

Attitudes toward marriage during the transition to adulthood in the United States: a multi-methods, representative, approach¹

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¹ This and other studies of attitudes toward marriage are being developed by the author at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Carolina Population Center in the United States. The full version of this paper can be obtained upon request.

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how socio-economic, demographic and cultural variables shape young people's attitudes toward marriage during their transition to adulthood. Using national representative data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (2007/2008), the multi-method approach combines Latent Class Analysis, Ordinal Logit Regression, and in-depth interviews to examine different perceptions and profiles of attitudes toward marriage, as well as the predictors of these attitudes. Results indicate that race, religion, income and pre-marital living arrangements have a strong effect on milestones that need to be achieved before getting married, such as completing education or cohabitating. However, happiness, love, relationship quality, commitment, and duration, besides life satisfaction might weight more when deciding when to tie the knot, especially when things, such as high education and sufficient income seem to be already guaranteed by your early socio-economic status. Other results shed light on social, age and gender norms, expectations and anxieties are found during the maturing process in the life course besides revealing young people's strategies to cope avoid or operate their own transition into adulthood when embedded in major social institutions.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction and literature review

In a life course perspective, the transition into adulthood can be placed into many frameworks and is historically understood as the accomplishment of five markers, which are leaving school, starting a full-time job, leaving the home of origin, getting married, and becoming a parent for the first time (Shanahan, 2000). If marriage used to be held as a universal value in the past, literature indicates that other pathways are now available for choice. At least since the 1980's, youth are allowed to decide whether to ever enter life stages such as marriage and childbearing, the timing of entrance and the order of these stages. As a result, "delays in marriage, rising rates of cohabitation, high rates of non-marital childbearing, and delays in marital births combined with changing patterns of schooling and work have meant that the movement into adulthood has become even less a predictable sequence of events that it once was" (Eggebeen & Dew, 2009: 108). Although the pathways are varying, the percentage of people that consider important "having a good marriage and family life" has remained constant throughout the years suggesting that saying "I do" did not lose its appeal.

Little is known about how different socio-economic, demographic and cultural variables come together to play a role in the youth imagination in their decision making processes regarding union formation. One's ideas surrounding timing, best conditions, necessity and gender differences regarding marriage, as well as the acceptance of marriage dissolution form the so called attitudes toward marriage (Pearce and Thornton, 2007). Attempts to capture the multiplicity of attitudes have revealed interesting results (Martin et al, 2003; Hoffnung, 2004; Cunningham & Thornton, 2005; Smock et al, 2005; Cherlin et al, 2008; Carroll et al, 2009; Willoughby, 2010; Taylor & Vogel-Ferguson, 2011; Willoughby, 2012; Willoughby et al, 2012). This paper extends the research on attitudes toward marriage by focusing on how young adults view their pathway to marriage, applying a quantitative and qualitative analysis combined to a representative sample of young adults as they transition into adulthood.

Literature indicates that schemas and materials produced by various social structures help shape the expected attitude and behavior regarding marriage. Some of these schemas are: *religious affiliations* (Carroll et al. 2000; Mahoney et al. 2001; Lehrer 2004, 2004b; Xu, Hudspeth, & Bartkowski 2005; Kalmijn & Luijkx 2005; Pearce & Thornton 2007; Eggebeen & Dew 2009); *Living arrangements* (Axinn & Barber 1997; Cunningham & Thornton 2005, Martin et al 2003); *Pre-marital sexual experiences* (Willoughby 2012); *Modernization and Individualization* (Lesthague & Surkyn 1988; Barber 2004; Gubernskaya 2010); *Gender* (Thornton, 1989; Thornton & Young- DeMarco, 2001, Pearce & Thornton 2007; Thornton & Freedman 1982; Fan & Marini 2000; Miller & Stark 2002; Crissey 2005; Willoughby 2010); *Parental marital status, resources, values and family structure* (Thornton & Freedman 1982; Jennings et al. 1992; Starrels & Holm 2000; Kalmijn & Luijkx 2005; Crissey 2005; Manning et al. 2007; Raley et al. 2007; South 2011; Willoughby et al. 2012); *Education aspiration and education level* (Becker 1981; Thornton & Freedman 1982; Teachman et al. 1987; Raymo 2003; Lehrer, 2004; Lehrer 2004b; Manda & Meyer 2005; Xu, Hudspeth, & Bartkowski, 2005; Manning et al. 2007; Willoughby 2010); *Employment and financial independence/stability* (Thornton, Axinn & Teachman, 1995; Parrado & Zenteno 2002; Burgess, Propper & Aassve 2003; Onu 2003; Sweeney 2002; Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004; Kalmijn & Luijkx 2005; Taylor & Vogel-Ferguson 2011); *Other subjective factors* (Brown 2000; Carroll et al. 2009).

However, people neither are passive recipients of structure nor are multiple schemas aligned with one another. Influences from more than one schema might cause values to overlap or clash, producing conflict or change (Theory of Conjuncture Action - Johnson-Hanks. et al 2011). Thus, I argue that the timing and conditions where marriage will be located in someone's own life course will vary according to a person's combined schemas, materials and agency, which will be reflected in different memberships to Latent Classes (LC's) of attitudes toward marriage and different things that one needs to accomplish before getting married.

Methodology

Main objective

Understand how different socio-economic, cultural and demographic variables might shape different attitudes and perceptions toward marriage during the transition into adulthood in the United States and understand young people's strategies to cope, avoid or operate their own path when embedded in major social institutions.

Specific aims and methods

1. Define profiles of attitudes toward marriage using the Latent Class Analysis (LCA) method.
2. Use Ordinal Logit Regression to identify predictors of each variable used to compose the LCA.
3. Analyze in-depth interviews looking for attitudes and perceptions toward marriage that explains more difference among the latent classes.

Data

Data come from the 1st and 3rd quantitative wave and 3rd qualitative wave of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a longitudinal mix-methods database created in 2001, designed to understand how spirituality and religion influences adolescent's life throughout young-adulthood. Respondents (mean age at 3rd qualitative interview was 20.5 in 2008) were enquired about several socio-economic and demographic characteristics, as well as attitudes and behavior. Analytical sample was restricted to those never married, yielding 2118 eligible respondents with complete data. Missing was treated as random. The variables used to compose the Latent Class of what needs to be achieved before one gets married (here understood as legal marriage) are: completing education, establishment of a career, purchase of a house, living on their own, dating enough people and cohabiting with partner prior to marriage. The categories of answers for each of these variables are ordinal and were coded as the following: 1= not very or not important at all, 2=somewhat important, 3=very important, 4=extremely important. Some covariates used in the analysis are: race, educational aspirations, income, parent's education, gender, age, living arrangement, religious affiliation, among others.

Results

I used the PROC LCA command on SAS 9.2 to generate Latent Classes based on the answer to the six things that need to be accomplished before marriage and their categories of answer. The Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) test informed that the optimum number of classes for the Latent Class was five (not shown). The sample distribution among the five classes was precise as can be seen in Figure 1 (gamma estimates), with ~20% of the sample allocated in each class. Figure 1 shows the categories within variables that each class has maximum probability of belonging to. Note, for example, that while class 1 concentrates people who have highest probability of thinking that complete education, establish career, buy a home, date enough other people and live with partner are not very or not at all important to be accomplished before marriage, class 5 seem to have the opposite values. For those people, their highest probabilities lean toward thinking that completing education, establishing careers, living on their own, dating enough people and living with partner are extremely important things to be done prior to getting married. Although LCA's cannot be seen as gradients given the subjective and complexity of their classes, looking at the color distribution in Figure 1, one can see that class 4 seem to be a higher gradient of class 1, giving a little extra importance to establish career and living on their own. Following, class 2 classifies as very important or somewhat important most of those items. Class 3 comes next, classifying as extremely important to complete your education, while other things remain very important (and buying a home remains not very or not important at all).

Figure 1: Highest probability of importance of achievement before getting married by Latent Class and by achievement

		Latent Classes					Highest probabilities (p>0.40)
		1	2	3	4	5	
Class membership probability (gamma estimates)		0.16	0.22	0.22	0.23	0.18	
n		331	505	499	530	392	
%		15	22	22	23	17	
Variables used to compose Latent Class (achievement)	Complete Education	0.47	0.46	0.55	inconclusive	0.79	
	Establish career	0.74	0.46 0.54	0.60	0.57	0.68	
	Buy a home	0.81	0.51	0.42	0.58	inconclusive	
	Live on your own	inconclusive	0.52 0.43	0.68	0.52	0.61	
	Date enough other people	0.46	0.45 0.46	0.49	0.58	0.46	
	Live with partner	0.43	0.44	0.48	0.50	0.43	

Color Schema Key for level of importance of achievement before getting married:

extremely important
very important
somewhat important
not very or not at all important

Note:

1) Inconclusive (p<0.40 for all categories)

Ordinal Logit Models were used to predict each of the six variables used to compose the LCs. Results suggest schemas and materials assessed by youth in order to form their ideals surrounding what needs to be accomplished before marriage (tables not shown). Some of the main results will be presented here. All results are controlled by socio-economic and demographic characteristics.

Blacks have 67% higher chance of saying that completing education is important when compared to whites. Females have 34% higher chance when compared to males. Compared to no-religious, Jewish have 83% higher chance of thinking that completing education is important, followed by Catholics (70%) and Mainline Protestants (50%), controlling for socio-demographic characteristics and level of religiosity. Being in cohabitation or having cohabited in the past reduces your odds of thinking that completing education before getting married is very important. Noticeable, people who never presented any form of dating behavior have higher odds of saying that finishing studies is important. Likewise, the higher your ideal age at marriage, the more you think that completing education is important.

In the analysis of establishing career, results go in the same direction as finishing education. Controlling for socio-demographic factors, Catholics and Mainline Protestants have higher odds compared to non-religious of thinking that establishing career is important. Educational aspirations have no effect on that when controlled for religion. Cohabitation decreases your odds of thinking that having to establish career is important before getting married.

Blacks and Latino, compared to whites, consider buying a house more important, as well as people with low income and people who believe that the breadwinner model is better. Parent's education is also found negatively associated, but without much difference once parents make over \$50k dollars/year. Jewish and people without religious affiliation are the ones by whom buying a house matters less.

Living on your own presents a different picture. Blacks and Latino have increased odds compared to the Whites of thinking it is important. People who are living with other persons have increased odds when compared to people living with parents. Comparing to no-religious, Evangelical Protestants have decreased odds of saying that living on your own is important. People who have ever dated, would cohabit, or are cohabiting show increased odds of reporting living on their own as important. The higher your ideal age of marriage, the more likely you are of saying that living on your own is important.

After running the Ordinal Logit Models, every person was assigned one single class based on the class they presented the highest probability of belonging to. This was useful to analyze 121 in-depth

interviews separated by class. Analyses shed light on factors that could not be captured by the quantitative analysis, such as importance of commitment and duration of relationship. The interview transcripts of class 1 demonstrate how nothing seems to matter in terms of achievement. A white middle-class girl age 20 responds what might be a good age to get married: "Anytime". Interviewer: Do you feel like there's anything in particular that you want to accomplish or do before you would get married? She answers: "No, not particularly". An agnostic girl, age 20, has a similar idea, but based on the notion of commitment, she answers "like maybe I would want to get married, just like aside from all that if you're with someone that you really care about and you want to show some kind of commitment to each other and that's the way you choose to do it". Another white girl, 21 years old, also refers to duration of relationship in order to be ready. "I know a lot of people who would say you should definitely graduate from college before you get married, but I think that's a personal thing within your relationship. If you've been dating for 5 years, just get married, just do it. (...) if you're already there emotionally and you've committed to each other, and really, you're probably creating a lot more tension trying to wait".

A typical of class 4, a white girl age 22, also do not worry too much about the perfect time, but values living on her own first. "I think I want to have my own time I guess, but maybe like 26. I have no idea, I don't know whenever I feel ready I guess". When asked about things one need to accomplish before getting married, not too much strength is giving to achievements, but sort of more importance than representatives of class 1 would give. "I think that I want to accomplish certain things before I get married, but I also think that if I really want to get married, I'm going to get married and I can accomplish those things when I married too. It just depends on the person". A member of class 3, a white girl, also age 20, explains why some things are important to be achieved before marriage, although no extremely importance should be assigned. "I think that there's things that I want to accomplish first, but I don't think that there's a necessary things you have to accomplish first. I just want to make sure that I have my education done, that I have a job that I can take care of myself, so that I don't have to rely on someone else". Class 2 will be skipped due to space constrains.

Opposite from that, members of class 5 bring narratives of things that definitely need to be accomplished before getting married. A black male, 23 year old, is worried that his children will be cold in the winter "At least a good career. Some money stashed somewhere. A house, or at least a car. Because I see a lot of people out here (...) getting on the bus with big ass strollers and the Moms walking down the street with the kids and like another kid, or the Pops is on the bus like, yo, it's cold out here sometimes in the winter time, man". A white girl, 22 year old, also list several things that need to be accomplished before getting married. "Yeah, you've got to have two good incomes coming in, you know. Get into your job first and have a house and get settled in, get time to know each other I'd say".

Main conclusion

As a conclusion, education aspirations, parental educational level and parental marital status does not have a main role in defining an attitude toward marriage as well as race, income, religious affiliations, pre-marital sexual experiences and pre-marital living arrangements. However, they shape the opportunities already presented in the youth's life. Thus, it is not that Evangelical white youth with intact family, high education and high income do not think about achieving things prior to marriage. It is that they will already have some of these resources anyway, so achieving them is not a primary concern. Results of the qualitative interview confirm that values such as happiness, love, relationship quality, commitment, and duration, besides life satisfaction, might weight more when deciding to tie the knot, especially when other important things, such as high education and good income seem to be already guaranteed by your early socio-economic status.