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Changing Attitudes toward Marriage and Family in the United States

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I cross-tabulated findings with both age and gender to see if attitudes toward marriage, such as when marriage should occur, what roles children play in the marriage, and the significance of marriage in society, were changing from one generation to the next and if men and women were affected equally by this change using data from an online survey that I conducted (n=128). The research revealed that attitudes are shifting slowly regarding marriage and the place of children in marriage. The change is most pronounced in what we see as the function of marriage, the acceptance of cohabitation, and the rise and acceptance of single parenting.

INTRODUCTION

Every child who can jump rope knows the popular playground rhyme — first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a carriage. Indeed, from the dawn of time, man and woman have teamed up to bear and raise children. Or at least that is the way things used to go. Newspapers and stories are abuzz about how marriage is changing. We hear dire warnings on the evening news about how “traditional marriage” is in danger. But what is the real story? Stephanie Coontz (2004), who specializes in the study of marriage and family life, suggests that the “traditional” idea of marriage and family, throughout time and culture is a myth, that change is inevitable, and things may not be as bad as they seem. She asserts:

Two-provider families, for example, were the norm through most of history. Stepfamilies were more numerous in much of history than they are today. There have been several times and places when cohabitation, out-of-wedlock births, or non-marital sex were more widespread than they are today...Even same-sex marriage, though comparatively rare, has been accepted in some cultures under certain conditions (Coontz, 2004, p.974).

She adds that pretty much any arrangement of coming together, splitting apart, having children, raising children, sending children off in marriage, building relationships, and tearing them down, has all been done somewhere, by somebody, at some point in history. In the last 150 years, we have seen many changes in our world that have, in turn, changed the face of marriage in America and what family means to American society.

Despite the ebb and flow of trends and beliefs about marriage, right now, in the United States, a shift in thinking does seem to be occurring with regard to what defines a marriage or a family and what is acceptable in those realms. It is not uncommon in political or religious discussion to hear that these changing views on marriage and parenting are destroying America and eroding the family. But are they really? Others see this change as a breath of fresh air and a welcome reformation of what it means to be an individual and a part of family. Either way, there is no denying that, for better or worse, things are changing. Marriage and family are being redefined, and what is, and is not, acceptable is shifting. In my research, I explore the changing attitudes toward marriage and family and how it might affect us going into the future. It is important that we stay on top of how things are changing, how they will continue to change, and affect the rest of society. These shifts must be taken into account as we go forward serving families, preparing young people for adult life, or making policies regarding the wellbeing of our citizens. It is important to know what is really changing, and how these changes will affect society, communities, families, and individuals— today and in the future.

Literature Review

Some things are certain when it comes to marriage and family. The evidence is clear that marriage and family life are good for us as individuals and as a society. Married people, as a group, are generally better off financially than singles. Research shows they have higher incomes, better work performance, larger savings, and a greater accumulation of assets. (Martin et al, 2003; First Things First, 2013). Married people tend to be healthier mentally and physically, live longer, and have lower rates of alcohol abuse (First Things First, 2013). On the flip side, being single is not that great for families or individuals. Children of single-parent families are much more likely to be high school dropouts. They are three times more likely to live in poverty than children who live in families where the parents are married (Gubernskaya, 2010). Single dads are less involved in their children's lives and less responsible toward their families. Single parent households are "a major cause of child and family poverty and welfare dependency and many associated problems," both of which "cost taxpayers millions and put a strain on society's ability to help the most vulnerable" (First Things First, 2013).

Despite all of the advantages to being married and disadvantages to being single, research suggests the institution of marriage is becoming less valued, and the role of children within the marriage ambiguous. Divorce, cohabitation, choosing to remain single, having children outside of marriage, or not having children at all are all becoming popular choices in lieu of marriage and the stigma of these choices seems to be fading into the past (Gubernskaya, 2010). The Institute for American Values noted a sense of ambivalence towards marriage in a third of adults. With changing attitudes about sex, birth control, and acceptable living arrangements, marriage has become less necessary in the minds of many (Martin et al, 2003).

Naturally, this is resulting in a general downward trend for marriage. In interviews, researchers found that young people still like the idea of marriage, but were full of uncertainty about the reality of marriage. Even still, between 1962 and 1994, most young people stated that they wanted to get married in the future and believed that marriage is very important (Gubernskaya, 2010), which seems to be an optimistic view of marriage in general.

Once marriage was a union of convenience and necessity with functions including merging families, forming social bonds, bearing and raising children — in this way, marriage provided a multidirectional safety net for everyone involved. But then came the industrial revolution and with it a change in the way families functioned. Cottage industry and farm life gave way to factory work and urban living. How families worked together, and how money functioned in the family, began to shift. After the Industrial Revolution came the post-war economic boom and the firm establishment of the middle class. With comfortable income levels and an abundant supply of goods to meet their needs, Americans moved into an era of post-materialism. Rather than living lives according to their need for things and unions that would ensure their survival, such as marriages of convenience and the simple need for a spouse to ensure procreation and provision (Coontz, 2004), people turned their attention to autonomy and self-expression. They could now marry for love or personal fulfillment (Gubernskaya, 2010).

This economic security gives individuals the luxury of pursuing self-realization and liberates them from the normative constraints that go along with economic dependence on family and community. Post-materialist values are associated with high levels of tolerance for abortion, divorce, and homosexuality and low levels of support for the importance of family life and children, male dominance, and traditional gender roles (Gubernskaya, 2010, p 181).

For example, people began pushing off marriage and childbearing in favor of pursuing a college education, or becoming established in a career, while living together instead. With these choices becoming more acceptable, or even expected, what is believed to be traditional marriage values in the United States has begun to decline (Gubernskaya, 2010). By the 1960s, we could no longer hide from the changes that were coming. The disapproval rates for sex outside of marriage, cohabitation, and divorce, fell dramatically. As time marched on, the changes relentlessly continued. Having children outside of marriage has become an acceptable choice, and conversely deciding to never have children, in or outside of marriage, is also a valid choice. More and more women are choosing not to get married at all. "Twenty-two percent of U.S. women 30 to 34 were never married in 2000. That is about triple the percent of never-married women in that age group in 1970" (Sloan Work and Family Research Network, 2006). With all of this change, it is important to find out why it is changing, and what, if anything, should be done to address these changes.

With marriage being deferred, cohabitation has moved in as a new marriage light - something to fill a relationship gap between dating and marriage. According the U.S. Census, between 1990 and 2000, the number of cohabiting couples has increased by 72 percent (Sloan Work and Family Research Network, 2006). People choosing cohabitation over marriage, with no intention of marriage, has also increased dramatically over the last thirty years. In interviews with young people ages twelve to eighteen, researchers found that 50 percent of teenagers had positive attitudes towards living together and only 27 percent thought it was a bad idea. Almost 50 percent said they would want to live with someone before they got married, believing that it would improve the quality and longevity of their marriage (Martin et al, 2003).

Unfortunately, there is a plethora of data contradicting these youth's assumptions. The research is clear: living together has been shown to dramatically reduce happiness and longevity of relationships. (One Plus One, 2013) Some researchers believe that the declining rate in marriage is robbing children of ability to see healthy long-term relationships and learn relationship skills that would ensure marriage success. This leaves them turning towards cohabitation, and continuing the cycle (Martin et al, 2003). Cohabitation allows people to enjoy the comforts of marriage without the commitment. But that is not all. Being able to wallow in relationship limbo is also pushing up the average age of marriage.

One of the subtler changes encroaching on marriage and child rearing is that people are putting them off until later in life, whereas the average age for first marriages in 1960 was 20 for women and 23 for men. Now, the average age is 25 for women and 27 for men—an increase of about 5 years for both (Sloan Work and Family Research Network, 2006). There are several things that may be contributing to this rise. The first is cohabitation. By allowing people to reap the benefits of marriage without actually entering into a marriage, they are able to put it off indefinitely without losing many of the privileges of marriage. Also, as previously stated, the luxury of more people being able to obtain a college education and become financially independent has given women a reason not to rush into marriage. Easing of social prohibition toward premarital sex, and with birth control and legal abortion mitigating the consequences of sexual activity, allows people the social and moral freedom to meet their sexual needs outside of marriage; needs which may have urged couples toward the altar 60 years ago. Any of these contributions toward sexual freedom may be a factor in the decision to put off marriage. Whatever the reason, the decision to put of marriage may actually be contributing to a decline in the divorce rate. According to researchers at the Marriage Project, people who marry at a later age are less likely to get divorced (The National Marriage Project, 2007). The increasing age of first marriage is not necessarily a bad thing when considered relative to its effect on divorce.

Whenever the topic of divorce comes up in casual conversation, people seem to have a penchant for stating that divorce is on the rise and we are all doomed. While that is partly true, it is also partly false. Divorce is actually on the decline and, while certain groups are at higher risk for divorce, no one is entirely doomed. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, divorce has been on a steady decline since 1985. The crude divorce rate—the number of divorces per 1,000 people—is indeed at 50%, but certain populations are at a much higher risk for divorce. Certain factors significantly decrease the probability a couple will divorce, while others significantly increase the probability that a couple will be at risk. Couples who have higher incomes, higher education, higher age at the time of marriage, practice religion, delay conception until after marriage, and have an intact family of origin are more likely to stay together. Conversely, couples who make less than \$25,000, come from divorced families, conceive a child out of wedlock, have no association with any religion, or dropped out of high school are significantly more likely to divorce (The National Marriage Project, 2007). Also, couples who are in their second marriage are at a significantly higher risk of divorce (Olson, DeFrain, Skogrand, 2008). While the proportions and risks of divorce may not be as bad as the public is sometimes led to believe, it is still prevalent enough to have a huge impact on how people feel about marriage in general. The rate of divorce is still high, which leaves a lot of children to be raised in single-parent homes (often the mother's). In a study of teenager attitudes on marriage and divorce, researchers found that about half of the respondents had a negative view on marriage and just over 20 percent had positive feelings about it. It is important to note, though, that over half of the respondents came from divorced families, and this may be shading their view of divorce. The researchers state it is unclear what effect being part of a divorced family has on a child's view of marriage and divorce, but early research suggests it does indeed have some kind of effect (Martin et al, 2003). While two-thirds of the teens interviewed expressed optimistic views toward marriage, most of them felt unprepared for marriage. Yet they also responded that they felt they had the skills needed for marriage. What the researchers inferred from this was that the teens appeared to be confused about what was needed to prepare and function in a

marriage relationship, perhaps because so few of them had seen a healthy marriage on a day-to-day basis (Martin et al, 2003). This lack of experience in how successful families function seems to be a key in shaping how children feel when approaching marriage, and how the acceptance of divorce and single-parent families will affect the next generation.

Even with divorce on the decline, the rate is still considerably high, leaving many children in single-parent families. Despite the decline in the divorce rate, the number of children being raised in single parent families is on a sharp incline. Statistics show that in 1970, 12 percent of U.S. children lived in a single-parent home; this rose to 28 percent by 1996. And from another perspective, in the year 2000, married couples raising their children together comprised 73 percent of all families with children. By 2006 that had declined by two percent (Sloan Work and Family Research Network, 2006). Cohabitation has also been a driving force in the number of children being raised by unwed parents. In 2004, almost half of babies born, were born to mothers who were cohabiting. In 1960, only 500,000 children were being raised in homes with parents who were not married. This number has risen to 5.5 million, and increased 72 percent in the last 10 years alone. And while the age for first-time marriages is increasing, the average age of unwed mothers is only 20 years old. Forty percent of these mothers are living with men who may or may not be the father of one or more of their children (Sloan Work and Family Research Network, 2006). Of all the ways families are changing, this seems to be one of the biggest areas. The taboo of living together and raising children without being married is clearly dead.

Another change in family structure and marriage is the role of childbearing. Many children have never lived under the same roof as both of their parents. More and more people see childbearing and childrearing as having little or nothing to do with marriage. According to U.S Census statistics, U.S. births to single women in 2004 comprised 35.7 percent of all births, or 1.5 million babies. In 1980, only 18.4 percent of babies were born to unwed mothers (Sloan Work and Family Research Network, 2006). More than half of female high school seniors say that having a child outside of marriage is acceptable, according to a recent poll from the University of Michigan Survey Research Center (Beam, 2009). Women are also choosing to remain child-free more often. In 1962, 85 percent of women believed that children were an essential part of married life; by 1980, only 43 percent of women believed this (Gubernskaya, 2010). Although children were once a central part of marriage, and marriage was considered central to raising children, times are definitely changing. Family life that once involved marriage and children has now become two separate areas. One involving choices regarding romantic partners, and the other regarding decisions to become parents.

When facing changes in how we function as a country, it can be helpful to look to other countries who have perhaps embraced similar changes more quickly than the United States. By doing this, we can see how these changes have affected society, families, marriages, children, and individuals. We can also assess what policy changes have been made to support people as they move into these new kinds of family structures. Gubernskaya (2010) looked at countries with similar views on marriage (Ireland, Germany, United States, Netherlands, Great Britain, and Austria) to compare and contrast how the changes were occurring, and how they were affecting society. Statistical analysis of marriage and family trends in Great Britain reveal changes and concerns similar to those expressed in the United States (one Plus One, 2013). One common theme in changing ideas about marriage and family was education. "Education brings exposure to nontraditional ideas about family and gender roles, which has enduring effects on attitudes. In many countries, better educated individuals delay marriage, have fewer children, and view family roles as less central to life" (Gubernskaya, 2010, p.183). Other changing trends reported were that better educated individuals had more positive attitudes towards the choice to be child-free and "placed less emphasis on marriage" overall (Gubernskaya, 2010, p.183).

However, sometimes the more things change, the more they stay the same. Gubernskaya (2010) also found that, despite being expected to complete their education and pursue a career, women are still the ones primarily in charge of raising children, taking care of elderly relatives, and doing house work. This, in turn, left them less enthusiastic than men with regard to marriage and family. When asked to choose, they were less inclined to choose domestic life, and fled to the workforce instead, believing they will be just fine without the trappings of marriage. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to believe that people are happier when married. Women in the US, Great Britain, and the Netherlands were less convinced than men about the importance of children in the marriage

Meanwhile, in Sweden, social change has opened a new door to the way women and men approach marriage and family. There are many parallels that can be drawn between the established attitudes towards family and marriage in Sweden and the rising trends

observed in the United States. Sweden is experiencing a decline in marriage rates, older age of marriage, a high divorce rate (although still lower than the United States), and more children living without married parents either because of divorce, break up, or because they were born to single parents (Popenoe, 2006). Full equality of women in the workplace, job protection policies, generous paternity leave, and good universal daycare have all paved the way for women to make choices about marriage and family without having to worry about who will take care of her or her children or having to choose between marriage and family.

Despite every provision being made for the bearing and raising of children, the birth rate in Sweden is down to below replacement level. However, it is slightly higher than the rest of the EU (Chesnais, 2006). Marriage is also down. There are no benefits or penalties that distinguish married from non-married people. They are treated as individuals with rights that do not hinge on their relationship choices. Generous government provisions for families have enabled parental relationships to break up or for people to choose to eschew traditional marriages altogether. These social benefits are given without respect to marital status, unlike the entitlement benefits given in the United States. As a matter of fact, because of the policies in place promoting gender equality and the well-being of the child, there is virtually no socioeconomic difference between married and single parents (Chesnais, 2006).

This suggests that by embracing the changing definition of marriage and family, and creating policies that keep pace with change, Sweden has mitigated the negative financial effects of relationship statuses that we are seeing in the United States, especially with regard to single mothers and their children. The cohabitation rate of Sweden is the highest in the world, and 20 percent higher than the U.S., because “virtually all couples live together before marriage, compared to around two-thirds of couples in America” (Popenoe 2006, pp2-3). When questioned about whether or not it was OK to still just live together after having kids, 86 percent of men and 89 percent of women thought this was perfectly acceptable (Popenoe 2006). A possible explanation for the fewness of Swedes marrying is the weakness of religious beliefs in Sweden (Popenoe, 2006). As religious affiliation and church attendance have dwindled in the U.S. in the last 60 years (Newport, 2013), divorce and cohabitation have increased. Statistics show that people who actively practice religion tend to marry more and divorce less (The National Marriage Project, 2007).

It is important to note that Sweden is not fighting these changes. Instead, they have chosen to work together as a nation for the best possible outcomes for children, families, and individuals, regardless of how families decide to define themselves. They have enacted policies to ensure that everyone is treated equally, and everyone is properly cared for. Consequently, the wellbeing of every man, woman, and child is rising.

Hypothesis

I believe the data will show we are seeing changes in the definitions of marriage and family. I hope my research will give clues as to how policy and social services should be changing to keep up with it.

METHODS

For this study, I created a survey to explore how views on marriage and family were shifting among those close to me, and if they were similar to patterns seen in other studies. While the survey data was quantitative, I was looking more for ideas and trends than facts and figures. I was hoping to get a baseline for how people *felt* about marriage and family. Due to a non-random sample, that used a snowball effect for choosing survey participants, I ended up with a small number of respondents, from a less-than-diverse population. The survey consisted of a few basic demographic questions, including age, sex, sexual orientation, and marital status, and 14 questions about the respondent's thoughts on marriage, children, and family. The independent variables used for analysis were age and sex, and the dependent variable was the remaining survey questions. The survey included questions on what marriage is, ideal timeframes, thoughts on ending marriage, and where children fit into a marriage. The survey was hosted by Survey Monkey and spread by word of mouth, Facebook, and emails to friends and families. Thus, this constitutes a convenience sample. Participants were encouraged to pass the survey on to their friends and family in an effort to diversify the sample. The sample size was 125. However, since most of my friends and family are middle aged, conservative, white women that is who the majority of the respondents were. In contrast to the literature

reviewed, they hold very traditional views about marriage and family. While my survey has drawbacks for drawing broad, definitive conclusions, it is a preliminary survey of marriage and family ideals, giving insights on current trends, and where future research can be focused. Some of the individual questions, responses, and interpretations follow.

RESULTS

In this study, I cross tabulated findings with both age and gender to see if ideas about marriage and children differed by generation and gender.

Figure 1a shows that the importance of waiting to have children until marriage varied by generation. The older the respondent, the more likely they were to say that it is better to wait. Figure 1b shows that more men than women think it is better to wait for marriage.

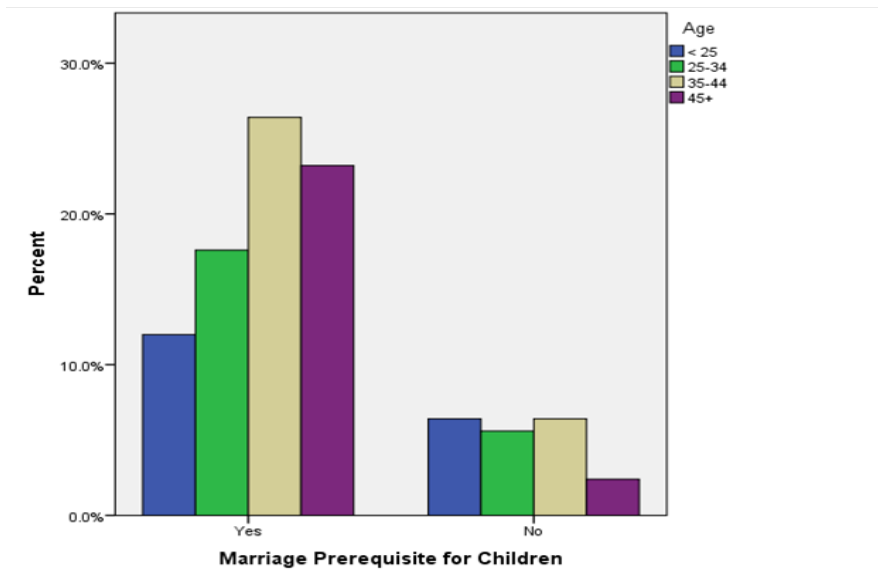


Figure 1a. Views on Marriage as Prerequisite for Children by Age

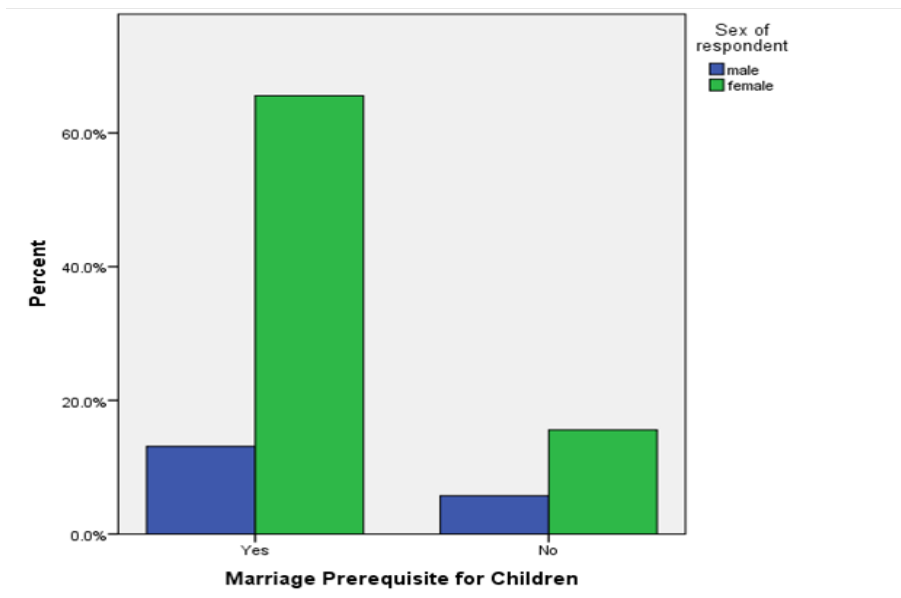


Figure 1b. Views on Marriage as Prerequisite for Children by Gender

Figure 2a and 2b demonstrate that while an overwhelming majority of respondents thought having children in your twenties was ideal, men were more optimistic about starting a family in their thirties. However, this could have something to do with the physical realities of pregnancy, which men would not be as in tune with. There was a general consensus that anything before your twenties or after your thirties was not the ideal time.

Figures 3a and 3b show that while overall the respondents had an optimistic view of marriage (as evidenced by their current status of being married or wanting to get married). The slight spike in people uncertain about marriage or not desiring marriage in the 35 and over groups could be due to their older age and lack of desire to change their current status.

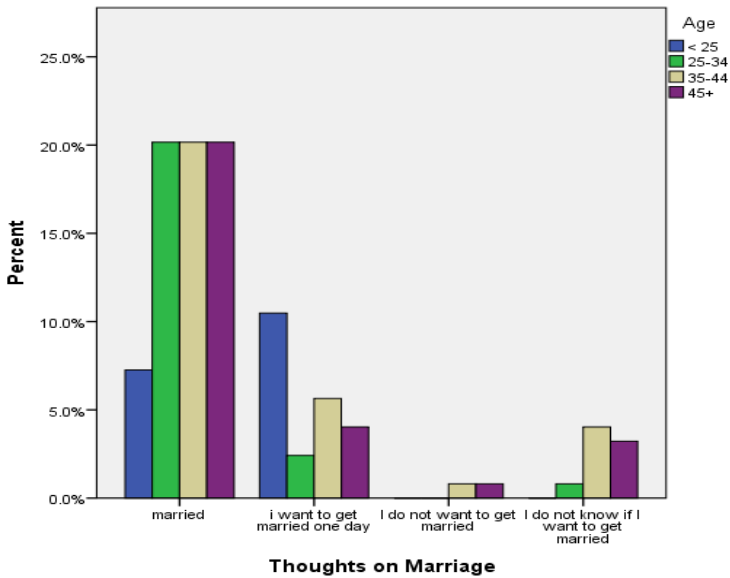


Figure 3a. Thoughts on Marriage by Age

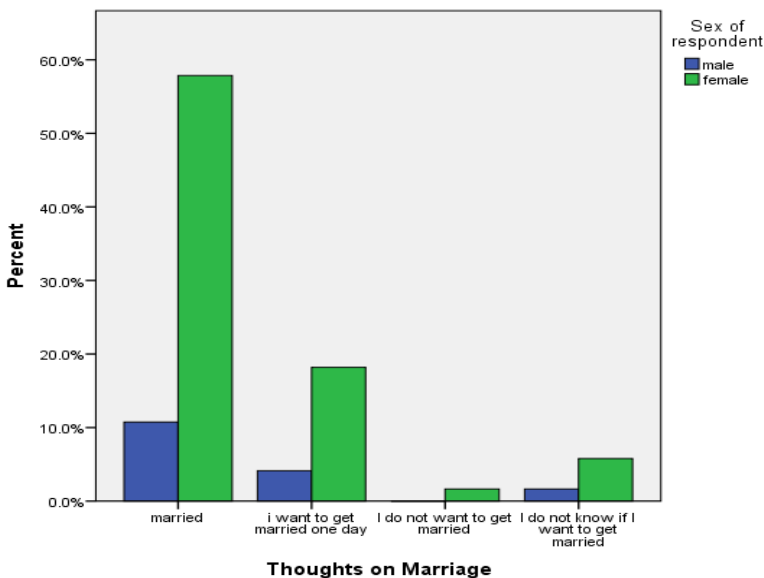


Figure 3b. Thoughts on Marriage by Gender

Figures 4a and 4b show that very few people view marriage as a purely social construct. They believe that it is an institution of significance either legally or religiously, and most view it as important in all three realms. This seemed to be about the same for men and

women. This is important because it explains why legal and/or religious recognition of marriage between same sex couples is such a big issue currently.

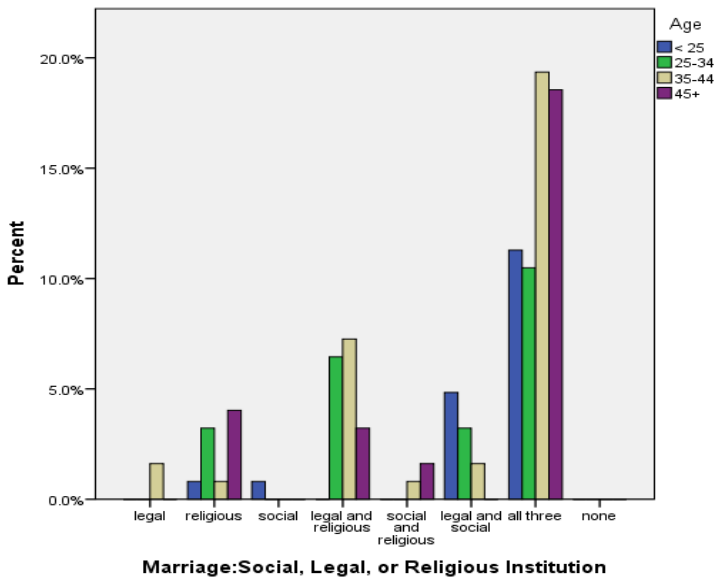


Figure 4a. Views on Marriage as an Institution by Age.

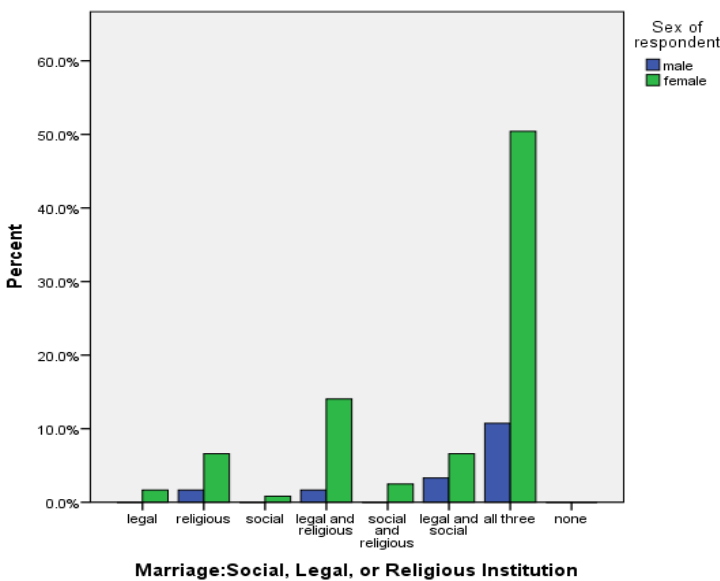


Figure 4b. Views on Marriage as an Institution by Gender.

DISCUSSION

Change is inevitable and, like it or not, even marriage and family are not immune to it. When society fails to keep up with change or refuses to move with it, the people in that society end up losing. However, conversely, when government policy and social service groups accept change and work with it, everyone in society benefits. Sweden is a perfect example of such adaptability. While it may not

be possible to enact the same changes in the United States, it is important to make policy changes that reflect how families are changing. Otherwise, those living outside of outdated norms will continue to suffer. And, like we saw in the study of teens views of marriage, we will see a generation who dreams about getting married and having a family, but is stymied by confusion about what that entails, and ill equipped to succeed in family life (Martin et al, 2003).

We will continue to see single mothers and children suffer disproportionately at the hands of poverty. And, we will continue to see women opting for a career over marriage and or children—none of which is good for families. Our collective definition of family has been changing and it is time for policy and education to catch up. Having an accurate picture of how and why society is changing will help target resources appropriately. The state of marriage and family affects every aspect of a society. Knowing where we actually are, rather than reacting out of fear and dislike for change, will help us have solid footing to address the new needs of families and individuals in intelligent ways.

LIMITATIONS

This is a preliminary pilot study, using convenience sampling. Therefore, the findings are not necessarily representative and generalizable. I will use this research as a springboard for further, more sophisticated analyses using probability sampling.

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