



Media Backgrounder on Current Research

Does Marriage Still Matter?

Talking with Young Adults about Marriage and Relationships

The MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood
www.transad.pop.upenn.edu

January 2007

Qualitative Study: Coming of Age in America

As part of the current phase of research by the Network, researchers have fanned out across the United States to interview young adults in their 20s, in both rural and urban areas, to better understand, first-hand, how these young adults in vastly different settings are making their way into adulthood.

The researchers selected five very different places—small-town Iowa, New York City, San Diego, and St. Paul, Minnesota, Detroit, Michigan—on the grounds context is a major factor determining one's future. Headed by Harvard sociologist Mary Waters, the qualitative studies are delving in-depth into the broad demographic and societal trends uncovered in the Network's first book, *On the Frontier of Adulthood*. The project researchers are preparing to publish the findings from each site in a forthcoming book, likely in early 2006. A second book, which will examine trends and issues across all sites, is also forthcoming.

Below is are some excerpts and background on marriage among young adults today.

For more information, see
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Young adults today are delaying, but not abandoning marriage, according to research by the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood

As recent headlines report, today for the first time there are more unmarried women than men. Marriage is apparently taking a hit. Although the statistics might portray a declining state of matrimony, our research with approximately 500 young adults in their 20s and early 30s in three cities (New York City, San Diego, and St. Paul, MN) and one small town in rural Iowa shows that while marriage is delayed, it is not abandoned. The young adults we spoke with had high standards for marriage, and were more interested in developing a solid relationship *before* they married and ensuring that their mate was the “right one” before tying the knot. They were also determined to have all their ducks in a row before marrying (education, career, a house, etc).

What we’ve found is that where once being married meant you were an adult, today you have to be an adult to be married.

The Changing Face of Marriage

—Keeping a hold on your self

Sociologists and others have long viewed marriage as a “companionate” arrangement: $1 + 1 = 1$ (we). Once into a marriage, the individual disappeared. You sublimated yourself and became a twosome. Today, that no longer flies. One of the more prominent themes that emerged from our study was this notion of two individuals coming together, and remaining individual. The idealized couple dynamic today is something akin to a pair of choreographed figure skaters. Each partner moves on the ice separately, and yet each one must always be aware of the other, somehow managing to move in tandem. The new marriage math is $1 + 1 = 3$: you, me, and us. Over and over again, young people report that they are looking for partners who fit into their lifestyles and complement their personal goals and individual needs. In all the talk of marriage, there was almost no discussion of romantic love and widespread agreement that the features of friendship were singularly important for creating a successful marriage.

—Commitment is a process

Many young people are adopting what might be called a developmental notion of marriage. For this generation, marriage is the culmination of developmental process in which young adults acquire maturity, financial security, independence and a sense of themselves and only then do they find a partner with whom to spend the rest of their lives.

Achieving personal, educational, and career goals. In urban areas, young adults see career and personal goals important to achieve *before* they marry. A 25-year-old New York woman lists the accomplishments she views as prerequisites for marriage:

“I’m hoping that in five years, I will have completed my Bachelor’s degree and my Master’s. I’m hoping to be employed as a teacher...happy and satisfied in [my profession]. I’m hoping that I will have my house, if not one of my own, one with my mother. I’m hoping that if I’m not married, that I will at least be with somebody that I care about and with plans of marriage, but I don’t necessarily have to be married. But, number one, the education goals and then two, I hope to be financially stable and content.”

In highly competitive cities, some young adults find relationships simply impossible to balance, let alone commit to. When a 23-year-old New York man's girlfriend pressures him for an engagement ring, his response is: "Talk to law school!" cause I can't make a commitment until I have a career." For a 25-year-old San Diego man, marriage will happen, eventually. Right now, he says, "I'd rather concentrate on work and stuff like that..."

Getting to know you. Another step in this process is gaining intimate knowledge of one's partner, experiencing decisions and setbacks together, learning to communicate and develop a sense of mutual trust, and acquiring a sense that their relationship has a kind of inevitability; that is, they are the "right person" for one another. All this *before* they get married.

According to a 29-year-old St. Paul man, being friends with his future wife for several years made it possible for them to know what they were "dealing with" in their relationships.

"I mean, we get along well and part of that, I think, what helped was that we were friends for three, four years, and so I knew exactly who she was I got to see the true side of her during that time period. It was the same for me. We knew exactly what we were dealing with."

It is the more predictable and stable dynamics of friendship (versus romance and romantic whirlwinds) that they value in finding a partner for a lifetime commitment. As one St. Paul woman described her current relationship as:

"a place that's comfortable, exciting, empowering, and centering. All the pieces come together and I like who I am in the relationship. I don't need to change anything about myself to be better in this. That feels really good."

In contrast, in rural Iowa, young adults marry earlier (average age of marriage in Iowa is 23 compared with 27 nationwide), and they seem much more pragmatic about marriage, more in line with the 1950s model than the model emerging today. As one young Iowan explained about marriage: "You might as well [get married] because you guys have been together for so long and it's not gonna make a difference." Or as this 25-year-old Iowan, who married his high school sweetheart at age 22, says:

"I mean it's kind of a dumb thing, but I mean, I took pride in [the fact] that I had a schedule that I thought was a smart way to do it. I thought I would graduate from high school, graduate from college, have a job and then get married and then have kids, two, three, four years later. I took pride in that."

—**Marriage mentality: the Icing on the Cake**

Young adults in our studies insisted on gaining an education, economic security, maturity, and personal development before marrying. The achievement of these goals leads to marriage in rural Iowa, but not in the metropolitan settings. In New York, San Diego, and St. Paul, young people also require the "marriage mentality." The marriage mentality refers to a young person's self-definition. With the marriage mentality, a young adult decides he or she is emotionally and psychically ready to take on life-altering responsibilities of becoming a husband or wife. No one who is unwilling to give up the carefree, youthful ways of the single life, we were told, has any business making the lifetime commitment required of marriage unless, of course, they are willing to risk the likelihood of divorce.

Class, Ethnic-Racial, and Regional Differences in the Meaning of Marriage

Trend data from our larger national samples reveals that higher levels of education lead to delays in marriage. Based on analysis of our interviews, however, the most striking socioeconomic difference (that is, differences in income and education) in how young people described their views on relationships and marriage centered on discussions about children among unmarried parents. Elites delay marriage and childbearing, while those with lower incomes and less education tend to put off marriage, but not childbearing. Children no longer represent a good reason to get married. Children, however, are not irrelevant to marriage either, because a partner's commitment and responsibility in caring for children becomes one of the many ways couples assess their readiness for marriage.

Although our quantitative data show higher rates of marriage among certain ethnic groups, our analysis of the interviews found no significant racial and ethnic differences in young adults' views of the *meaning* of marriage. Most young people see marriage as a desirable goal and very few said they see no reason to marry.

Regionally, the most marriage wary young people were in San Diego and New York, Minnesotans were somewhere in the middle, and the rural Iowans held the most traditional views of marriage.

Regional differences could also be explained by the fact metropolitan young people's lives are filled complex array of activities that makes marriage just one of many things that competes for young person's time and interest. There are also more potential partners and less social pressure to view marriage as a necessary part of adulthood. Although marriage remains a strong life objective, it is just one of many options that can command young adults' immediate attention.

Regardless of region or social class, when young adults discuss their apprehensions about marriage, they ground their fears about marriage within the quality of relationships rather than the wholesale rejection of marriage. Even among the most skeptical, there was a sense that marriage could still be a possibility if the right partner and circumstances arise. For the most part, marriage is something young people would like to do at some point in their lives, even if they are not clear if they will meet the right partner or if they will ever be prepared to make such a commitment.

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The MacArthur Research Network on the Transitions to Adulthood examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youths' psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adult's development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.