is much that he could have analyzed if he had actually taken the life course perspective described (to be fair, subtly) in his abstract and in points throughout the paper.

What did Sherif find? Islamic culture holds that men and women are different, have different social roles/functions, and should, therefore, be kept apart prior to marriage. There is no dating in Cairo. Spending time alone with a man is forbidden because it has the potential to soil the reputation of a woman and put her potential for marriage at risk. This creates interesting paradoxes because, in the case of upper-middle-class Muslims, women are not expected to come to the marriage with nothing as we often assume. A woman with a career is deemed desirable by young Egyptian men, but a woman places herself at risk of deterring a potential husband because of the mixed-gender workplace. She is, therefore, expected to work but becomes less attractive because she “may have had too much unsupervised contact with strange men.” (p. 620). It would be interesting to see if this paradox does operate in delaying marriage for otherwise appealing and
marriageable young women. Again, this is a worthwhile life-course perspective that Sherif does not follow up on.

An interesting finding is that there have been changes in the role that the marrying individuals play in the formation of their marriage. Sherif points out that, historically, marriages were arranged by the families of the potential bride or groom. This cultural norm would have, understandably, had some major impacts on the marriage process once a match and accompanying marriage took place. Now, young people have more say in who they will marry. While there are still some structural boundaries that young people are raised not to betray (e.g., they are encouraged not to marry beneath their social status), Egyptian youths are able to marry for other, less “practical”, reasons than were the norm for their parents and grandparents. This change in how the marriage market functions should, undoubtedly, have a different effect on how marriages themselves function beyond Sherif’s descriptions of the mate selection process. How might an arranged marriage differ throughout its life course than one of these newer “love match” marriages? In contemporary Cairo, a “foolish choice” of marital partner would still be determined by socioeconomic status, not issues of love, sincerity, expressiveness, or even instrumentality that are commonly used in the United States to gauge a wise mate selection decision.

Sherif goes on to discuss the formal aspects of marriage. While in Egypt, the expectations related to marriage are higher, the actual acts surrounding the practice are similar to those we experience in the United States and other Western traditions. Men ask the parents for permission to marry their daughter. When an Egyptian man proposes, he offers his future bride a gift, usually some form of expensive jewelry. There is an engagement period, that is not legally binding, which can be ended with limited sanction by either party. Another interesting life-course question arises when Sherif reports that older couples are usually more reluctant to break off the engagement. Even if they get cold feet related to their future together, these couples tend to rely on “God and their families to make the marriage work” (p. 625). The engagement is followed by a marital ceremony, which includes the signing of the marital contract. Because of the traditional nature of this culture and others I have studied (e.g., the West Indies), a man and woman are not “truly” married until, in the words of the Bible, the Torah, and the Koran “the man is able to leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife”. The consummative wedding ceremony may not take place until the new groom is able to prepare a home for his bride and himself. So, while the two are as officially married as any American would be once the marriage contract is signed, witnessed, and certified, they do not celebrate the wedding until appropriate living arrangements have been made. This brings into question another life course transition question. If the actual wedding does not take place until a home is available, how does this delayed transition into “wedded bliss” affect the bride and groom and their families, particularly if there is a substantial delay?

The central significance of Sherif’s paper is that it creates (again, as much ethnographic work does) a number of empirical avenues about the life course and family development. By describing this culture’s approach to marriage and the primacy of the act itself in the life course of young Egyptians, he presents us with numerous opportunities to question how these high expectations affect the marriages they produce. The problem with this research is that he does not seem to take up his own torch and use the theory as a guide to understand how these families function. Instead he simply serves as reporter. My hope is, that with the amount of data he seems to have collected, that he will take this opportunity to be more scientific in helping us discover how the theory may function in the lives of these young men and women.