

Perceptions of Parental Relationships: Tracking Sources of Pessimism and Optimism in Young Adult Attitudes About Marriage

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This study was inspired by recent reports of high divorce rates in the United States. According to *U.S. Divorce Magazine* (DivorceMag.com, 2002) the number of divorces granted in 1997 was 1,163,000. Some states have much higher divorce rates than others: in Nevada, for instance, the rate has skyrocketed to 9.0 divorces for every 1000 of the total population, while in Massachusetts the rate per 1000 is just 2.4. In 2002, 10% of the US population was divorced.

The point of this study is to examine attitudes towards marriage in the single and never-married population. These attitudes form a potentially important determining factor in never-married people's decision to marry and their management of future relationships. In terms of developmental psychology, early adulthood is generally the time when individuals begin to consider or contemplate the possibility of marriage. However, currently there is no broad model to help pinpoint which factors young people today consider relevant to this important life choice, much less how these factors influence their romantic relationships (Bartell, 2006).

The scope of marriage studies ranges broadly across a broad field of concerns, addressing categories such as communication, values, friends, in-laws, role conflict, religion, education level, occupation, length of marriage, careers, career satisfaction, age, number of children, household participation, sex roles, and stress. My study seeks to implement a comprehensive survey to provide an accurate identification of young people's current attitudes about marriage. Such information could possibly establish

guidelines for counseling interventions to assist young adults who are struggling with marriage decisions arrive at more reasonable attitudes and expectations regarding marital commitments and relations.

My personal pro-marriage bias leads me to hope for a decrease in the high divorce rates reported above. Marriage is a relationship generally embraced with the expectation that the relationship will be maintained for the duration of the couple's life, barring exceptional circumstances: in this respect, marriage is taken to be a life-long commitment.

While it is important for young people to understand the reasons for upholding a life-long commitment of this sort, it is also important for them to consider factors that might contribute to unrealistic expectations. Some young people enter into this binding contract for religious reasons; others marry in response to social or societal pressures, or for numerous other reasons. Crooks & Baur (1996) suggest that many people enter into marital commitments thinking marriage will satisfy their social, financial, sexual, and emotional needs. Many couples who marry also believe marriage will make them happy.

Attitudes towards marriage are complex and easily affected by numerous factors, even if we fail to understand what these factors are or how they contribute to the formation of our expectations or beliefs. Researchers have proposed a variety of key issues to consider in assessing the reasons for divorce. According to Bartell (2006), and Amato & Booth, (2001), the inheritance of family personality traits is of central importance. Risch, Riley, and Lawler (2003) found that the top three

problems contributing to divorce are *financial decisions, balancing job and family, and sexual relations*. They argue that many views of marriage come from expectations that children acquire from their family experience. If we can understand more fully the origins of these expectations, our understanding of young people's views about marriage might be enhanced.

Another plausible reason for high divorce rates is that current expectations of marriage are more demanding than those of the past. Miller, Perlman, & Brehm (2005) demonstrated that people now pursue marriage more than ever before as a pathway to fulfillment. People believe that "marriage is supposed to be play, not work; it's supposed to be exciting, not routine, and passionate, not warm" (Miller et al., 2005, p. 397). These researchers found that when we use such unrealistic expectations to evaluate ourselves and our partners, our relationships are likely to seem inadequate. Under these influences, the decision to marry is likely to have been based on an overly optimistic feeling, rather than on a realistic appraisal of the advantages and disadvantages of the relationship.

Larson (1988) supports the view that the high US divorce rate can be traced to unrealistic expectations about the marriage relationship. The average qualitative assessment of marital relations has declined since 1970 (Miller et al., 2005). Larsen argues that people are expecting too much from marriage.

Popenoe and Whitehead (in Miller et al., 2005, pg. 399) discovered that the number of people who say their marriage is really happy is lower than it was twenty-five years ago, while at the same time the level of marital conflict is seen as higher (Amato et al., 2003, as cited in Miller et al., 2005, pg. 399). Marriage is now seen by married couples as less rewarding and less desirable than it used to be. This negativity may transfer across

generations: Bartell (2006) stated that there is an increase of about 70% in the risk factor of divorce if the wife has been through a parental divorce and 190% increase in risk factor if both spouses have been through a parental divorce. Based on such research, I am interested in how young people's attitudes to marriage and also their evaluations of their parents' marriages, are related to perceptions of marriage as an viable option in the respondents' own lives.

Many researchers have suggested there is a relationship between people's perspectives on other people's marriages and their own attitudes toward marriage. People's attitudes may demonstrate a variety of approaches in their expectations about marriage. Jones and Nelson (1996) have described three possible ways to categorize these expectations: *pessimistic, realistic, and idealistic*. This tripart categorization is the basis of the well-known Marriage Expectation Scale.

Researchers have claimed that idealism with respect to marriage is typically based on romantic love, and that romantic love is based on passion, which often turns out to be simply a temporary infatuation. While individuals who experience infatuation might think that this stage in their life will last forever, it rarely does. They often do not know the other person well or even necessarily like them to the degree they believe they do. Miller et al. (2005) present the triangular theory, in which long-term relationships are based on three factors: *passion, intimacy and commitment*.

When the marriage results solely from highly passionate love, the relationship is unlikely to last. Without the other two components of the triangle, the passion aspect can lead to false or inaccurate perceptions of marriage, while intimacy and commitment tend to result in a marriage decision that has more lasting power. Sternburg's study (as cited in Reis & Rusbult, 2004) points out that those with a romantic or passionate

perspective about marriage were found to be unsatisfied in marriage and likely to be pining for an ideal marriage.

The perception of marriage as “romantic”, however, is widespread: young adults also believe in romantic love even if they are children of divorce themselves (Jones & Nelson, 1996; Wallerstein, 1987). Jones and Nelson surveyed single, never-married college students who as children witnessed interparental conflict to determine their attitudes toward marriage. Their study demonstrated that students from intact homes did not differ in their expectations for marriage from those from non-intact homes. Data were collected on 244 students from intact homes and 61 students from non-intact homes. However, the non-intact home group had parents who fell into the category of either divorced, or divorced with one or both parents remarried. The fact that there were still two parents in the home may have affected the results. In contrast, another study (Kalter, 1987), found that children who view interparental conflict might later come to be pessimistic about their marriage.

Other research has found that those who are engaged to be married have higher “idealistic distortions” than those who are married or are in a long term dating relationship (Bonds-Raacke). College students sometimes have a “mythical image” of “marriage as wonderful”, as demonstrated in a survey that indicated their level of agreement with statements like, “satisfaction increases during the first year of marriage” and “sexual activity is the best predictor of relationship satisfaction” (Berk, 1998). Relationship partners often seem to concur in their beliefs about the romantic or passionate aspect of marriage, while some studies show that men score higher than women (although not to a statistically significant degree) on romantic expectations (Sprecher, 1999).

As indicated in the earlier discussion of Bartell’s study (2006), there might also be a relationship between people’s attitudes about marriage and their perception of the quality of their parent’s relationship. Research suggests that attitudes about marriage can be reliably predicted based on perceptions of divorce in the children of divorced parents. In a study conducted with a diverse sample of participants from the age of 14 to 20, 89% of whom were already dating, Kinsfogel and Grych (2004), demonstrated that witnessing parental conflict makes it more likely that children will come to think of conflict as a normal feature of relationships. The study also suggested that once these children are adults they will be prone to engage in behaviors which may entail verbal and physical aggression with their own partner. Kinsfogel and Grych concluded that behaviors observed in parents are likely to be applied in young adulthood.

In a longitudinal study of 297 parents and their married offspring, Amato and Booth (2001) determined that marital discord viewed by offspring hindered the offspring’s marital relationship and brought about marriage problems. These researchers concur that past family experience relates directly to how offspring will behave later in their marriages.

Indeed, perceptions of negative aspects of parental marriages appear to have a more significant impact on offspring than perceptions of positive aspects. Researchers generally agree that parents who have problems in their marriage relationship are likely to have children who end up with greater instability in their own marriages. Amato and Booth’s study showed that parents who in 1980 reported problems, conflict, and instability in their marriages had children who in 1997 reported that they experienced greater marital instability, less happiness, less interaction, more conflict, and more problems. The authors reason that the children

copy the parents' interaction and later act on what they witnessed in their parents' marriage.

Although this study found little support to suggest links between marital relationships and parent-child relationships, it did show that jealousy, desire for dominance, irascibility, criticism, moodiness, and lack of communication were the biggest predictors of offspring's marital success. Similarly, in a study by Boyer-Pennington (1999), students who came from intact homes were found to have better expectations of their probable future marriage compared to students from single and multiple divorce families. Bartell (2006) also found that parental divorce is a factor that puts romantic relationships during adulthood at risk. Moreover, Katler (1987) suggested that the most important factor contributing to attitudes about marriage is the offspring's perception of conflict and resentment among the offspring's parents.

Building upon the research presented above, the present study categorizes single, never-married adults as *pessimistic*, *realistic* or *idealistic*, as categorized using the Marriage Expectation Scale previously described. The point of the study is to investigate whether people in these three categories will exhibit spontaneous generation of a range of reasons for divorce. Participants are subsequently asked to rate the quality of their parents' relationship.

Method

Participants:

Participants are undergraduate college students attending a small public university in a rural community in northern California. Generally members of the young adult population, all participants are single, never married and grew up in a two parent home for the majority of their childhood. Students were recruited from the Psychology Department's online subject pool with all participation

voluntary. Some students may have received extra credit for their participation, based at the discretion of their instructors.

Design:

This study has a non-experimental, between-subjects design. The first independent variable in this study is categorization of the participants into three groups based on their scores from the Marriage Expectation Scale perspectives on marriage with three levels being Pessimistic, Realistic, or Idealistic. The other independent variable is participants' perception of the quality of their parents' relationship with each other, with the two levels being low quality or high quality. The dependent variable is participants' perceptions of their future marriage. This will be determined by using an interval scale.

Measures:

The questionnaire consists of three sections designed to measure participants' attitudes towards marriage, their perceptions of their parental figures' marital relationships, and demographic characteristics. For example, one question reads, "I think my parents were unhappy together." For all survey items participants are asked to indicate how strongly they agree with each statement on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The demographic section requires indication of age, gender, major, and class level.

Procedure:

The researcher posts surveys on the Psychology Department's online subject pool. The criteria for participation in the study are clearly defined: participants must be single, never married; they must have grown up in a two parent home for the majority of their lifetime; and be at least eighteen years of age. Students who meet the criteria and wish to participate are given a consent form and

debriefing form online. To participate, they must read and sign the consent form.

After the participants sign and send back the signed informed consent form, the researcher places the consent form in a separate designated folder. The participants are given a blank, unsigned copy of the consent form to keep for their own records. Participants are then prompted to complete the questionnaire. They are reminded that they can skip any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. They can always choose not to complete the questionnaire if, after further consideration, they decide not to participate. After the participants complete the survey and return it to the researcher, the researcher places the survey in a separate container from the consent forms. The participants then receive a debriefing form about the goals of the study, and are given references if they wish to learn more about the study. They are also instructed where they can seek help if necessary, and how to obtain access to the results of the study.

Anticipated Findings

Although this study is still in the data-collection stage, it appears probable that those participants categorized as pessimistic will have more negative attitudes towards

marriage than those categorized as realistic and idealistic. Further, based on what other research studies suggest, participants who believe that the quality of their parents' relationship was fair or good are likely to have more positive attitudes towards marriage, while participants who come from families with perceived low quality parental relationships are predicted to have more negative attitudes toward marriage.

Additionally, it is likely that perceptions of parental relationships will have a greater impact on those with a pessimistic perspective, because perceptions of a good quality parental relationship might overturn their pessimism, whereas those with a more idealist and realistic attitude may not be as affected by variation in perception of parental relationship quality.

It is hoped that these results will confirm other studies regarding factors affecting young adult attitudes about marriage. By determining the key factors affecting attitudes about marriage, studies of this sort could be used to help counselors design guidance programs grounded on realistic rather than idealized expectations for those engaging in a marriage commitment.

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