

# **Refashioning Family in the 21st Century: Marriage and Cohabitation among America's Young Adults**

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## **Introduction**

The last several decades have witnessed nothing short of a revolution in marriage and family relationships. Young Americans remain highly likely to marry. However, this social institution has been marked by dramatic changes, including the postponement of first marriage coupled with dramatic spikes in cohabitation, the increasing likelihood for marital disruption (e.g., separation, divorce), the growing propensity for unwed childbearing, and various redefinitions of marriage (e.g., same-sex partnerships). In this essay, we examine the contours of marriage and intimate partnerships among young adults ages 18–29. We argue that emerging adults face a number of new challenges related to intimate relationships, and we place these challenges within the context of broader social and cultural changes. Throughout, we are careful to explore how young adults' dispositions toward marriage vary by gender, race/ethnicity, and social class, while also examining how other institutional factors (e.g., religious involvement) and demographic patterns (e.g., educational and workforce commitments) influence intimate partnerships for young Americans. Our essay closes by calling attention to the fluid character of marital and intimate partnerships among young adult Americans today.

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## **Setting the Context: Social and Cultural Influences on Marriage and Family Life**

Intimate relationships, including those that occur among young adults, do not exist in a vacuum. For this reason, we begin with a brief summary of major changes that have been sweeping through American society during the past several decades, while pinpointing their effect on marriage, intimate partnerships, and family relationships.

Among the most formidable cultural changes to influence marriage is the increasing pervasiveness of individualism. Broadly understood, the ethic of individualism elevates self-fulfillment over social obligations. Americans are increasingly likely to define the “good marriage” in terms of the fulfillment or satisfaction it brings to its individual partners rather than a marriage’s longevity. As recounted by sociologist Andrew Cherlin, the family has been transformed from a preindustrial public institution with clearly prescribed roles and functions to a postindustrial private entity that is predicated on personal fulfillment, including affection, companionship, and self-discovery.

Closely related to the growing prominence of individualism has been the acceleration of consumerism (sometimes called “new consumerism,” given the long history of consumerist tendencies in American capitalism). Consumerism today is not only reflected in the increasingly prominent role that the acquisition of material goods plays in social life. Even more profoundly, the last several decades have seen the logic of the marketplace infiltrate all facets of social life. Where marriage is concerned, consumerism reinforces that idea that relationships should be a product of personal preference (“choice”) and has had a hand in delaying marriage, given young people’s increasing focus on establishing themselves in a career prior to forming a family. Such preoccupations have only been magnified by the transition to a postindustrial (service sector) economy in which both long-term employment and the maintenance of a middle-class standard of living have become much more precarious. Economic restructuring, along with social movements such as feminism, have dramatically increased married women’s and mothers’ labor-force participation rates, creating new opportunities and challenges for American families. Feminism has also challenged patriarchal authority in the home and male privilege in other social institutions (e.g.,

politics, religion). Long gone is the old marriage bargain in which men's wage-earning prospects were traded for women's physical attractiveness, homemaking skills, or childbearing prospects. The new marriage bargain is predicated on the long-term economic prospects of both partners. It is with attention to these dramatic changes that marriage and intimate partnerships among young adults in 21st-century America are best understood.

### **Marriage and Young Adulthood: Ambivalence and Postponement**

What do we know about young adults' attitudes toward marriage? Today's young adults came of age in the midst of remarkable ambivalence about marriage, and their attitudes reflect these conflicted sentiments. On the one hand, marriage remains a highly desirable option for a preponderance of young adults. The vast majority (90%–95%) of young people aspire to get married someday, and about 85% of them will get married. In this sense, marriage would seem to be highly valued by today's young adults. Yet, on the other hand, emerging adults express wariness about marriage and are especially reticent about what they view as premature marriage. According to a National Marriage Project survey of young adults in their 20s, 86% of 20-somethings believe that "it is extremely important . . . to be economically set before you get married." No doubt, these concerns are fed by the fact that marriage is now a much less stable institution, and Americans, particularly young adults, are increasingly unlikely to view marriage as a lifetime commitment. Where intimate relationships are concerned, young Americans appear caught between a love of freedom and a longing for commitment and companionship.

Therefore, the strict sequence of life-course transitions articulated in the old children's rhyme, "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes [child's name] in a baby carriage," fails to resonate with many young Americans as it once did. In fact, that middle step—marriage—is now defined in a wide variety of ways, ranging from same-sex unions to covenant marriages.<sup>1</sup> It is rather ironic that at a time when marriage is a less stable institution than ever before, everyone wants a piece of the marriage pie.

These ambivalent dispositions toward intimacy influence young people's entry into marriage. Young Americans today are more likely to marry later in life than most of

their forebears.<sup>2</sup> As indicated by the 2000 U.S. census, young men's median age at first marriage is 26.7 years, while young women's median age at marriage registers at 25.1 years. Structural transformations in educational attainment and labor-force participation, along with demographic trends such as cohabitation, nonmarital fertility (unwed childbearing), and extended life spans also contribute to the current postponement of marriage. Marriage is no longer bundled with sexual activity and childbearing as it once was.

In addition, young people seem to embrace the view that marriage is a relationship into which one should enter only when questions such as "Who am I?" have been largely answered. As Jeffrey Arnett describes it, "Staying unmarried allows emerging adults to keep their options open, not just in terms of whom they might marry but in terms of whom they might become and what they might decide to do with their lives" (p. 102).

### **Countercurrents: Who Marries Early and Why?**

The danger of focusing only on a general trend evidenced in the nation at large, however, is that doing so ignores the conflicting currents that often exist beneath the surface. Where marriage among young adults is concerned, a number of countercurrents that run against the general trend of postponement are evident. Therefore, it is not true that there is a wholesale retreat from marriage among emerging adults. As noted, the vast majority of young people aspire to get married, and over 8 in 10 will actually do so. Such aspirations and behaviors hardly signal wholesale retreat. Moreover, alongside a later overall age at first marriage, the age range at which young adults now get married has expanded considerably. (Imagine a bell curve whose center has not only moved to the right, but whose base is now wider.)

Some do marry comparatively young by today's standards. Nearly two in ten 20- to 24-year-olds are married, with 25% of women and 16% of men marrying prior to age 23. Thus, emerging adults are not fleeing en masse from marriage prior to their mid-20s.

These conflicting currents evident beneath the surface flow from particular springs (that is, social groups). What are they? Religion is a major influence on marriage

timing. Mormons (Latter-day Saints) and conservative Protestants are most likely to marry young, as are those who value their religious faith quite highly. Socioeconomic status also influences marriage timing. Young people from economically disadvantaged families and those with less education have long been more likely to marry at an earlier age than their affluent, highly educated peers. However, rising rates of cohabitation among the economically disadvantaged have led to a postponement of marriage within this population. There are also racial/ethnic variations in the timing of marriage among young adults. Marriage takes place considerably earlier among Latinos (nonwhite Hispanics), when compared with whites and especially African Americans. These subgroup variations in marriage timing tell us a great deal about who supports and who resists the broader social trend toward later marriage. They are as much a part of the story as the general motif of delayed marriage.

### **Sizing Up the Benefits of Marriage**

Is marriage a wise or unwise choice for young adults? What benefits, if any, are to be had in getting married? In the last couple of decades, conflicting bodies of research have spawned a debate about the benefits of marriage, and the playing out of this debate in the popular media has likely influenced young adults' decisions about when to marry.

Some scholars, such as Linda Waite and several researchers associated with the National Marriage Project, have argued that marriage is beneficial to men, women, and society at large. Also, relationship quality (that is, the satisfaction or happiness with one's intimate relationship) is significantly greater for married persons than for cohabiting couples. Moreover, the research of Waite and others has uncovered links between marriage and a number of other positive social outcomes, such as greater physical health, psychological well-being, and wealth. Married people are also more satisfied with their sex lives than are single persons. Some have even argued that marriage is good for the environment because it is an institution that promotes the economical use of resources, including more efficient household energy consumption.

Yet others question these findings. Criticisms take two forms. First, it is difficult to determine whether marriage actually fosters greater health, wealth, and happiness among young people or whether young adults who are healthier, wealthier, and happier

prior to marriage are more successful in the marriage market. Thus, people who exhibit positive characteristics may be more likely to be “selected” into marriage because they would be seen as the most desirable marriage partners.

Second, a number of feminists and gender scholars have argued that, while marriage may be broadly beneficial in some respects, it is still men who benefit more from marriage than women. Much scholarship points to the unequal division of labor (housework and child care) that characterizes most American marriages, and the role of gendered family obligations in sustaining the wage gap between married men and women. Even in dual-earner married households, women are still charged with the majority of housework and child care tasks. And, despite fathers’ greater involvement in child care today, new married parents are especially likely to have a gendered division of labor. These scholars also highlight the fact that housework responsibilities are distributed more equally among young cohabiting couples, suggesting that marriage pays “patriarchal dividends” to men.

Debates about the benefits of marriage for young people and society as a whole are not likely to be settled anytime soon. And, of course, the positions staked out by defenders and critics of the benefits of marriage perspective are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that marriage is at once broadly beneficial (e.g., environmental impact), while also more strongly favoring the interests of some (e.g., men) over others (e.g., women). Also, marriages are complex relationships that involve not only hard work (e.g., housework, routine child care) but also deeply satisfying forms of interpersonal bonding (e.g., sustained emotional support, parent-child attachment). It is quite likely that, while some facets of married life yield positive returns and generate lasting satisfaction, others prove to be quite trying. Thus, marriage benefits are not an all-or-nothing proposition.

A number of factors influence the quality of young adults’ marital relationships. As might be expected, young couples who face economic deprivation with little prospect for relief are more inclined to have conflicted and lower quality marital relationships. Interestingly, women who marry more emotionally expressive men indicate greater satisfaction with their marital relationship. And, for reasons to which we now turn, couples who have cohabited prior to marriage exhibit lower levels of marital satisfaction

once they decide to marry.

### **Cohabitation among Young Adults: Contours, Causes, and Consequences**

The past several decades have witnessed the proliferation of premarital cohabitation (unmarried persons “living together”) among young American adults. Approximately 6 in 10 young adults will cohabit at some point their lives, and even as early as the 1990s, cohabitational unions outnumbered marital unions among young adults. About half of all nonmarital births to white and Hispanic women occur in the context of cohabitational unions. When cohabitation began to become more widespread, some observers were concerned that cohabitation would largely supplant marriage as a form of intimate partnership. While a collective flight from marriage has surfaced in some European countries, cohabitation does not generally serve as a substitute for marriage among American couples. The majority of cohabiting persons will eventually marry, whether their current partner or some other.

Patterns of cohabitation among young adults vary dramatically by religion, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity. Young adults from conservative religious backgrounds (e.g., Mormons, conservative Protestants) are less likely to cohabit and, as noted above, are more likely to marry young. Within such contexts, early marriage is likely fostered by the moral stigma given to cohabitation. Economically and educationally disadvantaged young people are more likely to cohabit. It is important to recognize, however, that these patterns overlap with racial/ethnic variations in cohabitation. African Americans are the most likely to cohabit but are also overrepresented among the poor and less educated. Some commentators have also attributed relatively lower rates of African American marriage to a shortage of “marriageable” black men, though debates persist about the causes of higher relative rates of African American cohabitation. Among Latino groups, Puerto Ricans are the most likely to cohabit.

Young people cohabit for any number of reasons, but most often do so because they feel they are not ready for the long-term commitment that marriage entails. Cohabitation is viewed by some young adults as a pilot test for marriage in terms of

social, emotional, sexual, and lifestyle compatibility. If cohabitation was an effective pilot test for marriage, one would expect that cohabiting partners would have higher quality marriages, combined with a lower likelihood to divorce once they do decide to marry. Hence, only the best cohabiting relationships would survive to become marriages, and these relationships would be characterized by a remarkable degree of harmony and longevity. But, alas, this is not the case. Cohabitors who marry are more likely, not less likely, to divorce once they have married. Why would this be so? First, those who cohabit are probably less committed to marriage at the outset. Otherwise, these couples would not have chosen cohabitation prior to marriage. Thus, cohabitors may bring some reservations about marriage into the marital relationship. Second, there may be some facets of cohabitation (e.g., segregated finances, partner autonomy) that do not translate well into marriage. Because cohabiting relationships are often structured quite differently than marriages, and are even treated differently in terms of their legal status and extended kinship support, the “pilot test” argument for cohabitation is not supported by sociological evidence.

### **Future Uncertain: Young Adulthood and the American Marriage-Go-Round**

What does the future hold for marriage among young adults in the United States? Although social scientists are notoriously poor at predicting the future, doing so with regard to the future of marriage and intimate relationships in the United States seems like an especially perilous enterprise. We began this review with the observation that marriage in America is marked by a high degree of ambivalence. This ambivalence is especially pronounced among emerging adults. The vast majority of young American men and women aspire to get married, and more than 8 in 10 will do so someday. However, that “someday” is increasingly likely to be postponed among the young adult population at large. Young adults value their personal freedom and worry about getting established (educationally, professionally, and personally) before getting married. They have been raised in an era in which self-fulfillment has been elevated as a virtue and the stability of marriage can no longer be taken for granted.

At the same time, the menu of options (consumerist metaphor intended) available to young people considering long-term partnerships has expanded. Young



adults face a wider range of choices today concerning their intimate relationships. They may choose marriage, cohabitation, or extended singlehood. And even opting for marriage does not settle matters. In fact, young people who decide to marry today find themselves facing an array of decisions about the types of marriage available to them (e.g., conventional/covenant marriage, straight/gay marriage), a diverse set of pathways into marriage (e.g., traditional engagement versus premarital cohabitation), and the rather high prospect for marital disruption in America's "divorce culture." In short, marriage has become a more complex institution and, with the rise of divorce, a more unstable union than at any previous point in history.

Given the impermanent quality of intimate partnerships today, sociologist Andrew Cherlin has astutely called the contemporary family a "marriage-go-round." He offers the following observation: "Consequently, Americans are conflicted about lifelong marriage: they value the stability and security of marriage, but they tend to believe that individuals who are unhappy with their marriages should be allowed to end them" (p. 4). So, as young adults climb aboard the marriage-go-round, only one thing is certain. They are facing an uncertain future, one that is replete with choices but lacking in a clearly defined destination.

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<sup>1</sup> Covenant marriages, adopted in a handful of states, are more difficult to end, because they endorse fault-based tenets and waiting periods as legally legitimate pathways to divorce. One achievement of proponents of the marriage movement, covenant marriages are one of the proliferating marriage options faced by young people today. See Steven L. Nock, Laura A. Sanchez, and James D. Wright (2008), *Covenant marriage: The movement to reclaim tradition in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that age at first marriage has varied for men and women since such statistics have been collected (1890). Women's age at first marriage has increased consistently during the past century, whereas that for men has been marked by a series of peaks and troughs.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

Amato, Paul R., Alan Booth, David R. Johnson, and Stacy J. Rogers. (2009). *Alone together: How marriage in America is changing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Along with Cherlin's *The Marriage-Go-Round* (cited below), this volume is one of the best current books on the general state of marriage in American society today. It discusses how the rise of individualism has combined with demographic changes to reshape various facets of marriage (attitudes, behaviors, marital quality), including young people's entry into marriage. It presents evidence-based arguments in an even-handed fashion. Its title astutely captures Americans' ambivalence toward marriage.

Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen. (2004). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Arnett's book is an outstanding analysis of various facets of emerging adulthood. Chapter 5 addresses marriage, presenting an intimate portrait of young adults' marital aspirations and relationship experiences. In looking for a marriage partner, emerging adults consider interpersonal qualities and common interests. They typically take their time in finding a partner to "get their own lives in order" (p. 101), which often includes completing their degree and establishing a career.

Cherlin, Andrew J. (2009). *The marriage-go-round: The state of marriage and the family in America today*. New York: Knopf.

Cherlin's widely praised book is a comprehensive and highly readable review of the state of marriage in American society today. Key statistics on marriage, cohabitation, and divorce are presented, with many observations about the marriage prospects of young adults and the impact of the "marriage-go-round" on young families and

children today.

Eden, Kathryn, and Maria Kefalas. (2005). *Promises I can keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

This volume examines why young, low-income, urban women prioritize childbearing over marriage. It is a qualitative (ethnographic) study designed to illuminate poor women's attraction to motherhood and redefined views of marriage in light of their challenging circumstances (economic scarcity, unfaithful men, etc.). The authors' critical appraisal of research on the retreat from marriage and their rejoinder to current perspectives are featured in the volume's concluding chapter.

Eggebeen, David J., and Jeffrey Dew. (2009). The role of religion in adolescence for family formation in young adulthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71, 108–121.

Religion influences young adults' decisions about union formation, that is, marriage versus cohabitation. This study demonstrates that propensities to form marital versus cohabiting unions vary by a number of religious factors, including denominational affiliation, worship service attendance, and religious fervor (salience). As expected, highly active, highly fervent young adults affiliated with conservative Protestant faiths were the least likely to cohabit and the most likely to marry. However, a conservative denominational background does not produce promarriage outcomes in the absence of attendance and fervor. Thus, various religious factors interact to influence the likelihood of particular union formation outcomes.

National Marriage Project. (2007). *The state of our unions 2007: The social health of marriage in America*. [www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/](http://www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/).

The National Marriage Project collects and disseminates data on marriage, marital aspirations, and social indicators related to marriage. *The State of Our Unions 2007* reports on American trends during the past four decades related to marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and other topics. There are also 2008 and 2009 updates to the 2007 report. The National Marriage Project is a nonpartisan organization, though

many of its publications emphasize the negative consequences associated with the weakening of marriage and family relationships in contemporary American society. Thus, while the National Marriage Project is composed of scholars, it conducts policy-oriented research with an emphasis on marriage promotion.

Patterson, Charlotte J. (2000). Family relationships of lesbians and gay men. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62, 1052–1069.

This article reviews the research on lesbian and gay families, underscoring the ways in which same-sex couples have confronted, and in some cases overcome, prejudice and discrimination. The article discusses various facets of gay and lesbian family life (partnerships, parent-child relationships), addresses a range of public-policy issues, and also identifies possible trajectories for future research related to the topic. Although this article does not specifically address the gay and lesbian families of young adults, it does shed light on recent moves to expand definitions of marriage to include gay and lesbian couples that are especially germane to marital and union choices facing young people today.

Phillips, Julie A., and Megan M. Sweeney. (2005). Premarital cohabitation and marital disruption among white, black, and Mexican American women. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 296–314.

This investigation reviews research on racial/ethnic variations in cohabitation and explores the effects of premarital cohabitation on the risk of marital disruption across various racial/ethnic groups. In this particular study, cohabitation is shown to have the strongest link to marital disruption among white women, and little or no effect among black or Mexican American women.

Sassler, Sharon, Anna Cunningham, and Daniel T. Lichter. (2009). Intergenerational patterns of union formation and relationship quality. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30, 757–786.

This study examines the different relationship trajectories of young adults from families of divorce versus intact (nondivorced) families. Parents' intimate

relationships provide a template for those of their young adult children. Children of divorced parents, and of those who cohabited following a divorce, are more likely to cohabit during young adulthood. Moreover, children of cohabiting parents reported lower quality and less stability in their intimate relationships.

Schoen, Robert, Nancy S. Landale, and Kimberly Daniels. (2007). Family transitions in young adulthood. *Demography*, 44, 807–820.

This study presents a treasure trove of vital data on marriages and intimate partnerships among young adult Americans. The authors argue that a singular set of socially imposed transitions to adulthood prevalent in the 1950s has evaporated and has been supplanted by a multitude of paths to adulthood.

Smock, Pamela J. (2000). Cohabitation in the United States: An appraisal of research themes, findings, and implications. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 1–20.

This review article provides a handy summary of research on American patterns of cohabitation. Although it is now nearly a decade old, it still provides a touchstone for vital information on this increasingly common pathway to union formation.

Thornton, Arland, and Linda Young-DeMarco. (2001). Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63, 1009–1037.

This review article is an outstanding compendium of changing views of marriage and other family issues in the United States. Although the trends reported here are evident among the American population at large, the shifting terrain of marriage and family faced by young adults today is described in detail.

Uecker, Jeremy E., and Charles E. Stokes. (2008). Early marriage in the United States. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70, 835–846.

Uecker and Stokes identify the factors most strongly associated with early marriage, including socioeconomic disadvantage, religious conservatism, and more deeply held faith commitments. They also address the relationship between cohabitation,

educational trajectories, and early marriage.

Waite, Linda J. (1995). Does marriage matter? *Demography*, 32, 483–507.

This article is considered a must-read among those interested in whether or not marriage confers benefits to husbands, wives, and society at large. It has generated a great deal of research from both proponents and critics of the benefits-of-marriage perspective.

Xu, Xiaohe, Clark D. Hudspeth, and John P. Bartkowski. (2005). The timing of first marriage: Are there religious variations? *Journal of Family Issues*, 26, 584–618.

This article examines how religion functions as one critical pathway for entry into marriage. Latter-day Saints, despite their generally high educational aspirations, are among the earliest to marry, along with conservative Protestants. Catholics marry later than these more conservative faiths, and Jews are among the latest to marry.