

Waiting until After College Graduation to Marry

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Keywords: Marriage, divorce, education

Abstract

This study used survey research to capture the attitudes of 25 Midwestern university students on waiting until after college graduation to get married. Results indicate that participants feel that waiting until after college graduation to get married would lead to a more successful marriage. Results also indicated that students believe a higher education can lead to increased employment opportunities and financial stability and that the older a person marries the less likely they will get divorced. It is hoped that this information is utilized to help educate young adults on the benefits of waiting until later in life to get married. This study enhances the knowledge base on the attitudes of young adults and marriage. The next step in research could be to compare the sexes to ascertain any gender differences.

Introduction

Despite continuous changes in gender roles over time, 90% of women in the United States will eventually marry (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). It would be assumed that economic independence of women would be associated with lower rates of marriage, but research has found the opposite to be true. Instead of remaining single, women are waiting until later ages to get married. For women, this means the possibility of a more egalitarian marriage, generating more satisfaction. But what about men? Most of the literature focused primarily on the position of women and had little to say about men. In general, research shows that there are benefits for those who wait until after attaining a college education to get married, including increased employment opportunity and economic advantage.

Literature Review

Research indicates that there are several factors that can impact the success of a relationship. However, there is a lack of recent studies on how age at time of marriage and education impact the success of a marriage. Generally, most studies in this area occurred before 1990 and only a few have been conducted since then. Marriage and divorce trends are beginning to shift, from the 1980s, with highly educated women becoming more likely to marry than women with less education. In addition, there is an increase in marriage satisfaction, which may be due to the economic adequacy and increased employment opportunities that women with higher education possess. Some studies suggest that the decrease in younger marriages may be responsible for the decline in termination of marriages (Heaton, 2002; Goldstein & Kenney, 2001; Thornton, Axinn, & Teachman, 1995; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991).

Goldstein and Kenney (2001) found that both men and women are marrying later than they have in the past. The average age of women at time of marriage has risen from an average age of 20.8 years in 1970 to 25 years in 1998. Goldstein and Kenney's research found that women with a higher educational degree will be more likely to marry than those that have less education. These women will not only be at a better economic advantage than women that do not have a higher education, but they will also have increased employment opportunities. As women weigh the costs of entering marriage before attaining a college education, they may find that the benefits of a higher education include a more egalitarian marriage. Men may also benefit from the increased amount of capital women earn with a more successful career.

Heaton (2002) states that age at time of marriage and education attainment have an affect on marital stability. A reliable predictor of marriage stability is age at time of marriage. Educational attainment comes in at a lesser degree of prediction. Nevertheless, each factor contributes some fraction of value. It can be presumed that those who wait to marry are more mature in terms of age and experience. Perhaps, in terms of mate selection, those who take more time to choose a spouse are able to institute a more enduring relationship. Those individuals that choose to attend college may also choose to postpone marriage until after graduation, so the doors remain open for occupational and geographic flexibility.

Thornton et al. (1995) investigated the positive impact education has on marriage, and their research revealed that a higher education brings more financial security. Their study showed that the more education people acquire, the longer they prolong marriage. People often view marriage as an adult status and not the role of a student. Therefore, people expect that students should complete their schooling before taking on the task of marriage and a family. Tuition bills and other living expenses leave students struggling financially. In addition, most students work only part time jobs, if at all. Financial security plays an important role in a marriage. When people obtain a higher education they are more likely to be financially stable, therefore attending college can be beneficial.

Bumpass et al. (1991) discussed many factors that can lead to a disrupted marriage. They divided background factors of marital dissolution into sections. Two of these sections included family background (race, education, socioeconomics) and respondent characteristics at marriage (age at marriage, marriage cohort). According to the researchers, young marriages were more likely to be dissolved than marriages that took place later on. The article also reported that women with less education have a higher chance of having their marriage dissolved. Four out of five women who graduated from college were more likely to have a successful marriage than those with less education.

Current research fails to discuss the attitudes that 18-20 year olds have on waiting until after college graduation to get married, as well as a lack of information on the viewpoint of men. As a result, we hope that by examining the attitudes of this cohort we may gain a better understanding of the declining number of young marriages and the effects young marriages have on marital relationships. The current study also seeks to understand the attitudes on how attaining a higher education can benefit a relationship and increase marital satisfaction for both men and women. Studying this concept is important because the divorce rate in today's society is exceptionally high, and it is important to determine predictors of divorce so it can be prevented.

Theoretical Framework

The theory used in this study is the Social Exchange Theory (Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993). It was developed by Sir James Frazer in 1919. Sociologists George Homans and Peter Blau and psychologists John Thibau and Harold Kelly put it into use in the late 1960's and early 1970's for research purposes. This theory indicates that individuals go into relationships with costs and benefits of that relationship in mind, and that the benefits should outweigh the costs.

As applied to our study, this theory predicts that the sample groups' attitudes will demonstrate beliefs that waiting until after graduation to marry will lead to a more successful marriage. Based on the Social Exchange Theory, it is predicted that individuals will weigh the costs and benefits of going to college and decide that waiting to get married until after graduation will be in their best interest. It is also predicted that students will present motives such as financial stability, increased job opportunity, and maturity as reasons for waiting. This is supported by our findings in the literature.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the attitudes of college male and female students on waiting until after graduation to marry. It is hoped that the results from this study will be used to increase knowledge on why divorce occurs and to determine ways to prevent it. Marriage counselors, human service representatives, and guidance counselors will be able to utilize our findings to educate people of all ages about factors causing divorce.

Methods

Participants

The study took place at a mid-western university. Participants included 13 female and 12 male students, ages 18-20.

Research Design

This study is a cross-sectional design because it collected data at one point in time. Data was collected via self-administered questionnaires, because of cost-efficiency, convenience, and quick return of data, which was particularly important due to time constraints.

For convenience and ease of access, most respondents were residents in college dormitories on campus. This study used quota and snowball sampling methods. The quota sample included 12 males and 13 females, randomly chosen from the campus dormitories including friends/acquaintances, and was met by surveying students that fit the desired characteristics.

Materials

The survey instrument was approved by the Institutional Review Board before distribution; it included a cover letter stating the purpose of the study, instructions for completing the survey, a statement affirming voluntary participation, and a declaration assuring the confidentiality of all responses.

The data collection instrument was a written questionnaire. Participants were asked about their academic status, gender, and age. The questionnaire included five questions,

based on a 5-point Likert scale, from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree, asking respondents to choose and circle the best-fitting answer to match the intensity of their attitudes about each statement. The five questions were driven by the literature review and personal curiosity regarding students' attitudes on divorce, financial independence, increased job opportunity, and educational attainment. The survey questions met face and content validity. Questions were designed to cover the whole spectrum of what was found in the literature review. The survey was piloted on acquaintances and they affirmed that the survey was clear and had felt no further suggestions were needed.

Procedure

During the data collection process, students on campus between March 8th and March 10th, 2006 were asked if they would be willing to complete the survey. To try and reach the target age of 18-20, most respondents were found in underclassmen dormitory settings and completed the survey while we circulated the building. In order to get an equal representation of males and females we chose to sample 13 females and 12 males.

All students approached were willing to participate. After agreeing to participate, students were given the survey and, after reading the cover page, were asked to circle the responses best representative of their attitudes. Participants were given an additional sheet of paper and instructed to use the sheet for any additional comments. Surveys were completed in the presence of one of our research team members and respondents were thanked for their participation.

Data Analysis Plan

In an effort to ensure data validity, research was "cleaned" and "coded." All surveys were fully completed so none had to be discarded due to missing data. Cleaned surveys were then coded using acronyms for each variable. As a research team, we created a code book, assigning a name to each variable and a number to each of the potential responses to every question.

Demographic variables were coded first: gender and age. Then, each of the statements on the survey instrument were given a variable name: individuals should wait until after college graduation to marry (*AGR*), a college degree can lead to a more successful marriage (*SUC*), people with a college degree are more likely to be financially stable (*FIN*), individuals that go to college have increased employment opportunities (*JOB*), the older a person marries the less likely they will be divorced (*ATM*). For each of the five statements, numbers were assigned to the range of potential responses: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree.

To analyze the data, we employed the use of the data-analyzing computer program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Using this program, we analyzed the dependant variables and used the individual as our level of analysis. Frequencies and a reliability analysis were conducted to determine whether or not the survey variables measured what they intend to measure.

Results

A frequency distribution indicated no missing data; results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution

Variable	Response			
	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
AGR	8.0%	24.0%	52.0%	16.0%
SUC	8.0%	36.0%	48.0%	8.0%
FIN	4.0%	12.0%	48.0%	36.0%
JOB	4.0%	8.0%	32.0%	56.0%
ATM	16.0%	20.0%	48.0%	16.0%

Note. (AGR)=Individuals should wait until after college graduation to marry; (SUC)=A college degree can lead to a more successful marriage; (FIN)=People with a college degree are more likely to be financially stable; (JOB)=Individuals that go to college have increased employment opportunities; (ATM)=The older a person marries the less likely they will be divorced.

A reliability test was done to determine if the variables were an accurate measure of the main concept (waiting until after college graduation to marry is beneficial). According to the Chronbach's Alpha measure of reliability, our variables (AGR, SUC, FIN, JOB, ATM) score was .791. This shows that these variables are a good measure of students' attitudes towards waiting until after graduation to marry.

Discussion

It was predicted that students would feel that waiting until after graduation to marry leads to a more successful marriage. Sixty-eight percent of those surveyed believe that individuals should wait until after college graduation to marry, 24% of students were undecided.

Results also supported the hypothesis that students would present motives for waiting to get married. More specifically, results indicated that students believe a higher education can lead to increased employment opportunities and financial stability, which is supported by Thornton, Axinn, and Teachman's (1995) discussion regarding the importance of financial stability in a marriage. Thornton et. al. and 84% of participants express the belief that a higher education can increase financial stability. Results also show that 88% of those surveyed agreed that persons with a college degree have more job opportunities. Increased job opportunity and income are believed to cut down on the financial strain in the relationship. Consequently, a college degree can lead to financial stability which then decreases the likelihood of divorce due to financial strain.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Our biggest concern was that of the sample size. Due to time constraints a sample that was easy to access and small in number was needed. If repeated, we would have liked to obtain a bigger sample size to get a broader range of responses that could be generalized to the larger population. The next step in research could be to compare the sexes to ascertain any gender differences.

Implications for Practitioners

Since the study was based on the benefits of waiting until after college graduation to get married, the results would be useful to Guidance Counselors in high schools and colleges for young adults inquiring about going to college, relationships, and/or marriage. In today's society, youth are more likely to go to college and are holding off marriage, family, and kids until later in life (Goldstein & Kenny 2001).

Conclusion

As a result of this study, we hope that it will help the general population see that young adults may be more apt to hold off on marriage to further education, search for self-interests, and become more financially stable/independent. We also hope this information will be utilized to help educate young adults on the benefits of waiting until later in life to get married.

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