The Relevance of Marriage in 21st Century America

There is someone for everyone. Every couple marries, buys a house, has kids, and lives happily ever after. In America, it seems that this is the life story engrained in us since our youth by movies, television, books, and every other cultural source imaginable. However, in recent years it would seem that Americans are perhaps too cynical to buy into this fairy-tale and are instead opting for other lifestyle choices. Marriage rates are low, while divorce rates, cohabitation\(^1\), and childbirth out of wedlock are high, so what happened to marriage? Sociologists have identified a number of causes for change which will be examined in this report. However, these factors decreasing marriage’s popularity and success call into question marriage’s relevance and place in 21st century American society. This paper seeks to briefly examine the causes behind marriage trends in the United States but focuses on determining the result of those trends on marriage’s place in America today. The truth is that marriage remains important to Americans, but social norms requiring marriage have begun a steady decay. People are no longer hesitant to make the decision to cohabit with their partner or even have children in without marrying first. As Andrew Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University writes, “Americans . . . hold to marriage as an ideal, [but] today marriage is increasingly optional” (33). This is perhaps the most profound observable societal change in our midst: society is ceasing its heavy-handed pressure to marry every couple, but this is not the result of decaying American morals but rather a completely normal and perhaps predictable progression of long-existent sociological trends.

Statistics make evident the changing face of marriage in the US on which this paper’s arguments are based. There are a number of ways of describing the changing societal trends,

\(^1\) Cohabitation is, in this context, used to describe couples living together without being married to one another. Such couples sometimes choose to have a child despite the fact that they are not married.
however, so several types of statistics are included. The Council of Contemporary Families’
statistics report that while only 28% of the American population was unmarried in 1970, 45% is
unmarried in 2009 (“Single In America”). This is a dramatic increase, clearly, but not the only
way to measure this phenomenon. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
reports that there are 3.4 divorces per 1,000 population in 44 participating states, which is called
a divorce rate (“Marriage and Divorce”). This statistic, however, is difficult to interpret for non-
sociologists. Most clear, though also potentially misleading, is Cherlin’s interpretation of the
CDC’s Vital and Health Statistics: Cohabitation, Marriage and Remarriage in the United States,
estimating that 48% of American marriages end in divorce in twenty years (Cherlin 36; US
Department of Health and Human Services). This seems startlingly high, but actually becomes
more reasonable when confounding variables such as race, education level and first or second
marriage are isolated. Additionally, this rate is an estimate while actual observed rates for shorter
periods such as five, ten, or fifteen years are lower (US Department of Health and Human
Services, “Vital and Health Statistics: Cohabitation...” 55). All of these statistics point to the fact
that marriage is substantially more optional now than it ever has been, and there are a number of
reasons why.

Changes in American economics are one of the several factors behind the aforementioned
trends in marriage. The National Marriage Project, a research project at the University of
Virginia, published a report in 2011 linking trends in marriage and national economy. This is not
just a one-way, but two way relationship, where financial prosperity leads to more marriages, but
fewer marriages lead to weaker economy (“Study Links Marriage, Economy”). Our recent
downtrodden economy can be seen as both a cause and effect of lowered marriage rates where
the two are stuck in a feedback loop, continuously influencing one another. Additionally,
marriage carries the worry of expensive divorce which seems to greatly discourage hesitant couples from tying the knot, especially in economically insecure times. At the least, people are inclined to wait before marrying to try to secure their finances beforehand, which would explain rising median marriage rates (Cherlin 35), after which they gain confidence to “settle down.”

A progressively less religious America is also a factor in marriage’s changing identity. Marriage is often a religious ceremony and many religions encourage marriage before having sex and childbearing, so religion pressures and encourages marriage. However, David Briggs reported for the Huffington Post on results of the General Social Survey which found that religious service attendance has dropped nine percent in eighteen years, more people are growing up in religiously inactive households, fewer people are becoming clergy, and faith in religious leaders has dropped ten percent since the 1970s. This means that religious pressures are affecting fewer people, and those it does affect may be less inclined to fold to the pressure. More children are being born out of wedlock too, often by cohabiting couples (Cherlin 35), which further shows the decreased influence of religion on lifestyle choices.

The feminist movement also is responsible for changes in attitudes towards marriage. As American feminists fought for the rights of women in the 1960s and ‘70s, women slowly but surely found themselves on much more equal footing with men. Suddenly, the idea that a woman was dependent on a man and needed to marry to have kids and be supported by her husband seemed dated and sexist. Thus, it would make sense for women to not rush into marriage because she could instead explore her own career and life paths. Figures show that even since 1980, the idea that the man should be the “main breadwinner” has become substantially less popular (Amato et al. 145), indicating that attitudes towards women as reliant on men continue to become rarer. This is not just a phenomenon of surveyed opinion, Paul Amato (sociology
professor at Pennsylvania State University) and his co-authors concluded in their book on American marriage’s changes, *Alone Together*, “our data indicate a continuing trend toward gender equality—a trend that is entirely plausible, given the increase in wives’ educational attainment, the growth of wives’ labor-force participation, improvements in wives’ earnings, and a rise in the proportion of family income contributed by wives” (174). Women also became more sexually independent with the invention and popularization of oral contraceptive birth control as well as an increasingly secularized view on sex before marriage which would let women have sexual experiences before marriage without the enormous social repercussions that used to follow. All of this meant that women, in the social circle, were growing more equal to men than they ever had been and marriage seemed to suffer as a result, but by no means for the worse.

Lastly, changing culture is a major influence which, while hard to quantify with statistics or figures, may be one of the most important factors in explaining marriage trends. Aforementioned statistics support that more children are growing up in households of unmarried parents, a single parent, or parents going through a divorce. It is not a stretch to suggest that simply by experience, American youth have been losing faith in marriage as an institution and especially as an ideal to aspire to. When adults all around are increasingly divorcing, never marrying, or raising children alone, it may appear to children that marriage has fallen from the pedestal on which our culture had placed it. These children grow to become a marriage-eligible generation and this is when the trends become noticeable; marriage does not hold its old appeal to them. A marriage-optional culture is developing and superseding the culture that encouraged marriage and forbade divorce.

Society’s influence has changed marriage into an optional social choice. Marriage has changed because society has changed. Marriage is a human and societal construct, not an
unbreakable promise that every baby born makes to society to one day fulfill, and so it is just as susceptible to fall victim to the inherently ever-changing zeitgeist. When Catholic influence had stronger pull in societal trends, divorce was once very taboo for Americans, but the influence grew weak and so divorce went from taboo to the norm. The same occurred with sex before marriage which switched from forbidden to discouraged to the vast majority as today many health educators for youth encourage sex-positive dialogue and making one’s own choices about sex. Increased divorce rates, decreased marriage rates and increased cohabitation, often with children, are simply natural extensions of the idea that America is coming to shed societal taboos in favor of a more socially liberal lifestyle. Perhaps marriage and divorce trends may remain stable for a while now, because the mission to successfully optionalize marriage has succeeded.

It is worth considering the issue in the context of the separate but related issue of gay and lesbian marriage and unions. With homosexuality largely accepted by all but the most conservative of American society, the issue came to the forefront and young politically active people, both gay and straight, began to examine both the necessity of marriage as well as the alternatives. Cohabitation was an obvious choice for gay couples who could not marry and this could easily have influenced the increasingly liberal younger generations to consider it as an equally valid, if not superior arrangement. With the legalization of gay marriage in six states and Washington, DC, as well as recognition of gay marriage in two more, the issue has become a bit more complex but it is too late to take back its influence on the minds of couples everywhere who now look at cohabitation as an option when planning their futures.

Marriage’s changing face is not without criticism, especially from religious and socially conservative political groups, but these criticisms ultimately fail to change reality and often condemn the change without suggesting countermeasures. In an article for evangelical online
newspaper *The Christian Post*, Brittany Smith describes a counter-movement called Project 2026 which aims to revive Christian values surrounding marriage. Additionally, pastor Jimmy Evans and his wife created *Marriage Today*, a television show and website, which seeks also seeks to use Christian values to aid individual marriages as well as the institution of marriage in America in the face of the discouraging statistics. The general consensus of the opposition is that a generation with little faith in marriage is religiously misguided or, if religion is not involved, is morally wrong. This, while hard to refute objectively since it is a matter of opinion, can perhaps be best explained not by a loss of touch with God or morally corrupt generation but rather with generations becoming more secular as they have in the United States for many generations. Views on social institutions have indeed changed and this has included deviating from the suggestions of various religious texts but this cannot be simplified to say that there is anything wrong with this progression especially considering that there have been enormous changes in our society since the times when these religious texts were written.

So the face of marriage in 21st century America has changed as new generations become increasingly socially liberal and secular and begin to shed previous taboos and limits on personal rights. Marriage remains a popular institution, especially among the white, the wealthy, and the college educated (US Department of Health and Human Services, “Vital and Health Statistics: Cohabitation...” 17), and yet this group is likely simply the last to fall to the economic reasons for delaying or opting out of marriage. It is hard to say what will come next for marriage; it may stay a trend for the wealthy, college educated, white “elite” or even this group may fall to social change. Conversely, perhaps in decades, a religious revival may cause a decrease in divorce as it becomes taboo again and marriage rates will soar as Christian influence sweeps the nation. This is difficult to predict, but what is certain is that today we live in an age where marriage is no
longer a necessity but an oft-declined option and this is by no means a sign of national moral degradation but rather a completely foreseeable continuation of numerous documented trends.
Works Cited


