

# Time for Fresh Thinking on Early Marriage

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November 1, 2018 6:30 AM



*(Pixabay)*

Societal support for young adults who want to marry at earlier ages could help them find happiness and bolster the fraying family structure of the underclass.

Amid Pew Research headlines on Millennials delaying marriage or not marrying at all came a glowing Bloomberg report about a University of Maryland researcher who argues that marital deferment is good news because, on the one hand, the divorce rate plummeted. Apparently Millennials and Gen-Xers capable of ascending the capstone-marriage crest — reached only after all educational, career, and financial ducks are in order — brought down the divorce rate a whopping 18 percent. Compare this with their Boomer parents, who continue their generation's love affair with divorce, splitting well into their '60s and '70s in both first and second marriages.

A primary reason that Millennials wait until their late 20s for their more stable unions is, according to the Maryland researcher, that they want to achieve some career and life stability, but apparently that strategy doesn't work for everyone. In the same report, the researcher noted that many poorer and less-educated young adults are opting not to marry at all, instead raising kids while living together and forgoing the ascent to an expensive Mount Capstone wedding out of reach for most people who are not college-graduated or well on their way to career success.

While some questioned the reasoning behind the report's logic "that a plummeting divorce rate is a bad sign for America," cultural conservatives and liberals alike who are concerned

about inequality would do well to understand the ramifications of the current capstone-marriage zeitgeist. It sends to young adults the message that they can't consider marriage – an institution noted for helping individuals, families, children, and communities achieve stability and economic well-being – until they've already achieved a certain measure of stability and economic well-being. Instead, less-confident young adults resequence family-formation patterns by put parenting before marriage, placing children's and even their own well-being at greater risk.

Even better-off young adults can be done a disservice by the capstone model. First, it creates an individualistic focus not easily converted to a couple focus after the elaborate, week-long themed wedding takes place. Moreover, the capstone model may entail complex relationship histories teaching the wrong lessons before marriage. In the Bloomberg article, younger non-divorcing Americans are called rebels for staying married, but we propose an even more radical rebellion: Make 21 to 25 cool again as an age to (inexpensively) wed! A cornerstone, rather than capstone, marriage would not only open up more marriage options for the well educated but could encourage more of the poor to aspire to marriage and its manifold benefits.

### ***Will the real countercultural couples please stand up?***

First, some testimonials. Radical young marrieds already exist, and not just in traditionally minded religious communities. They make blips on the Internet in surprising places, with headlines such as “7 Unexpected Reasons Marrying Young Might Be the Best Decision You Ever Made” or “I Got Married at 23. What Are the Rest of You Waiting For?” The latter's author, Julia Shaw in *Slate*, offers a particularly compelling testimonial, debunking the conventional wisdom that, before they tie the knot, singles must play the field, for example, backpack through Europe, bartend to supplement an unpaid internship, or buy a condo.

Shaw goes on to describe the budding financial acumen she and her law-student husband engendered as basement-apartment dwellers without Internet and, every once in a while, heat. Gradually gaining independence with their own cell-phone plan and health insurance, they learned financial self-restraint early on, celebrating her husband's bar-exam passage not with a lavish vacation but with dinner at Pizzeria Paradiso and a nearby budget hotel. Even more compelling are Shaw's psychological-emotional arguments for a couple to grow up together and face the young-adult vicissitudes of life – “job searches, job losses, family deaths, family conflict, financial fears, and career concerns” – with a committed partner. Through it all, she asserts, “we learned how to be strong for one another, to comfort, to counsel, and to share our joys and not just our problems.”

Ellie Krupnick in her piece on the [seven unexpected reasons](#) to marry young also vouches for the peace of mind a marital support system offers. She calls the “single list” of solitary travel and accomplishments overrated. “We moved into our first apartment together,” she writes. “We bought our first furniture for the first time,” and she quotes marital experts about the benefits of learning and growing together. Krupnick's insistence that travel and other single-list adventures are even better with a partner is validated by the more traditionalist [Little Duckwife blog](#). Peppered with scriptures and heavy on inspiration, Little

Duckwife and her young husband certainly debunk the notion that they're missing out on fun. A bounty of exotic locales and snorkeling photos accompanies her descriptions of preacher-led marriage counseling and their counterculture college experience.

### ***What the research says***

So these youthful-marriage iconoclasts do exist, but ask just about anyone you meet on the street and they will rotely tell you that social-science researchers – not to mention the fount of all social wisdom, [Oprah Winfrey](#) – warn about the dangers of this alternative lifestyle. Obviously, teenage marriage – about 20 percent of all first marriages, according to our analyses – poses a high risk of divorce. More relationship\_literacy education for youth may help them understand the risks of marriage in the teen years. But once couples get into the 20s, the risk of divorce declines steadily (and then starts to go back up again in the 30s). [A number of studies](#), though, hint at an interesting association between age of marriage and marital happiness, with the sweet spot for maximizing marital quality occurring at marriage between 22 and 25.

On average, these early-to-mid-20s marriages are a little happier than late-20s marriages. Why? Perhaps those marrying earlier and dissenting from the cohabitation consensus put a greater priority on marriage. Or maybe molding two lives together at earlier ages is easier, as couples forge a “we-identity” early on, instead of trying to reshape a hard-clay “I-identity” of a settled self resistant to the personal remodeling inherent in marriage. [Megan Mcardle](#) in her article “The Many Cases for Getting Married Young” describes the lamp hypothesis of Stanford psychiatry professor Keith Humphrey: When you've lived in a room a long time, it can be difficult to find a lamp that exactly suits a lifetime of accumulated bric-a-brac. In the same way, finding someone to fit all of the choices you've spent a decade of young-adult life making will be challenging.

Humphries describes a spouse-hunting acquaintance who has his life's apartment, replete with “the wallpaper, the carpet, and the furnishing, and wants that perfect lamp that will accentuate everything in its current form, detract from nothing, and require nothing to be moved even an inch.” Because this acquaintance is dating women with the same criteria, looking for an equally particular lamp, Humphries says, “Good luck to him.” Such individualism not only contributes to a personal sense that marriage means losing an important sense of yourself. It can also feed into a view of divorce as a net gain when couples experience hard times. It also contributes to a cultural paradigm of marriage as a loss, the end of youthful fun rather than the beginning of a grand adult adventure.

Postponing marriage, though, comes with potential liability even greater than the fostering of inflexible individualism. The single twenties are often marked by a complex sexual history that many naively assume will extinguish later yearnings for more and varied partners. However, [research reveals](#) that multiple relationships and an active premarital sex life don't minimize post-marital regrets and may even contribute to them. Multiple partners are associated with greater risk of later marital infidelity and instability. Having more premarital relationships is linked to poorer communication, higher infidelity rates, lower sexual quality during marriage, and higher divorce rates.

Writing for *The Atlantic* about the research of University of Utah sociologist Nicholas Wolfinger, [Olga Kahzan](#) cautions those “stuck on a hedonic treadmill of potential lovers” to

ask, “Is all this dating going to make me happier with whomever I end up with?” [Wolfinger shows in a recent study](#) that, on average, married women and men who have had only one sexual partner, their spouse, are happier in their marriage than their counterparts who had multiple sexual partners. Kahzan quotes sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox, who notes that, “contrary to conventional wisdom, when it comes to sex, less experience is better, at least for the marriage” — a conclusion that should encourage at least a minor version of the early-marriage insurrection we’re calling for.

Also writing in *The Atlantic*, back in 2013, Hugo Shwyzer surmised that “the evidence suggests . . . that the capstoners are more than a little naïve if they imagine that a rich set of premarital life experiences will serve as an inoculation against infidelity.” Then in late 2018, he updated his saga in the [Institute for Family Studies blog](#) with the admission that “just weeks” after the publication of his article in 2013, “the mother of my two children would (*not wrongly*) throw me out of the house after finding the evidence of a series of my own affairs. Experience, education, therapy, and middle-class comforts had not affair-proofed my fourth marriage.” And not only does sexual exploration not affair-proof a marriage — it can create a depressing journey for young explorers such as Christine McPherson, heroine of the film *Lady Bird* (2017), who bemoans to her first sexual partner, “I just wanted it to be special.” He bluntly retorts, “Why? You’re going to have so much unspecial sex in your life.” Plenty of evidence exists on how premarital sex for young adults is not nearly as fun and problem-free as many suppose.

### ***More considerations***

Obviously, advantages of delayed marriage exist and contribute to lower divorce rates. Investing in higher education, steady work lives, and financial stability work well for many who follow the capstone path, especially if they don’t indulge in a lot of casual sex and do retain a strong commitment to marriage. And cohabitation may reduce the risk of divorce in the first year of marriage. But after the first year, cohabitation continues to be a significant risk factor for later divorce — especially serial cohabitation and moving in before a formal engagement.

Amply studied and parsed by social scientists, low-commitment cohabitation offers a test-drive imitation of marriage. Not only does it not prepare a couple for the real thing. It works against marriage, even after we take into account the demographic and attitudinal differences between those who cohabit before marriage and those who don’t. Although living together begins as an exercise in freedom from marital constraints, as [one scholar outlines](#), it paradoxically results in a series of unfortunate consequences: an inertia that makes it harder to leave a relationship before adequately judging its merits; a substitution of high-cost ways of assessing compatibility — e.g., sharing rent, pets, and often children — for low-risk ways such as dating, work projects, and other leisure activities; a situation that may increase conflict in the relationship; and a lower mental threshold for breaking up.

Megan McArdle in her essay on getting married young also points out that “for highly educated women who delay until they’re settled, the risk is that they will outrun their fertility,” a point that Ellie Krupnick expounds on in her seven-reasons piece. There she quotes Mike Meyer, a clinical fellow with the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy: “There’s a lot of pressure on 28-year-old women who aren’t married yet,” Meyer observes, “because that seems to be the age when everybody is getting married. And those

who aren't feel awful." So, advises Krupnick, avoid the pressure of filling a slot by the time your fertility alarm goes off. "Men and women at, say, 21 or 23 don't face those same expectations, meaning the decision to marry is one they genuinely want for themselves," she writes, describing Daria, of New York City, who felt "pressure-less" marrying at 22 because "we felt like getting married young – not because friends around us were getting married, not because there was any parental pressure on it, not because we'd been dating for a year and five months and oh, that's too long."

### ***The real losers***

Daria is actually onto something. While young marriages of the past, especially shotgun arrangements whereby pregnant couples were united forcibly, may have formed within a societal pressure cooker, that pressure, for better and for worse, has evaporated. Those in their early 20s who choose to wed now do so with less pressure than those nearing 30, finding liberation in a marriage they really want, not one they feel they need to do to check off a box. Marrying in the early and mid 20s now is markedly different from those pre-20s marriages of a generation or two ago. The modern response to pregnancy is not shotgun weddings. It's shotgun cohabitation.

And no one has been hurt more than the less-educated and the poor by the fundamental changes surrounding marriage, especially by the expectations of all that supposedly needs to happen before a couple considers tying the knot. Influential family-policy analyst Isabel Sawhill describes a "success sequence" for family formation – schooling, marriage, children – that inflicts a great cost on those who rearrange the order. When children come after marriage, which comes after at least some education, families are remarkably stable and children grow up in better circumstances and have better outcomes. Most families that don't follow the "success sequence" are impoverished.

For those on the economic precipice, this re-sequencing of family formation is becoming the new normal. While the typical age of first marriage keeps wafting upward, the rising generation enters into sexual coupling at the same age as their grandparents did – only the rising generation does so without the commitments and social acknowledgment of marriage. Keep the sex and companionship; delay the commitment and sacrifice. A new, earlier-marriage paradigm might take an existential toll on our elites, as illustrated by the research and examples above, but it strikes a much heavier blow to the most vulnerable among us.

More than 60 percent of births to less-educated women are non-marital, compared with 10 percent of births to well-educated young adults. Many of these non-marital births are to cohabiting parents whose fragile unions are unlikely to survive more than a few years and will result in both parents' going on to have more children with other partners, creating a dizzying complexity of family relationships for children and a pattern that will echo into the next generation. Men who have little financial wherewithal will be strapped with child support; women without husbands will raise multiple children alone, and children without resources and role models will have to fend for themselves. To these individuals, the capstone-marriage model, in which marriage stands atop college and career accomplishments, feels more like fantasy than reality, much less a doable life script, as the Manhattan Institute's Kay Hymowitz calls it.

The result for the un-capstoners, in numbers? Nearly 25 percent of American men and 20 percent of American women between the ages 40 and 44 have never married, according to our calculations, which are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2013 American Community Survey. Thirty percent of men and nearly 25 percent of women with just a high-school diploma have never married by 44. And more than a third of black men and women in their early 40s have never married. The proportion of never-married adults age 25 and older has more than doubled over the last 50 years, with 25 percent of today's young adults projected to never marry by age 50.

To the uninitiated, the prospect of a monumental marriage dearth might not sound all that alarming. After all, single people aren't exactly a menace to society. But many singles are not singles; they are unstable families, with enormous costs to individuals and society. Reordering the success sequence results in all that's opposite from what experts, in fields ranging from economics to medicine, find that marriage promotes: financial stability, physical and mental health, community safety, and childhood well-being. "Unless something changes, we are heading for a situation in which a huge number of American children – possibly the majority – are growing up without their fathers," McArdle warned in 2013.

### ***A 21st-century cornerstone model of marriage***

That a capstone model of marriage dominates when far too many can't or don't follow its blueprint for success does not mean it should be demolished and hauled off to the social-history dump. A capstone marriage obviously works well for some (including the second author of this piece, who didn't meet anyone she wanted to marry until 27), but we need a more accessible model for a greater swathe of today's young adults. We need a minor revolution. Dissenters swimming upstream from the capstone-marriage tide need encouragement, and a naïve populace needs to be weaned from truisms, about cohabitation and marriage, that are neither true nor helpful. The creation of cultural space for a revised cornerstone model of marriage and for helping all achieve their life goal of a stable, happy family could look something like this:

*Put to rest the broad belief that marrying before age 25 is a divorce disaster waiting to happen.*

Teen marriages are a high-risk choice. But marrying in the early 20s? Perfectly reasonable for some who want it (and are not enamored of the single life), and in some ways it's a good step to take in beginning a productive adult life. Those who marry very young, before age 21, are at a higher risk for divorce. Over the years, that finding has been stretched to mean that anything before 25 is unthinkable, and that has become a cultural axiom that articles like this and, hopefully, other clarion calls, should help to soften.

*Ameliorate the challenges faced by those who have a history of family instability and have never seen a working marriage.*

They have no blueprint for healthy relationships, so this is no small challenge. However, relationship-literacy education, provided in many states to vulnerable populations, offers adolescents, young adults, and couples aspiring to marriage an understanding of what a good marriage looks like and what pitfalls to avoid. This is no closely guarded secret: Those who, like the lead author of this piece, are in the relationship-literacy arena know a lot about how relationships work, about how healthy marriages are formed, and about what

goes wrong. Providing relationship-literacy education and marriage preparation in communities that need it most has led to incremental and positive results. It can be done much more extensively and expertly. Churches, too, are well suited to help carry the educational load.

*Create a new financial model that scales back costs on multiple relationship fronts.*

Start with the wedding. Inexpensive wedding options for young adults with modest means must somehow make a comeback, to counter the exotic and elaborate weddings that only the truly wealthy can afford but that all now aspire to. The wedding industry could offer scaled-down versions for young adults with modest means, and reality TV could also pitch in with discount versions of *Say Yes to the Dress* or with a fixer-upper twist on reality wedding shows. Community organizations in less affluent areas could make sure that respectful wedding venues are available at no or low cost. But that is only the beginning. Young married couples need to accept a longer period of financial austerity — once axiomatic but now completely alien — in the early years of marriage. Financial-literacy courses à la Dave Ramsey could also play a role in marriage-preparation classes, and community-sponsored relationship classes could expand more than they already do on the financial nuts and bolts that build a successful marriage.

*Parents must be willing to help launch young married couples in the same way they enable their single young adults to launch.*

Some parents essentially bribe their children to postpone marriage until completing education and establishing themselves financially. Continued family support, when feasible, is invaluable for cornerstone marriages and probably less expensive to parents than footing the bill for capstone-prerequisite adventures. Maintaining a reasonable level of financial support for young adult children when they marry, and conveying that willingness openly, could go a long way in supporting a desired and conscious walk down the aisle rather than a rash move to a boyfriend's apartment.

*Young women need to understand the benefits of marrying while on the low-stress side of their fertility curves.* They can wait a few years before welcoming children into the household if they need to pursue education or early work goals or strengthen the foundations of their relationship. Marriage and childbearing need not be contemporaneous events, and growing into a “we-identity” with a spouse means that couples create their own paths as they grow together. Marriage need not derail a young woman's ambitions.

Mutual growing together, beginning in the soft-clay years, is the sine qua non of the cornerstone marriage. In contrast, the eminent family sociologist Paul Amato notes an increasing non-interdependence among contemporary spouses compared with those of past generations. What he describes is something like the friendly merger of two individual lives, rather than the weaving together of those lives, or the subterranean intertwining of tree roots in a forest. In mathematical parlance, a cornerstone marriage is closer to “ $2 / 2 = 1$ ” than to “ $1 + 1 = 2$ .”

Convincing Millennials, a questioning bunch, that building a life on top of a societal institution like marriage isn't such a strange idea may require multiple approaches and a cultural re-evaluation of whether marriage is one of many notches on the adult-achievement ladder or the foundation of a happy and fulfilling life. Sharing real stories of people who

have adopted a countercultural contemporary cornerstone model and have found strength and happiness in that path will help young adults frame marriage as the deeply meaningful life journey it is. Helping them take that road purposefully, and not too late, is a societal obligation shared by all who still believe in marriage. Hand this article to a 20-something today.

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