

Love and Marriage in the Minds of Emerging Adults

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Much is made of the idea of marriage among young Americans, and the vast majority of them still wish to get married. Yet the institution seems disconnected not only from where they are in their lives but also where many of them want to go. Marriage becomes a future event that will somehow happen someday in the scripted manner in which they conceive of it.

This paper, excerpted from a chapter in *Premarital Sex in America*, explores these and other ideas about love and marriage among emerging adults, using research and data from numerous sources, including national surveys of youth, families, marriage, and religion.

The authors report that the vast majority of men and women age 18–23 want to marry but consider the age for marriage to be the late 20s and early 30s. They deem marriage any time before then to a bad idea. Some of the more religious emerging adults, however, do marry early, in part because the association of sex with marriage remains powerful for them. Since many young adults esteem the idea of marriage but believe it inappropriate for their age, they consider waiting until marriage for a fulfilling sex life to be outdated and possibly quite foolish. Religious young adults reflect this attitude but to a lesser degree than nonreligious young adults.

Economic circumstances exert some influence on how emerging adults make decisions about sex and marriage, according to the authors. In general, the economic situation in America is good, historically speaking. And when times are good and career opportunities are broad, delaying marriage strikes many young adults as a good idea. Young adults also offer other reasons, though not always well-founded, for putting off marriage:

- Emerging adulthood is the time for experimentation, self-discovery, and experiencing things. Since marriage is about stability, it is not something for the present.
- Marriage and parenting are both part of a package deal, so delaying marriage prolongs the personal freedom that comes with not having children.
- Education and work take priority over marriage, although these priorities are expected to change sometime in the future.
- Postponing marriage allows more time to find the right match. Marriage has to be good, or it is not worth the loss of independence.
- Getting the right fit in a partner in terms of sexual “chemistry” is important. Figuring out whether you have sexual chemistry with someone precludes waiting very long to have sex. Thus, many emerging adults, except the most religious ones, sense that abstinence is risky.

In addition, the authors suggest that growing numbers of emerging adults are simply less optimistic about the idea of marriage and place less confidence in the institution itself, while the norms that long characterized behaviors associated with marriage (e.g., sex and childbearing) are weakening. Young adults—especially the less religious ones— not only are delaying marriage but are increasingly open to alternative norms. And although religious emerging adults are the most apt to elect earlier marriage, significant minorities of them are questioning the value and possibility of a good marriage.