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SMART
Strengthening Marriages and Relationships Training

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF MARRIAGE: 1950-2010[1]

[1]Adapted from "*The Evolving Role of Marriage: 1950-2010*" by Shelly Lundberg and Robert A. Pollak, *The Future of children", Volume 25(2),* p. 29. Copyright 2015 by the *Center for the Future of Children, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.*

With the beginning of the century, the past, present and future state of marriage in the United Stated (U.S.) became a topic of extensive academic interest (p.30).[1] The following are some of the key findings in relation to the evolving role of marriage in the U.S.

The Changing Marriage Trend

1. The 1905s experienced a record drop in the median age of first marriage; "just over 20 for women, and about 23 for men" (p.30). Since the 1960s age of first marriage continued to rise for the next four decades (U.S. Census Bureau).[1]
2. Since the 1950s, women started to gain better economic status with eventually blurred out the differences between wage-earning men and stay-at-home women by the first half of the 20th century; these differences were pivotal for marriages (Goldin, 2006).
3. Starting 1970s, women in the U.S. increasingly started to gain higher education, join the work force, and hence delay getting married. Additionally, people started to expect smaller families, divorce rates increased, and the rate of marriage among older men and women also declined (p.30).[1]
4. Between 1960 and 1980, the rate of annual divorce ("the number of divorces per thousand married couples" (p.31)) more than doubled, increasing from less than 10 to more than 20. Additionally, 1960s and 1970s experienced a series of judiciary decisions made by the Supreme Court that allowed greater and more stabilized financial rights to children born out of wedlock (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007).
5. Starting 1980s, the pervasiveness of premarital cohabitation significantly increased among young couples; this in turn delayed marriage (Bailey, Guldi, & Hershbein, 2014). The aftermath of 1980 experienced a stabilization of the divorce rate, although it remained increasingly prevalent with specific age categories (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014).
6. "Since 1987, the proportion of women who are currently cohabitating has more than doubled (p.35)." (Manning, 2013).
7. In the 1990s, the number of young adult women with college degrees first equaled and eventually surpassed the number of male college graduates; further delaying marriage (Bailey, & Dynarski, 2011) (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

8. Additionally, as a result of state and federal laws, directed to reduce costs associated with establishing legal paternity, marriage became relatively less of a determinant in deciding a father's child-support obligations towards his children born out of wedlock (Rossion-Slater, 2015).
9. Currently, "more men and women than ever, though still a small minority, do not marry at all;" cohabitation has emerged both as a predecessor and an alternative to marriage; and out-of-wedlock child birth has become increasingly acceptable and prevalent (p. 30).

> *"Marriage as a social institution appeared to be endangered (p.30)."*

10. "Social stigmas associated with non-marital sex, cohabitation, non-marital fertility, and divorce have declined dramatically" (p.31). (Thornton & DeMarco, 2001).
11. Changes in social norms and judiciary system made divorce easier hence weakening commitments related to marital-unions.
12. As the differences between marriage and cohabitation continued to alleviate, an increasing number of children started to become part of cohabitating families (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008).
13. Compared to other wealthy nations, the U.S. experiences a relatively higher rate of child-birth that occurs outside of marriage or cohabitating union. Additionally, the nature of marital and cohabitation unions in the country is very unstable (Cherlin, 2009).

Marriage and Cohabitation Trends according to Demographics:

14. The top and the bottom sections of the income distribution hierarchy experienced the most profound changes in relation to marriage and childbearing trends (p.30).[1]
15. Compared to Europe, in the U.S. individuals with lower levels of education are more likely to enter a cohabitation union and bear children outside of wedlock (Perelli-harris et al., 2010).
16. Within the white population, the decline in marriage rate has been more profound and swift for males and females with lower levels of education (p.33).[1]
17. Before the 1990s, non-college educated females were more likely to get married than college educated females (p.33).[1] However, since then the rates of both marriage and remarriage have increased within females with higher levels of education than in females with lower levels of education (Isen & Stevenson, 2011).
18. The predicted likelihood of a first marriage continuing for 15 years is significantly higher for females with higher education than females with lower levels education; 80 percent for females with college degree, 57 percent with females with some college and 53 percent for females with a high school diploma (National Survey of Family Growth).

> *"The prevalence of cohabitation sharply decreases as education rises (p.33)."*

19. Among highly educated females cohabitation usually acts as a precursor to marriage, while among poorer and less-educated females cohabitation in most cases end before transcending into a marital union (Licher, Turner, & Sassler, 2010).
20. Marriage is more prevalent among females with higher income than females with lower income (Oppenheimen, 2000).
21. Apart from extremely disadvantaged groups, "income-pooling by unmarried mothers and the unmarried fathers of their children would lift many families above the poverty line (p.37)." (Thomas & Sawhill, 2002; Thomas & Sawhill, 2005).

Understanding Retreat from Marriage

The two broad focuses of social science studies on the prevalence, stability and longevity of legal marriages have been: (a) "decreasing economic opportunities for many men", and (b) increasing economic opportunities for women" (p.34).[1] The following are some of the key findings:

> *"Economists view marriage as a choice made by individuals who evaluate the experienced gains from a specific marriage compared with other marriages or with living along (p.34)."*

1. The substitution of legal marriage by cohabitation was largely involved in the overall declination of the marriage rate (p.36).[1]
2. Retreat from marriage has been encouraged by "changing social norms about divorce, cohabitation, and gender roles" (p.34); these social norms have been largely influenced by "behavioral responses to market forces: (p.34) (Bachrach, Hindin, & Thomson, 2000).
3. There are two broad possible advantages of a marital union: (a) joint production, and (b) joint consumption (p.34).[1]
4. The benefits of marriage can be amplified by children in two ways: (a) children act as household public goods by providing their parents with the benefits of joint consumption, and (b) co-residing parents are more efficient in coordinating child-care and other investments for their children (Weiss & Willis, 1985).
5. In 1970s, controlled-fertility became accessible to young single women due to technical advances in contraceptives and changes in state laws including access to oral contraceptives and legalization of abortion (Goldin & Katz, 2002; Myers, 2012). As a result, social stigma related to premarital sex depleted and cohabitation became more common.

> *"The rapid changes in cohabitation, marriage, and non-marital fertility since 1960 are more easily explained as responses to changing incentives, rather than as responses to cultural changes in the significance of marriage (p.38)."*

6. As women gained more education, earned more wages, and spent more time in the labor market, the division between men and women in the work force began to decrease. This is turn, weakened the potential gains of a marital union (p.35).

> *"Delaying 'union formation' no longer required choosing between abstinence and the risk of an unplanned pregnancy (p.35)."*

7. The availability of marriageable men, especially black men, decreased with the loss of inner-city industrial jobs and increased incarceration rates. This reduced marriages rates among the black population (Wilson, 1987; Charles & Luoh, 2010).
8. Decline in marriage rates can also be attributed to government welfare benefits and welfare policies, however, this hypothesis is only applicable to individuals who are eligible or almost eligible to receive welfare benefits (Murray, 1984; Murray, 2012).
9. The decline of marriage in low-income communities can be explained by women's "unrealistically high aspirations for marriage (p.38)." For these women, marriage is not connected to parenting; it is, however,

"the white picket fence dream" (p.38) that includes good stable income, matured partner and a steady family structure (Edin & Kefalas, 2011).

10. Patterns of traditional marriage and child-bearing are relatively more stable among individuals with higher levels of education. One of the assumptions behind these patterns is college-graduate men and women are more committed towards traditional norms and social values than individuals with lower levels of education (p.38).

The Difference between Marriage and Cohabitation in an Economical Way

1. It is more costly to end a marriage than cohabitation. The cost to end a marriage includes financial, social, and psychological loss (p.36).
2. "Marriage serves as a commitment mechanism that fosters cooperation and encourages marriage-specific investments (p.36)." (Matouschek & Rasul, 2008)
3. Many people perceive divorce as a personal failure and hence try to avoid it, sometimes by delaying or rejecting marriage (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005).
4. The difference between marriage and cohabitation arises from "the public commitment to a permanent and exclusive relationship that a marriage entails (p. 36)." (Manning & Smock, 2005).

> *In the United States, "the institution of marriage retains considerable cultural significance (p.36)."*

Marriage and Investments in Children

> *"Long-term commitment is valuable in early 21st century America primarily because it promotes investment in children (p.39)."*

1. People in different socio-economic groups view their joint investment towards their children differently. This may explain the heterogeneity among the decline of marriage in different socio-economic groups over the past three decades (p.39).
2. Marriage among older couples may act as a mean to provide care for each other, and hence not related to parenting.
3. "The debate over same sex marriage is best understood as a contest over social recognition and acceptability, where considerations involving children play a secondary role (p.39)."
4. The decline in marriage rates and rise in non-marital fertility can be largely connected to the disparities in child outcomes, however, the "causation may run in opposite direction: parents who are able to adopt a high investment strategy are those most likely to get married and stay married, using marriage as a commitment device to support joint investments in their children (p.45)." If this is found to be true, then "equality of opportunity will be a major challenge in the 21st century (p.45)."
5. Inequality in parental resources can be attributed to "the rise in single-parent families", "widening gaps in divorce rates and the age at which women have children (p.33)." (McLanahan, 2004)
6. Compared to children with less-educated mothers, "young men and women today whose mothers attended college are more than twice as likely to graduate from college (p.34)." (Lundberg, 2013).

7. "A strong positive relation exists between younger children's stocks of human capital and the productivity of later investment in those children. That is, the returns to investments in older children are greater if investments were made when the children were young (p.43)."

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