

Love and Marriage in the Minds of Emerging Adults
Excerpts from a chapter in *Premarital Sex in America*

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Some outside observers look at the relationship scene among young adults aged 18-23, consider it entirely about short-term hookups, and presume that the majority of emerging adults are avoiding lasting and meaningful intimate relationships in favor of random sex. While certainly the times have changed and so have our sexual norms, there's no evidence to suggest that emerging adults are disinterested in relationships that last, including marriage. In fact, they *want* to marry. In our interview study, in the online CSLS, and in lots of other studies, about 95 percent of all young women and men tell us they would like to get married someday.¹ Most just don't want to marry *now* or anytime soon.² They feel no rush, unlike previous generations. The slow-but-steady increase in average age at first marriage—to its present-day 26 for women and 28 for men—suggests that the *purpose* of dating or cross-sex romantic relationships is changing or has changed. Most sexual relationships among emerging adults do not end in marriage or even cohabitation. They just end.

Reasons for this are numerous, of course, but one overlooked explanation is that many of them don't know how to get or stay married to the kind of person they'd like to find. For not a few, their parents provided them with a glimpse into married life, and what they saw at the dinner table—if they dined with their parents much at all—didn't look very inviting. They hold the institution of marriage in very high regard, and put considerable pressure—probably too much—on what their own eventual marriage ought to look like. And yet it seems that there is little effort from any institutional source (like education or religion) aimed at helping emerging adults consider how their present social, romantic, and sexual experiences shape or war against their vision of marriage, or how marriage even

¹ Laurna Rubinson and Lisa DeRubertis. 1991. "Trends in Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors of a College Population over a 15-year Period." *Journal of Sex Education & Therapy* 17: 32-41. In the online (and ongoing) CSLS, only two percent of respondents say they don't want to get married. Nine percent say they aren't sure.

² Even among 25-34-year-old never-married men, who should be in the peak period of mate selection, nearly 50 percent of the least religious of them are still not actively looking for a mate.

fits in with their other life goals. In fact, talk of career goals seems increasingly divorced from the relational context in which many emerging adults may eventually find (or wish for) themselves. They speak of the MDs, JDs, and PhDs they intend to pursue and acquire with far more confidence than they speak of committed relationships or marriage. The former seem attainable, the latter altogether unclear and unreliable. Many educated emerging adults—especially less religious ones—are skeptical of constraints on their personal goals.

Since they esteem the idea of marriage and yet set it apart as inappropriate for their age, waiting until marriage for a fulfilling sex life is considered not just quaint and outdated but quite possibly foolish. It's certainly not a big deal anymore. Sex *outside* relationships might still be disparaged by many, but not sex *before* marriage. Jeffrey Arnett, a developmental psychologist who is intimately familiar with the lives of emerging adults, notes the absence of relationship permanence *as a value* in the minds of emerging adults:

Finding a love partner in your teens and continuing in a relationship with that person through your early twenties, culminating in marriage, is now viewed as unhealthy, a mistake, a path likely to lead to disaster. Those who do not experiment with different partners are warned that they will eventually wonder what they are missing, to the detriment of their marriage.³

Arnett's right. The majority of young adults in America not only think they should explore different relationships, they believe it may be foolish and wrong not to. There is value placed upon *flexibility*, *autonomy*, *change*, and the potential for *upgrading* among them. Religious young adults reflect this less than the nonreligious, but still share in the mentalities.

Reasons for the Rising Age at Marriage

³ Arnett 2004: 73.

Anecdotal evidence for the bad idea of marrying early abounds. So it doesn't just feel true to many emerging adults. They have examples of how it *is* true. Our point is simple: among emerging adults, the story of marriage is a narrative that now begins and belongs to the late 20s and 30s. To thwart that notion—either by marrying much earlier or much later—is to go “off script” and face social sanctions from peers and parents. In other words, people now need compelling reasons to marry young, because they anticipate criticism for doing so. A faculty friend of ours who married at 19 (and considers herself quite religious), after her first year at an elite university, shared with us how much of a pariah figure she became:

We got married when we were both 19, the summer after our freshman year...and I can't tell you how many people gave us—especially me—a hard time about it. Very few people took us seriously, and when I announced my engagement, instead of congratulating me, many people asked, ‘Are you pregnant?’

As a result, most don't veer off script. They wait. Some of the more religious emerging adults jump in, in part because the association of sex with marriage remains powerful for the devout. But religious Americans are marrying later too, on average. Before we describe the different imperatives embedded in that script, we should recall the economic state in which emerging adults make decisions about sex and marriage. In general, the economic situation in America and the West is a good one, all recessions aside. American higher education is extensive, very forgiving, and widely accessible. The share of women in the labor force is remarkably high by historical comparison. The times are good, historically speaking. And when times are good and career opportunities broad, delaying marriage will strike many

as a good idea. Since religiosity now predicts college attendance rather than avoidance, religious Americans feel in a bind—they want to marry *and* they want to finish college and start a career.

Mundane motivations to delay marrying, however, are often couched in a variety of cultural packages and stories, such as these:

1. *There's No Rush*

As a result of the compelling story about the hazards of early marriage and their own interests in beginning a career and experiencing independence for several more years, most emerging adults want to put off marriage until later in their 20s or early 30s. For most, education and work take priority over marriage. They anticipate that this may shift, but their presumption about it is entirely passive. It will just happen. They believe, too, that postponing marriage will ensure a better shot at eventual marital success.⁴ Marrying too early means a shorter search and heightened odds of a poorer match. Delayed marriage makes a good deal of practical sense in our modern information economy, especially given how educationally intensive it is.

Some demographers have suggested that traditional economic answers for delaying marriage—that there's been rapid expansion in educational and occupational opportunities for women—are increasingly insufficient for explaining contemporary shifts in family formation. Instead, many sense a concomitant *cultural* shift in marital decisions toward very individualistic ones based largely on personal freedom, taste, and fit.⁵ Criteria like seeking an emotional or spiritual connection make more

⁴ Whitehead, Barbara Dafoe, and David Popenoe. 2000. *Sex Without Strings, Relationships Without Rings: Today's Young Singles Talk about Mating and Dating*. New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project.

⁵ Bumpass, Larry L. 1990. "What's Happening to the Family? Interactions between Demographic and Institutional Change." *Demography* 27: 483–498; Frank, David John, and Elizabeth H. McEneaney. 1999. "The Individualization of Society and the Liberalization of State Policies on Same-Sex Sexual Relations, 1984–1995." *Social Forces* 77: 911–943; Lesthaeghe, Ron, and Johan Surkyn. 1988. "Cultural Dynamics and Economic Theories of Fertility Change." *Population and Development Review* 14: 1–45; South, Scott J. 2001. "The Variable Effects of Family Background on the Timing of First Marriage: United States, 1969–1993." *Social Science Research* 30: 606–626.

sense today than in generations past. The vast majority of emerging adults—94 percent in one survey—want their marriage partner to be first and foremost a “soul mate.”⁶ Indeed, many of the interviewees we spoke with revealed a palpable sense of entitlement around marriage—it has to be very good, or it won’t be worth trading their independence for it.

Religious young adults, however, are more apt to wrestle over premarital sex. Many have it, but aren’t comfortable with years and years of it, and so feel more urgency to marry than less religious Americans. The rush is heightened, of course, among the minority of emerging adults who wish to reserve sex for marriage. Table 2 highlights how marriage-minded the most religious American young men are. The least religious single adult men are four times as likely as the most religious to strongly agree that “marriage is good for some people but personally it’s not for you.”

2. Be Your Own Person

The 20s—and to a lesser extent, the 30s—are a time to figure out *who you are*, another cultural mantra in marital decision-making. Figuring this out takes time, and marriage feels like a full-time job, one stacked on top of career concerns. To marry before one knows what one “really wants” feels profound foolish and shortsighted. Clara, an 18-year-old from Oregon, for whom marriage seems understandably distant, articulates this identity formation argument well:

...I think that main thing is making sure that you are your own person because I know people who are getting married and this is their sophomore year of college. I’m like, ‘You are not your own person,’ and you are going to have some major changes and, you know, you don’t know if at the end of ten years after this if they’re going to be the same person you married, if you’ll be

⁶ Whitehead and Popenoe 2001.

the same person. So just make sure you're your own person that way you are ready to present yourself to someone else.

What exactly it means to be “your own person” is unclear, given the intensive individualism that emerging adults already tend to exhibit. What is clear, however, is that emerging adults expect to *change* what they think and feel and want as they move through college and their early adult years, and that such change will move them from being who they are now—the product of their parents and peers—to who they’ll become: their own person. The most religious young American men seem to fear this loss of freedom and individuality the least: 26 percent strongly agreed that if they do get married, “one of your big concerns is losing your freedom,” compared with half that number among the most religious.

Unfortunately, the 20s have no hard grip on the “figuring out who you are” phase. Nor do singles. Cindy was nearing her mid-twenties and had an 8-month-old daughter when her husband decided he was better off apart from marriage and fatherhood. He said he wasn’t sure who he was anymore. What did that mean? It’s a mirage, she says: “It means nothing. It means starting the same thing over again and making the same mistakes, thinking you’ll get different results.”

It’s a very compelling story, however. Emerging adults think about their 20s in a very different way than they conceive of what their 30s will be like. Now is the time for experimentation; then is the time for settling into a stable set of preferences. Now is for self discovery and experiencing things; then involves other people. Now is for change; then is for stability. And if marriage is about stability and other people, it’s certainly not something to consider in the present.

3. It's Too Soon to have Children

The prospect of children born too soon is also a big deal to many emerging adults. Indeed, the thought of marrying early is often rejected because of the limits that marriage is believed to place on personal freedom. And yet a marriage that doesn't add children for several years is conceptually no more of a restriction on personal freedom than is cohabitation or a series of sexual relationships. Again, however, the power of the compelling story here is what's important. Marriage and parenting are all part of a *package deal* in the minds of many, including Meredith:

...people don't realize...that your life changes when they have kids...when you have a kid it's downhill from there, if you're too young. [*In what ways?*] Oh man, it's just, you don't get to live your life. You have to worry about somebody else. And, like, their life becomes your life. So if you're not mature enough, you haven't experienced enough, it's not a good situation.

Numerous interviewees responded to our question, "Why do you want to get married?" with an answer that went something like "...because I want to have kids." That many middle-class emerging adults equate marriage with children suggests that an older pre-contraceptive era mentality dies hard. The pill "opened up opportunities for new aspirations to be fulfilled prior to parenthood," note demographers.⁷ Although sex has become decoupled from marriage (albeit less so among the very religious), fertility has not for this group. It's what marriage is for.

That women's fertility peaks at age 20 and runs for less than 10 years before beginning its slow decline just prior to age 30 (and then a more rapid decline around age 35), are biological realities which aggravate many emerging adults who would much prefer peak fertility to range from 30 to 40 rather than from 20 until 30. So distasteful are these facts that many emerging adults are not even told

⁷ Ron Lesthaeghe and Karel Neels. 2002. "From the First to the Second Demographic Transition - An Interpretation of the Spatial Continuity of Demographic Innovation in France, Belgium and Switzerland." *European Journal of Population* 18:225-260.

them. Feminist writer Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner laments that “fertility isn’t taught in sex education; birth control, not babies, is stressed in college health centers...”⁸ It’s as if many emerging adults really would like to separate the generation of life from the act of sexual intercourse. The two don’t go together in their minds, and they wish they didn’t go together in reality. At least not yet.

4. *Travel*

As an indicator of the freedom narrative, lots of interviewees made reference to their own desire to travel in their early-to-mid 20s, and that marriage would hamper that quest. Why exactly the desire to travel is presumed to interrupt or undermine a romantic relationship on its way to marriage is unclear, but it remains a common theme among many emerging adults. The travel ideal is seldom accompanied by references to particular places they wish to go. It’s just the idea of it, together with the assumption that marriage nixes such travel possibilities. It’s as if marriage means children, work, a mortgage on a house in the suburbs, and the end of all things creative and spontaneous. Things like world travel.

Marriage often expands access to shared financial resources, while reduces or splits expenses. Where all the time and money to travel extensively in emerging adulthood comes from is seldom specified in their stories. Given the modesty of most starting salaries and the need to work hard to build a career, the travel narrative may be more imagination than reality for most.

5. *Parental Resistance*

While the emerging adult ideal of marrying in the later 20s is considerably later than when many of their own parents married, most of their parents aren’t balking at their wish to delay. On the contrary, they’re applauding it. Many warn their children of the hazards of considering early marriage. Like

⁸ Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner. 2002. “Oops, I Forgot to Have Kids.” *Bust* (Summer, pages 44-49)

turning 18, getting married remains a strong symbolic move toward independence. The strongest one, in fact: among all emerging adults (from intact, two-parent families) that are living on their own, those that married without ever having cohabited are the *least* likely to receive subsequent financial assistance from their parents, while single women are the most likely.

As many parents reflect upon their own economic successes (or dreams of such), a common piece of advice to their children is to finish their education, to launch their careers, and to become financially independent. Dependence feels like weakness to them. As a result, parents counsel their children: “Don’t rush into a relationship.” “First loves don’t last.” “You can’t bank on a mate.” “You have plenty of time.” Even devoutly religious parents who married young and are still together find themselves readily dispensing such advice. Sara, a 19-year-old devoutly Baptist college student from Texas, recognizes this very clearly. She is very much in love with her boyfriend and would like to be married right now, but equates talk of marriage with staging a family rebellion. Her parents “want my full attention on grades and school because they want me to get a good job,” she reveals.

Such parental warnings tend to work, too. In her evaluation of data from 341 women between the ages of 27 and 30, sociologist Monica Gaughan notes that with each incremental increase in the mother’s preferred age for her daughter’s marriage, the odds that her daughter would actually be married at the time of the interview dipped 23 percent.⁹ Clearly parental expectations are not only conveyed but often obeyed.

6. *The Pursuit of Sexual Chemistry*

In the age of online dating personality algorithms and matches, emerging adults have become well acquainted with the cultural notion that getting the right fit in a partner is extremely important.

⁹ Gaughan, Monica. 2002. “The Substitution Hypothesis: The Impact of Premarital Liaisons and Human Capital on Marital Timing.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64: 407-419.

“Chemistry” is the new watchword as emerging adults meld relationships with science. Such chemistry is not just about how well two people get along, the conversations they enjoy, the hobbies they share, their religious or political commitments, or their shared visions for a common future. It’s also about how complementary they are in the bedroom. Is there sustained erotic attraction? Does she do what he likes? Does he know how to please her? Are their sex drives comparable?¹⁰ According to Laura, an 18-year-old from Texas, sexual chemistry is “the automatic feeling you have with someone. It’s just you feel right with them. You feel good.”

Such an automatic feeling stands in contrast to the *learned* nature of sexual intercourse and its various potential positions, habits, and methods. Many emerging adults wish to get the learning stage out of the way early, so that they may acquire a transferable sexual skill set, that of being “good in bed.” Although sustained sexual chemistry actually takes time and requires conversation, many believe it should emerge rapidly and silently with the commencement of a sexual relationship. If it doesn’t—or if the sex is awkward or if a partner doesn’t like the same things you like—then that may be a sign that sexual chemistry just isn’t there.

Figuring out whether you have sexual chemistry with someone precludes waiting very long to have sex. The presumption is that if the sex is bad, it may not get better and continuing a relationship is a waste of time. That’s why many believe it’s a profoundly bad idea to avoid sex before marriage. (While sexual chemistry may matter to religious young adults, they’re much more hard-pressed to admit it’s an issue, since they recognize that it shouldn’t be).

Thus many emerging adults, excepting the most religious ones, sense that abstinence is actually *risky*. To wait and see about sexual chemistry may reveal that it doesn’t, and perhaps can’t, exist. To abstain until marriage could reveal—and seal—poor sexual chemistry. Such a marriage couldn’t last, many believe.

¹⁰ It’s ironic that talk of sexual chemistry and talk of the changing self tend to be mutually exclusive conversations. Not only does the human sex drive display robust gender differences, on average, it also changes with age.

When the Chemistry Experiment Backfires

The sexual chemistry argument dovetails well with what family scholars call “search theory,” an explanation of delayed marriage that suggests women are not opting out of marriage so much as they are engaging in a longer search process.¹¹ This search process, however, involves a good deal of sex, given that serial monogamy is the cultural environment in which emerging adults pursue romance and sexual relationships. Is there such a thing as too much experimentation to ensure sexual chemistry? In a word: yes. Sociologist Monica Gaughan’s study of 341 women in their late 20s revealed that the search theory explanation of marital timing may not always work out so well in reality. In fact, women who have more numerous sexual relationships during their early adult years, who spend more time in such relationships, and who have additional sexual liaisons besides their romantic relationships are all less likely to be married at the time of the interview. She concludes that “more is not better,” if the goal of relationships is to search for an optimal marital match. That may not be the goal, of course. But if it is, such a strategy doesn’t often work. In fact, more information about romantic opportunities—by way of experiencing a series of monogamous relationships—does not lead to greater confidence in the marriage market.¹² But in the era of electronic communication, Facebook, Twitter, and porn, heightened personal information about *everything*—about potential romantic or sexual interests, about opportunities for social interaction, and about sex itself—is what we have. Too much information, perhaps. Repetitive relationships—including repetitive experiences with cohabitation—don’t lead to better marital odds.¹³ They just lead to more sex.

¹¹ See Valerie K. Oppenheimer (1988). “A theory of marriage timing.” *American Journal of Sociology* 94: 563-591; Valerie K. Oppenheimer. (1994). “Women’s rising employment and the future of the family in industrial societies.” *Population and Development Review* 20: 293-342.

¹² Gaughan 2002: 417.

¹³ Daniel T. Lichter and Zhenchao Qian. 2008. “Serial Cohabitation and the Marital Life Course.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70: 861-878

Deflated Confidence in the Institution

Growing numbers of American emerging adults—in consonance with their European peers—are simply less optimistic about the idea of marriage and place less confidence in the institution itself. In the National Marriage Project survey of men, fully 55 percent of 25-29-year-old unmarried men agreed that “there are so many bad marriages today, it makes one question the value of marriage.” (Double the number of unreligious men ‘strongly agree’ with this statement, compared with the most religious).

To many marriage just doesn’t make sense anymore, certainly not in the short run, not until later in their 20s or 30s. Only cultural motivations still resonate, and those only modestly. The nonmarital birthrate of 20-to-24-year-olds in America illuminates this well. While historically this age span was a peak period for marriage, today the pattern of nonmarital births therein is pronounced, climbing from 20 percent in 1980 to 60 percent in 2007. That’s not a gentle slope. That’s a mountain of change, suggesting a wholesale drop in consumer confidence in both marriage and men.

While popular images of going it alone might conjure up 30-something professional women fed up with unstable men and electing to pursue a child by artificial insemination, nothing could be further from the norm. The drop in confidence in marriage is most evident among poorer and less well-educated Americans. An institution that helps keep Americans from being indigent and dependent on state assistance is being shunned by the very group that would most benefit from it.

On the other hand, emerging adults may so esteem the institution—as Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas argue in their urban ethnography *Promises I Can Keep*—that no relationship they experience ever feels like it could live up to what marriage is supposed to look like (in their mind). Indeed, many idealize marriage, expect a great deal from it, and are refusing to settle. The bar for a sexual relationship is lowered—for lots of reasons. Even the bar for childbearing is lowered, allowing for

increasing numbers of nonmarital births. But the bar for marriage is *never lowered*. It remains high. Indeed, out of reach for many, or at least more than they feel they can offer.

The Deinstitutionalization of Marriage

There can be no doubt that the “institution” of marriage is in the throes of de-institutionalization.¹⁴ As Tables 1 and 2 reinforce, even significant minorities of the most religious American young people are questioning the value and possibility of a good marriage. The norms that long characterized behaviors associated with the institution are weakening. Americans—especially less religious ones—are increasingly open to alternative norms and forms. Nonmarital childbearing has eroded norms about marriage as the only appropriate family form for raising children, and cohabitation has eroded norms about marital sex as the only form of legitimate sex. Additionally, changes in women’s labor force participation and household divisions of labor, the advent of no-fault divorce in 1970, and the prospect (and actualization, in some states) of gay marriage have further deinstitutionalized marriage as we know it. Stating all this implies nothing about the wisdom or politics of such tectonic shifts. Indeed, Americans have by and large wanted these changes, and if given a voting chance would affirm most of them. But they’ve come at a cost, generating unintended consequences. Rather than an institution that offers men and women clear roles, marriage has become an individualized, thinner arrangement that aims at the emotional satisfaction and personal development of the broader self. The basis for “complementary” marriage—the exchange of different services—has given way to a new, adaptive, marital contract that no longer requires specialization of roles. While religious emerging adults are the most apt to elect earlier marriage (and the complementary style), many of them too now understand marriage in a different light.

¹⁴ Andrew J. Cherlin. 2004. “The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66:848–861. The quote is from page 848.

Table 1: Percent of 25-34-year-old never-married male respondents who answered questions with “strongly agree,” sorted by religious service attendance patterns

	Very regularly	Irregular	Seldom if at all
A happy, healthy marriage is one of the most important things in life.	81.4	53.3	45.0
Marriage is good for some people but personally it’s not for you.	10.6	6.7	15.0
There are so many bad marriages today, it makes one question the value of marriage.	15.9	23.3	32.8
Government programs to strengthen families and reduce divorce are a very good idea.	47.8	31.1	28.4
It is a good idea to live together with someone first to find out whether you are compatible	22.9	38.7	60.3
You wouldn’t want to marry until you could afford to own a home.	24.7	20.0	30.0
You wouldn’t want to marry until you could afford a nice wedding.	22.9	20.0	16.6
You are not interested in getting married anytime soon.	17.1	29.6	35.8
If you do get married, one of your big concerns would be the possibility of divorce.	17.1	17.8	22.4
If you do get married, one of your big concerns is losing your freedom.	8.7	15.6	16.7
Your work schedule makes it difficult for you to go out and date.	20.3	17.8	23.0
At this stage in your life, you want to have fun and freedom.	27.1	31.8	45.3

Source: 2004 National Marriage Project survey.

Table 2: Percent of 25-34-year-old never-married male respondents who answered questions with “strongly agree,” sorted by how religious the respondent is.

	Not at all religious	Not too religious	Some-what	Very religious
A happy, healthy marriage is one of the most important things in life.	38.9	41.5	62.4	78.1
Marriage is good for some people but personally it’s not for you.	21.2	18.2	8.0	5.1
There are so many bad marriages today, it makes one question the value of marriage.	32.1	34.0	23.3	15.4
Government programs to strengthen families and reduce divorce are a very good idea.	25.9	18.5	42.6	39.5
It is a good idea to live together with someone first to find out whether you are compatible	75.5	52.7	41.9	17.1
You wouldn’t want to marry until you could afford to own a home.	37.8	20.0	29.1	15.0
You wouldn’t want to marry until you could afford a nice wedding.	16.7	14.8	23.7	12.2

You are not interested in getting married anytime soon.	44.4	31.5	27.8	12.5
If you do get married, one of your big concerns would be the possibility of divorce.	31.5	20.0	17.0	14.6
If you do get married, one of your big concerns is losing your freedom.	26.4	14.6	9.4	12.5
Your work schedule makes it difficult for you to go out and date.	13.0	21.8	25.6	19.5
At this stage in your life, you want to have fun and freedom.	64.2	34.6	30.5	30.8

Source: 2004 National Marriage Project survey.

Conducted by the Opinion Research Corporation of Princeton, NJ, in January and February 2004, this survey was based on a statistically representative national sample of 1,010 English speaking heterosexual young men, ages 25 to 34, both married and single. The figures reported here are from never-married men, which comprised 36 percent of the sample.