



**Marriage is More than Being Together:
The Meaning of Marriage among Young
Adults in the United States**

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September 2005

**Network on Transitions to Adulthood Research Network
Working Paper**

These working papers have been posted to stimulate research and policy analysis on issues related to the transition to adulthood. The papers have not been formally reviewed by members of the Network. The papers reflect the views of the authors and do not represent the views of the other members of the network nor of the MacArthur Foundation. This work has been supported by the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Grant No. 00-00-65719-HCD.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation and the Network on Adult Transitions. Special thanks to the Principal Investigators of the Transition to Adulthood Qualitative Study, Ervin Kosta, and the members of the Transition to Adulthood Network.

Is Marriage in Trouble?

Four decades after The Moynihan Report first drew attention to the impending marriage crisis facing low-income African-Americans, the public's hand-wringing over marriage has only intensified (Popenoe and Whitehead 2001, Waite and Gallagher 2000, Wilson 2002). Even though marital instability, single parenthood and nonmarital childbearing tend to be concentrated among the most economically disadvantaged, urban populations (Edin and Kefalas 2005, Furstenberg 2001, Jencks and Ellwood 2001, MacLaughlin and Lichter 1997, McLanahan 2004, Wilson 1987), there is growing concern that these trends are spreading to other segments of American society (Jencks and Ellwood 2002). Marriage pessimists point to rising divorce rates, increased levels of cohabitation, the advent of gay marriage, nonmarital childbearing, and the fact that Americans spend fewer of their adult years married (Popenoe and Whitehead 2001, Waite and Gallagher 2000, Wilson 2002) as evidence of the steady and seemingly inexorable decline of marriage as a social institution.

Not everyone agrees with this bleak assessment. Some family experts counter that these changes reflect a shift in the meaning and function of marriage (Edin and Kefalas 2005, Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004; Cherlin 2004, Coontz 2005). Marriage is not disappearing, so much as being transformed by a host of contemporary conditions, not only in the U.S. but also in virtually all industrialized countries throughout the world. (Cherlin 2004, Coontz 2005) The vast majority of Americans still hold on both to the ideal and the practice of matrimony. (Goldstein and Kenney 2001, Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). They cite the fact that demographers project that at least four out of five of today's young people will marry, hardly a sign that marriage is in retreat.

Family scholars have identified a number of conditions that have reshaped young people's notions of marriage. The extension of schooling beyond the teen years, the liberalization of sexual behavior, the availability of reliable methods of contraception, changing gender roles, the threat of divorce, and the option to remain single are but a few of the significant influences affecting the timing and attractiveness of marriage. To be sure, young people have a great deal more discretion about whether or not to marry; yet the proportion opting for marriage is hardly different from it was at the beginning of the last century (Fussell and Furstenberg 2004). Increasingly, young people whom we refer to as "marriage planners" are inclined to regard marriage as developmental process which progresses over time and is tested by real-life circumstances. A small minority, whom we label "marriage drifters," continue to think of marriage as inevitable and a natural outcome of an early and untested relationship. The drifters are inclined to regard marriage as a "promise" of future commitment, the planners see marriage as the celebration of a commitment that is already established and time tested.

Undoubtedly for many educated middle- and upper- class young men and women, delaying marriage until personal and professional goals are achieved is a rational response given the reality of what is currently required to qualify for a well-paying and stable job. (Axinn and Thornton 2000) For those in the bottom two thirds of society, getting married has surely become more problematic, especially for those with very limited education and earnings. (Edin and Kefalas 2005, Gibson, Edin, and MacLanahan forthcoming, MacLanahan 2004) Couples appear to be more discerning about whether marriage will indeed improve their economic and social fortunes. Accordingly, they have resorted to delay and temporary unions until their prospects are clarified. (Smock 2000, Smock 2004, Smock, Manning and Porter 2005) And, to be sure, a minority will probably never make the transition to formal marriage at all.

Does this mean that commitment to marriage is weakening or merely shifting to a later point in the life course? Of course, answering this question involves projecting current behaviors into the future, always a problematic exercise. In doing so, it is useful to probe in more depth about the way that young adults of marriageable age are thinking about the reasons for and against marriage. This paper goes beyond the confines of census and survey data to explore the way that young adults are thinking about marriage. It draws evidence from a large, qualitative study sponsored by the MacArthur Network on Adult Transitions, a diverse population of several hundred men and women in their twenties and early thirties who are currently navigating the passage to adulthood. We examine the ways that social class, community context, ethnic background, and gender are linked to how young adults construct their hopes and expectations for relationships, whether marriage is a likely prospect in their future, and, if so, the conditions under which they foresee entering into matrimony. Within a social world where young people do not have to marry if they want to engage in sexual relations, cohabit, or bear children: what purpose does it now serve?

Sample and Methods

The data used for this paper comes from a national qualitative study sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation's Network on Adult Transitions. From 2001-2002, researchers in four sites: New York City, San Diego, St. Paul, and Iowa conducted in-depth 2 to 4 hour interviews with a socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically diverse group of young people ranging in ages from 22 to 38 years old. The majority of respondents were selected from larger, random samples of pre-existing studies.¹ The on-going youth studies in Minnesota, New York, and San Diego were selected to provide the broadest diversity in terms of experience, socioeconomic background and geographical location. While all of the young people in the sample were born in the United States, nearly half are the children of immigrants. Though the Minnesota site targeted TANF recipients, New York, Iowa, and San Diego researchers interviewed young people from a range of socioeconomic conditions that reflected cross-sections of the communities and/or the larger random samples where the respondents were drawn.

Each respondent was asked a series of open-ended questions about various facets of the transition to adulthood, and this paper uses data from the relationship and marriage section of the questionnaire. In San Diego, the largest site (n= 136) researchers used a similar approach to interview a slightly younger group of children of immigrants (specifically Mexican, Laotian, Vietnamese, Dominicans, South Asian, Hmong, Thai, Filipino, and Cambodian) as part of the (Children of Immigrant Longitudinal Study) CILS project. In New York City site, the second largest sample (n=130), researchers conducted in-depth interviews with second-generation Americans (Russian Jews, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Columbians, Ecquadorian, Peruvian, West Indians, and Chinese). For the Heartland Study, the third largest sample (n=104), and the only one that was created exclusively for the purpose of this study: we surveyed 275² young people who entered the Ellis Community

¹ The Iowa Heartland Sample was created by the Network to have a rural sample for comparison. While the sample is quite diverse, it is not based on a pre-existing longitudinal youth study.

² The survey response rate was 81 percent of students who had entered the high school as freshman. We did not seek interviews with young people who moved away and completed high school in another

High School between 1986 and 1988 and between 1991 and 1993. We then followed up with 104 in-depth interviews when they were aged 22–31. This group had no children of immigrants and only two respondents (siblings) were of mixed racial ancestry. Finally, the Minnesota sample (n=54) targeted native born whites, African Americans, and a small sample of Hmong³. The Minnesota sample was overwhelmingly female, partly because, in an effort to create an economically diverse sample, interviewers targeted past and present TANF recipients. All of the in-depth interviews covered a set range of topics in a mutually agreed upon questionnaire.

The interviews were transcribed and coded in ATLAS-ti. With ATLAS-ti it is possible to sort responses within families and categories to determine how social class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, and region may play a role in how young people view marriage and relationships. For the class-based analysis, we used educational attainment as a proxy for class. Given the mobility of second generation immigrants, educational status was preferable to parent's level of education given that so many young people in our sample had far exceeded their own parents' social position professionally. And given the relative youth of our sample, we decided income, particularly in the case of students, was not a reliable marker for social class when compared to education. While we used ethnicity and race to analyze our responses as well, this paper includes no mention of respondents' race and ethnicity since our analysis did not show significant racial and ethnic differences in young people's orientations towards marriage.

Relationships in the Post-Romantic Era

A half century ago, family texts and professional advice touted the advantages of marriage. The dominant model of marriage was the companionate marriage that deemed, in matrimony, two people would merge their fortunes and their selves into a single identity to which their personal interests and needs would be subordinated. (Cherlin 2004) Many such unions occurred and were celebrated at anniversaries and funerals. However, the demands of a companionate marriage were high and the rewards and obligations were not always equally shared in arrangements that required a relatively strict division of labor. The implicit understanding that men ruled the roost created a hierarchy within marriage that is no longer widely shared by most of the young people whom we interviewed.

We sense that many young people have modified essential elements of the companionate marriage. Whether they adhere to the ideal or not, they recognize that the traditional hierarchy based on a sharp, gender-based division of labor is no longer viable. Moreover, the young adults that we spoke with acknowledged that a successful marriage must allow for greater space for individual lives within and outside the union, what Andrew Cherlin has described as the *individualized marriage*. (Cherlin 2004:852) Today's young people take a highly choreographed view of relationships. The idealized couple dynamic is something akin to a pair of figure skaters. Each partner moves on the ice separately, and yet, each one must always be aware of their partner and somehow manage to move in tandem.

community or visiting foreign exchange students. We did, however, complete surveys with young people who dropped out of high and completed GEDs.

³ The Hmong were not included in our analysis because of they have a "cultural marriage" which is distinctive from state recognized unions. We have excluded such unions because they do not fall within in the bounds of conventional state marriages. Because of the varying levels of recognition for gay marriage, we have also excluded discussions of marriage among young people who identified themselves as homosexuals.

Even though many of the tenants of companionate marriage remain intact, especially the strong emphasis on friendship and compatibility, we heard little talk of romantic love, especially among the older youth in our sample. For this single, 28-year-old woman college graduate living in New York, there is no time for romance's volatility and passion's unpredictability now that she is more mature and, like so many other twenty and thirty something adults we spoke to, she has a child of her own to raise. She explains, "When you're younger you [go out] and you have boyfriends you don't see people in the same way as you get older...If he's not someone you're gonna be with [for the long haul], you might as well just let them go ahead because it's not worth the time. And you know that now [when you get older], but back then, it's like, 'Oh my God, he's the world,' you know. But now it is like you don't have the time to waste. And I have a daughter and I don't, you know, you don't want this one and that one in and out of her life."

Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (forthcoming) offer a useful typology for distinguishing between friendship and romantic relationships. Friendships, they observe, are "cooperatively constructed" while romances must contend with the concept of "exclusivity." Communication in romances can be awkward while the communication between friends is "relaxed" and marked by "social ease." Romances suffer from "heightened emotionality" and power "asymmetries" while friendships are settled and characterized by "balanced reciprocity."

Love, in the words of a 27-year-old New York man with some post secondary education, "is the best and worst thing" about his relationship with his serious girlfriend. "It's good that we love each other so much but at the same time, because maybe she loves me so much and I love her, she knows that it's her advantage and my advantage too. But there's certain things that you can say to a person, and you can *hurt* them, and you know that you're gonna hurt them because they love you...there's like a saying in Spanish 'ambos' it means, it goes both ways- it could be good and it could be bad."

Couples fight; friends get along. Friends accept you at face value; romantic partners can be needy and demanding. A 26-year old New Yorker currently enrolled in a four year college says that she and her longtime boyfriend have moved to a more secure phase in their relationship now that they are not "lovey-dovey" and more like friends "who get along." She explains, "Like I know he's there for me, in my hard moments. ...You know, we're not like calling each other every minute, like a lot of people we know. My friends are always on the cell phone [with the people they are seeing]. Let's say I was going to the library and I changed plans and I was going out to eat...I would have to call my boyfriend and tell him. Maybe [we just] have a more mature relationship."

Comfort in knowing one another, a defining characteristic of "grown-up" relationships, is one of the most valued features of a successful marriage. A marriage partner should allow you to be yourself and accept you fully. According to a 29-year-old Minnesota man currently enrolled in a four year college and working full time, being friends with his future wife for several years made it possible for them to know what they were "dealing with" within their relationship. He continues "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 because there was nothing for her to change who she was and what she was all about. 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."

When young people do talk about love and marriage, they do not want to be under the spell of "out-of-control romantic love." Their notion of love within marriage gives partners the means to sublimate personal desire and self-interest for the collective good of a

relationship. While a marriage ideally offers partners space and freedom to follow their own paths, even the most flexible arrangements will call on a partner to make sacrifices. In these moments, love is the resource couples invoke as they try to see beyond their own preferences. A 33-year-old New York woman with a vocational certificate talks about love when she recounts her struggles with her husband. “He loves me to death, I mean, we’ve been up and down with lots of stuff. I guess all marriages are like that. You have to grow into each other, you know what I mean, and everybody’s changing. Everybody changes. You’ve been through different changes throughout your life. As you get older, you’re able to cope with it, you know.”

According to a 30-year-old New York woman with a bachelor’s degree, “I never realized how hard marriage could be. I love him dearly. I did marry him cause he’s my best friend; he’s also a pain in the ass....It was just hard. I never imagined it would be so hard. I think we fought for 11 months and it just magically went away. It was miserable. And it was really weird. Now we’re just in love, we do argue, but it’s good. I don’t know. It’s a trip.” Finally, a 34-year-old New Yorker with a high school diploma says love “isn’t romance and stars and what TV [perceives] it to be. It’s a decision. Either you decide to love somebody or you don’t. And that’s all there is to it.” Another New Yorker, a 23-year-old woman about to begin a Master’s degree program, believes “love comes after marriage.” She explains, “Like in the beginning you don’t even know what it is, it’s just attraction, but real love grows over time and over giving to that person and love keeps growing. You don’t fall out of love in a marriage. You work really hard at a marriage.” Love is not spell-binding but it is a binding force nonetheless.

The ideal marriage partner should “share a similar outlook” and make you feel “grounded” and “centered.” A 29-year-old Minnesota woman with a bachelor’s degree who hopes to marry her boyfriend soon sees her current relationship as “a place that’s comfortable, exciting, empowering and centering.” She continues, “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.”

What It Takes to Get Married: The Stages of Development

We found little evidence that young people reject marriage outright, it is just that the complex nature of early adulthood in the 21st century combined with young people’s high expectations for marriage place many obstacles on the way of young people’s pursuit of marriage. Marriage, once the master status from which all the other milestones of adulthood were achieved, is now something young people are only prepared to do once they feel settled into adult roles. (Furstenberg 1978, Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). In years past, being married meant you were an adult, today you have to be an adult to be married. Young people in rural Iowa feel ready for marriage more quickly than their counterparts in suburban Minneapolis, New York, and San Diego. (McLaughlin, Lichter, and Johnston 1993).

For a group we call the *marriage planners*, marriage remains a life goal, but it is just one of many options that can command young people’s immediate attention. While those who view marriage as a natural outcome of a relationship that has endured over a period of time are *marriage drifters*. Iowans speedy transitions through work and school combined with a social context where marriage occurs at an earlier age feeds into this more traditional timing and orientation towards marriage consistent with *marriage drifters*. A 24-year-old Iowa woman with an associate’s degree who married her high school sweetheart at the age of 21

epitomizes such a view, “I was ready. I mean we had been together forever. It seemed like it was just, you know, it’s either now or never.” A 24-year-old single Iowan and in the final stages of law school, explains how his sense of the right time for marriage has altered since he left his small hometown. He has shifted from being a *marriage drifter* to a *marriage planner*. “I always thought growing up, oh 22 or 23 years old [is the time to get married] and now it’s like there’s so much more that I want to do. I think that’s something about Ellis; people that stick around there tend to get married a lot quicker, a lot more quickly and we were just talking about this last night. We have a friend who came down to see us. She’s got it in her mind that she needs to be married now, or engaged because all her friends are. I’m just like, you came down here to go to school and with women getting more education now and everything, it’s not 20 year olds getting married anymore.”

No one speaks specifically of courtships, but in fact there is a distinct notion that relationships must develop over time, be tested, and ultimately move to “absolute commitment.” The hurdles that slow young people’s progress on the way towards marriage offer revealing insights into what marriage means today. *Marriage planners* talk a great deal about being ready (or not ready) for marriage. Being ready means feeling settled, mature and having achieved personal, educational, and career goals. Within the high-pressured lives so prevalent among the urban young people, focus on work, school, and children become incompatible with the emotional labor required for serious, committed relationships. The fast pace of modern life, the high cost of housing, the demands on completing one’s education, the challenges of the labor market, and not to mention a social context which makes it relatively easy for young people to enjoy the benefits of marriage without its obligations, makes the transition to marriage for young people in metropolitan areas more tumultuous and uncertain.

As a single 24-year-old San Diego man with a bachelor’s degree in engineering tells us, his life “is too hard” for a serious relationship. “This living situation I have right now...I only work part time but it feels like I have very little time.” 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 single, 25-year-old San Diego man with an associate’s degree in auto mechanics, marriage will happen sometime in the distant future. Right now, “I’d rather concentrate on work and stuff like that...” There is no time for time even for dating because he is such a “workaholic.” He explains, “I think I’d prefer to marry one of these days. Like every other guy I say ‘I’m not getting married.’ [laughing] but somehow it ends up happening.”

According to a 23-year-old New York man going into his third year of law school, balancing the demands of school has put stress on his serious relationship. “We tend to get along pretty well but it seems that once law school came into the picture it put a little space between us, but we tend to get along pretty well..... I spend more time in law school than I do in my own house. I mean, before law school we’d see each other almost every day. After law school, at most we see each other on weekends.” A 30-year old New York woman with a bachelor’s degree recounts the story of her long distance relationship. Her account chronicles how the complexity of contemporary couple dynamics means that she and her boyfriend live their separate and “entrenched” lives. Her views capture the essence of being a *marriage planner*, because even though the young woman wants a marriage, neither she nor her boyfriend seems willing to alter their individual lives and goals.

We’ve talked about marriage and living together but it’s hard when we don’t have a chance to see each other. It’s not like, ‘Hey, what are you doing? I want to come over.’ It’s very strategic, like it’s very planned. I’ve just closed on a condo [in New

York] and he's closed on one in Boston. Don't ask me what we're doing, because my grandmother says to me, 'You guys aren't even working ...to get closer together.' *It's like we're being entrenched in our current situations...* We haven't really said that in a year from now [let's reevaluate our plans] because we don't want to put any pressure on ourselves.

Economic, work, and educational considerations aside, twenty and thirty somethings also insist that personal growth and maturity should come before marriage. A single 24-year-old San Diego man with some post-secondary education tells us that a successful relationship is impossible if the romantic partners are not settled and mature before they commit. He uses his experiences in a recent relationship to illustrate the point: "I had my money issue, and [my ex-girlfriend] had her future issue. Like goals, she didn't have any. She was lazy. She didn't go to school. So we were always fighting with each other about money and school or stuff like that." Even though this 24-year-old New York woman with a bachelor's degree believes her boyfriend "is the one for her," she insists both she and her boyfriend need to mature *on their own* before they can move to a higher level of commitment. "I feel like I have growing up to do individually and together before we're able to get married or have children." Finally, a single 25-year-old woman New Yorker, enrolled in a four year college and working full-time, declares you can only be ready for marriage after you achieve "personal goals" and are "satisfied as a person" and "stable." The young woman goes on to list what she needs, besides a fiance, before walking down the aisle. "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."

The Marriage Mentality

There is no doubt that today's young people expect to have completed personal and professional goals before they marry, but making partner and buying a home do not guarantee that the next step will be walking down the aisle. The personal and professional prerequisites for marriage must come in conjunction with the marriage mentality. The marriage mentality includes accepting the norm of exclusivity for marital relationship and embracing life-altering responsibilities the status of wife or husband demands. Within a social context where marriage is a natural part of early adulthood, as is the case for the *marriage drifters*, marriage flows inevitably from a relationship of a certain duration, that is, when the couple has been time tested.

In Iowa, young people marry because they have been together for a while and this is what is expected. Iowans do not seem to require the marriage mentality. When a 24-year-old Iowan with a bachelor's degree recounts how he decided to get married, he tells a typical account for his peers. "I guess [marriage] just seemed like the next step. We had been dating 7 or 8 years, all throughout high school and college, so it pretty much just felt natural. It was the next thing to do I guess you know I pretty much knew that she was the person that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with so I guess that was the next step that's the last step you can take."

In contrast, a 27-year-old New Yorker with a vocational certificate who now feels ready for marriage, describes the transformation as an internal change she recognizes in herself. “I want to be married. Lately, I’ve been thinking, ‘Oh, I want to get married.’ I never used to think about that. You know what it is, I’ve changed my mentality. It’s family, you know, before it used to be, ‘I don’t care if I leave my boyfriend, that’s fine.’ Whatever. Now it’s changed. I want to have a family. I want to have kids. I want that. I want to get married, like in a church.”

According to a single 25-year-old New Yorker enrolled in a four year college, who says he would like to marry if he “finds the right person,” the major obstacle to more serious relationships and ultimately marriage is that he does not “see himself old” and settled. He insists, “I want to enjoy life. There’s people I know that are married. They don’t really feel happy because when you’re married you can’t do that much.”

Others say they put off marriage because it is such a momentous and permanent choice. In the words of a single 27-year-old New York professional “You can’t rush into marriage.” He continues, “I’m a little older and things are different, but financially, I’m not ready. And mentally, there’s days when I feel like I could and days when I feel like I’d rather be single....Not in the sense that I want to go out and play around and stuff. I feel like I don’t want to come home to a wife.”

Here a 25-year-old San Diego woman with a GED and some Naval experience, describes the pitfalls of getting married before each partner is truly ready. This young wife and mother recounts how she and her husband recently separated because while she has embraced the marriage mentality, her husband has not.

I was 21 and he was 18 [when we got married], so he's still very immature....Yeah, and like I said, [for] my first pregnancy I was alone, so I expected him [to be different and] to be there 24/7, you know. You see in the TV and all the movies, [the men] are always there, so that's what I expected, and he wasn't [...] And he played a lot, and he's admitted it now. He was really into his sports. He was really into basketball, and doing the single guy thing still, which is what he did a lot....I was in that marriage mentality. I already had been a mother for three years. I wanted a husband. I wanted to be settled. I was tired of dating and going from guy to guy, you know, I wanted a father for my daughter. So, the fact that it wasn't like that it was a very very rocky. We actually have only been living together [...] since October cause he moved out.

The willingness to make such a commitment is forged by a process of individual development and interpersonal change that produces a readiness for the sacrifices required for marriage and family building. This attitude comes slowly to young adults in New York and perhaps especially to men.

Two elements of relationships couples struggle to come to terms with are exclusivity and the balance of power. Men complain about women who will not allow them to indulge in the occasional night out or who force them to stop spending money on things for themselves. When men explain their ambivalence towards relationships, they frame their uncertainty in an unwillingness to give up the self-centered ways of bachelordom and settle down. A 23-year-old, college educated New York man tells us that the pressure he feels from his girlfriend is the age-old battle between the sexes.

That’s how [...] most women operate. They need to settle down and a man needs to run around. I don't have an issue settling down -well, I do...I wish that [...] she

didn't have her biological clock ticking and 'cause she and I understand [...] that it's not good to have children after thirty ...but I don't want children before thirty, but probably, you know, if I'm going to stay with her, it's going to have to be a decision that I'm gonna have to make.So it's hard, and it's something that needs to work itself out in the next couple of years, if we are to be together. There's obviously pressure for marriage.....She says there's no pressure for marriage, but there will be...

For this 23-year-old New Yorker in law school there is growing tension between him and his longtime girlfriend over the way he spends his free time. “There's a lot of issues regarding female friends I have at law school and stuff of that nature. It's quite understandable, I mean, I see where she's coming from.” A 25-year-old New York man enrolled in a four year college blames a recent break up on the fact that his girlfriend was too demanding of his time. “The kind of person I am, I'm kind of independent. She kind of wanted to see me all the time. It's like smothering, I guess, is the way I feel. I want to have my own freedom; I want to have my own time.” A 26-year old newlywed in San Diego, who works as an auto technician, echoes this view when he describes his struggle to adjust to married life. “[When I got married], I lost my privacy that I used to have before. It's not always about me no more. You know, it's not. I just can't think only about myself now, you know, I can't be selfish no more. I have to think of her.”

For women though, they fight against a sense that they will lose themselves in marriage. A 26-year-old high school graduate from San Diego blames the problems in her relationship on her estranged husband's controlling behavior. “You know, I mean I had a rough time with him. I mean, he's very overprotective and possessive. He wouldn't let me do whatever I want. He's just like my dad when I was a teenager living at home. He'd give me curfew, you know, check the time when I was coming home. Just calling me constantly. He don't trust me. Even when I come home to visit my mom and dad, he would call there.... I didn't like that.”

For a 29-year-old teacher's assistant and single mother in Minnesota, the problem in her current relationship with her youngest child's father is that he expects her to be “cave womanish.” “I have my place and duties and he has his, he truly believes he's supposed to be the breadwinner and I shouldn't work. I don't know why men do that, but it seems like it's a possessive thing. He's not that bad but he's not that good either. He could work on it a little more.” A married 29-year-old white housewife from Minnesota remembers how her former boyfriend's despotic behavior destroyed their relationship. “I could not even go to the bathroom without him at the door....I was physically abused by him, I went through hell and back because of him.” She continues, “When you are trapped in a relationship 24-7, and they have that control and that power over you, you don't know who you are, you are what they want you to become. And until you've had enough or until you've had that glimmer of hope that there is that hope out there again, you can't do anything. You're literally frozen in here. I know what it's like to be frozen in here, and I hate it.”

Even though men and women worry about power dynamics within marriage, women frame their anxieties of power in terms of being dominated and men worry about not being allowed to be “selfish.” Thus, young couples are trying to achieve the delicate balance between a commitment to the collectivity and a hard earned struggle to preserve an individual identity that will be respected and preserved in the union. Cherlin refers to the increasing importance of self within modern American marriage as the *individualized marriage*. (Cherlin 2004: 852) In this respect, the ideal marriage does not embody the old formula of

“one plus one equals one” but a new model that could be described as “one plus one equals three: you, me, and us.”

Making a Commitment

Another element of the *marriage planner* view is the way today’s young adults understand making a commitment as an on-going effort in which romantic partners come to think of one another as us, rather than simply you and me. It must be achieved by 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. Given that relationships gradually evolve over an extended period of time; in our interviews young people describe cohabitation, not as a marriage-substitute but rather an intermediate phase – a dress rehearsal of sorts - for couples working towards a marriage’s absolute commitment.⁴

A cohabitating 23-year-old college graduate from San Diego describes the changes in a relationship that seems to be inching in the direction of marriage. Even though the practical concerns of saving time and money pushed this couple to cohabit, the young woman says the pair moved in together because they were “ready” for what she regards as a new phase in the relationship. Indeed, she ranks this relationship as the most marriage-worthy precisely because “He’s probably the person I’ve been with the longest.” Even though there are no specific plans to wed at this juncture, the woman insists this is only because she and her boyfriend do not want to get married “at this point.”

This 30 year-old college educated New York woman also feels ready to live with, but not marry, her current boyfriend. Though she describes marriage as a label, it is a label, she says, she wants for herself at some point in the future. She explains, “I wouldn’t know how to be married or not, it’s like a label to me. It’s something I want to do, but I don’t necessarily know if it would make our relationship stronger or better. At this point, I would just like to live together, then we could spend more time together and that would be the best thing. I think I’d be terrified about getting married at this point. [But] I want to be married and this is the closest I would say I’ve ever been to wanting to be married.”

The most striking examples of how *marriage planners* see commitment as an evolving process may be among the unmarried parents we interviewed. During the 1950s, only one in 20 children were born to single parents, today the number is one in three. Unmarried parents’ slow and difficult march towards marriage brings to life the unique challenge such couples face. (Edin 2000; Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004, Edin and Kefalas 2005) When childbearing occurs outside of marriage, young people recognize that parents ought to want to stay together for the sake of a child. (Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004, Edin and Kefalas 2005) But, changing norms – specifically the fear of divorce and the declining stigmatization of nonmarital childbearing - have made the shotgun wedding a thing of the past.

⁴ Kathleen Kiernan (2002) refers to a society that sees cohabitation as a rehearsal, but not yet a substitute for marriage as “stage two.” In Smock and Gupta (2002) the authors analyze marriage rates among cohabiting couples and contend that the declining rates of marriage among these partnerships demonstrates how American society is somewhere in between Kiernan’s stage two and stage three, a society in which cohabitation is a socially recognized alternative to marriage. Stage Three societies include The Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden.

For this 24-year-old high school graduate from San Diego, there is a growing sense that he and the mother of his children should be married, and yet, he tells us he still does not feel ready, even though it is the children who are pressuring their parents to wed.

[Marriage], it's somewhat important...it's somewhat important [because] now the children want to know why [we're] not married. And explaining to them, and making sure that you plant that right seed in your child's mind that they can understand why, it's more challenging, more and more complicated. And it's also somewhat important. Because again, you want to show them that I love your mom this much. That we need to be married. So that when they grow up, they understand that that was important, as well. And not grow up living with the person that they're living with or having relationships, that their relationships, and that they're actually having something solid, and something more, more pure. More, I don't know. Just something that just means more than just being together....I've gone through these many years and not been married. And you know, it hasn't been all that important. But, you know, there comes a time and a point where, you know, that decision has to be made.

When he says how marriage “hasn’t been all that important,” his words demonstrate the widespread sense that marriage’s practical significance has declined. At the same, its symbolic role has expanded, even among the most marriage wary, marriage “is more than just being together.” (Cherlin 2004; Edin and Kefalas 2005)

To a 23-year-old first generation immigrant living in San Diego and attending a four year college while working full-time who is also living with the mother of his child, there is no need to rush into a marriage for the sake of appearances. He says, “Marriage is something you earn....If [she] graduates and [I] graduate, you can start working and we can afford [a wedding] and that’s when you get married. It’s not just cause we have a child and all of a sudden we need to go out and do it.” Even though this single 22-year-old New York man enrolled in a four year college sees himself getting married in the future, he does not believe marriage is necessary for being a responsible parent “I can't see myself at the church with a suit and all that. But I can see myself with some person for life, you know. I don't think you have to [be married] to be parents cause marriage, nowadays, it's just a piece of paper.”

For a cohabitating 25-year-old New York woman with an associate’s degree, who has been with the father of her child for five years, marriage will only come once the couple has some economic security. “Actually, from my family, I was getting pressure [to get married], but I just didn't like feed into it 'cause we weren't ready, even though we had a child, but, we weren't ready to get married. Financially we couldn't deal with it 'cause we were still living at my mother's house when we had our son, so, I just couldn't see the need for anybody to approach us to get married. we are planning on doing it, so whenever we're ready, we'll do it. RT: How long have you been engaged for, like officially? R: Five years. (laugh).”

A 24-year -old woman enrolled in community college in San Diego who has been living with her boyfriend for seven years wants to get married. She and her boyfriend, who have a daughter, have broken up, reconciled, gotten engaged, and yet there is still no wedding date. As the years wear on, she insists the pair will only wed when she is truly confident that they are ready to make a lasting commitment.

I'm hoping [we get married]. I don't know. It depends on how everything turns out. I don't know, I don't know where we're going. I mean like we, I had pretty much almost broken it off with him last year. I mean, we were, I mean like I had him out

of the house and everything. It's like, I mean, we've been together seven years in January... January 29th. And I mean, it was just like to the point where I don't know what he's doing, I don't know where he wants us to go. You know? And I'm thinking about it and stuff like that. And I think about it a lot. It's like, I don't know if he's just afraid that he's going to be all alone....It's just like some days I feel like [a proposal] was forced out of him, you know? Kind of like I [made him do it]. So I haven't decided yet...I just want to make sure that like, you know, he really means it. That it's something he really wants to do. Or if was just like something to keep me from going away, you know?

A 24-year old San Diego woman, with some post secondary experience and a six year old son describes the reasons she chose not to become engaged to her child's father. Although she was with the father of her child for two years, his proposals – which never included a ring – made her uncertain about his intentions. To her way of thinking, it is not enough to “just ask” for a woman's hand. His casual attitude towards an engagement, failure to purchase a ring, and penchant for the bachelor lifestyle gives her pause.

He'[d] asked me twice, but I thought it was a joke. Because you just don't ask. [And anyway], my son's father, he still liked hanging out with his friends. He still liked the girls' attention. And I just never trusted him. So that's why I never married him. I just thought it was a joke [when he proposed]....He didn't do no kind of romantic thing. He just asked me. And I just said no and I guess later on that night, I guess his cousin told his mom that he was crying cause I said no. [But] he showed me no ring or nothing. You know, when someone serious, they would do it right. You just don't ask... so I didn't take it seriously....He's like 'How could I ask?' I was like, 'Well, that's not the right way to ask.'....That's why I'm kind of iffy on seeing someone new cause like I don't want to mess that up. But then, we both need to feel the same way. It's just that right now, we have a lot of working to do on ourselves. And, you know, of course, we want a family for our son.

To her way of thinking, she is wary about walking down the aisle, not because she trivializes marriage, but because she cherishes it. Even in cases of a shared child, today's young people demand a great deal of prospective marriage partner.

There can be little doubt that fifty years ago, the social prohibitions against nonmarital childbearing would have led a young woman with a baby (or expecting one) to accept a man's marriage proposal (whether or not a ring was offered or how she was asked). The ambivalence that many young people exhibit comes, in part, from a combination of myriad alternatives to not marrying, an abiding apprehension that many marriages do not work out, an excessively high set of standards for what a successful marriage (and proposal) is and the perceived need for attaining personal maturity and having the resources to settle down and form a family.

Findings: The New Marriage Norms

When young adults discuss their apprehensions about marriage, their reservations rarely reveal that they reject marriage as a socially relevant institution; rather their doubts arise over whether they will be able to find the right partner establish a viable and rewarding relationship, or satisfy the economic conditions for a permanent union. Even among the most marriage wary - there was a sense that marriage could still be a possibility if the right partner and circumstances arise. Most young people hold a *marriage planner* view: they would like to do at some point in their lives, even if they are not clear if they will meet the right partner or when they will ever be prepared to make such a commitment. In other words, the

high demands associated with building a successful marriage and the tremendous pressures on young people to create a degree of economic independence and establish themselves in their labor market are formidable barriers to getting married early in life.

We also find that young people have modified the ideal form of marriage, what family sociologists called the companionate model, in order to adjust to the growing reality that young people must pursue individual paths within the framework of a conjugal marriage relationship. 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 interests.

While young people also insist educational attainment, economic security, maturity, and personal development must come before marriage, the achievement of these goals, however, does not guarantee that a young man or woman is ready to wed. Another distinguishing feature of the *marriage planners* is that they must acquire the “marriage mentality.” The “marriage mentality” refers to a young person’s self-definition. With the marriage mentality, a young adult decides they are 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 a marriage unless, of course, they are willing to risk divorce. The more traditional external, institutional pressures to wed from the state or religious institutions that define *marriage drifters* have been replaced by a profoundly internal mechanism which is self-directed and contingent on other life circumstances. Of course, acquiring the marriage mentality, no doubt, also is dependent on cues provided by the decisions of friends and peers who are also struggling with similar decisions and signaling when marriage and whether marriage is an appropriate life-choice.

One of the more striking findings was the surprising de-emphasis on love and romance.⁵ While young people may spend their adolescence integrating romantic relationships into friendship ones, when young adults approach the time of life when they want to wed, it is the more predictable and stable dynamics of friendship that they value in finding a partner for the lifetime commitment. Most of the young adults whom we spoke to never mentioned love or stated explicitly how they were wary about using love as a compelling reason for marriage.

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

Quantitative analysis of our national samples reveals that higher levels of education delay the timing of marriage (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart and Landry 1992; Oppenheimer, Blossfield and Wackerow 1995; Quian and Preston 1993; Sweeney 2002; Turcotte and Goldscheider 1998). The most striking socioeconomic difference we noted in our data was the way unmarried parents discussed the role of children in their romantic relationships. While the college educated delay marriage and childbearing, less-educated young adults put off marriage, but not always children. (Edin and Kefalas 2005, Furstenberg 2001, Wilson 1987) Among the parents we interviewed, the existence of shared children is not a strong incentive to get married. Even though the shotgun wedding is a thing of the past, children are not wholly irrelevant to marital decisions since a couple’s ability to come together and raise their children together represents one of the most important ways couples assess their readiness for marriage. (Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004, Edin and Kefalas 2005) Less-educated and less-affluent young people often have children in informal unions or enter

⁵ It is interesting to note that Coontz finds that contemporary marriage places a very high degree of emphasis on romantic love, but in this sample of younger people (many of whom have yet to wed), there was a striking caution about the role of love in marriage.

cohabitation when they become pregnant in what might be called a “shotgun cohabitation,” but do not typically choose marriage merely because of a pregnancy. The informal union only is converted into marriage when it is time-tested and a couple has achieved economic security (Smock, Manning, and Porter 2004, Edin and Kefalas 2005).

While the quantitative data revealed different rates of marriage among ethnic groups, the qualitative analysis failed to uncover systematic racial and ethnic variations within young people’s orientations to marriage, perhaps because our ethnic sub-samples were simply too small to detect variation. We can say that most young people see marriage as a desirable goal and very few young people from any group saying they see no reason to marry.⁶ 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 when they will feel prepared to make such a commitment.

Regional Differences: Marriage Drifters versus Marriage Planners

The strongest differences in young people’s expectations for marriage were by region. (See McLaughlin, Lichter, and Johnston 1993) Among the overwhelmingly urban and suburban *marriage planners*, marriage must compete for a young person’s time and interest. To *marriage planners*, marriage remains a life goal, but it is just one of many options that can command young people’s immediate attention. The portion of the sample who grew up in rural Iowa were *marriage drifters* who continue to view marriage as a natural outcome of relationship that has endured over a period of time, *marriage planners*, in contrast, were far more circumspect and deliberate about their marital plans. Strong social pressures supporting young people’s desire to wed during their early twenties still exist for the *marriage drifters* in rural Iowa.

Such regional differences originate in the way metropolitan young people’s lives are filled with a complex array of activities that makes marriage just one of many things that competes for a young person’s time and interest. (Grazian 2005) There are also greater numbers of potential partners and less social pressure to view marriage as a necessary part of adulthood in diverse urban settings. While marriage remains a strong life objective, it is just one of many options that can command young people’s immediate attention in urban, suburban settings. It is possible that marriage trends among rural youth could be attributed to their lower levels of educational attainment. However, urban and suburban working- and lower-class young people were far more likely to express views consistent with *marriage planners*, not *marriage drifters*, irregardless of their educational level.

Conclusion

Our framework for understanding these differences is consistent with survey data showing deep social class and regional differences in the timing of marriage. It is also bolstered by results of public opinion data showing that many adults no longer regard marriage as an event that needs to occur during the transition to adulthood. Instead, a growing number of young people and even adults in their parents and grandparents generation think of marriage as something that takes place after other transitions have occurred. This is markedly different from the way that adulthood was constructed at the middle of the last century when marriage was the mainspring of adult transitions and occurred, at least for most women and many men, at the time that they left the natal household (Furstenberg et. al. 2004, Fussell and Furstenberg 2004). The careful and meticulous testing and planning young people endure on their way to today’s marriages

⁶ The strongest rejections of marriage came from a handful of African Americans in the New York sample.

could be seen as evidence of this generation's reverence for, not rejection of, marriage's significance. (Edin and Kefalas 2005) In the words of a 29-year-old Minnesota woman with a bachelor's degree and four children "The moment we got married it changed. It changed because now it was like we knew it was a serious thing, a serious commitment and to just walk away was something you should not do quickly...I pretty much believe in sticking something out."

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