Changes In Women And Marriage Essay, Research Paper

Abstract

This paper presents an in-depth discussion about the changing

relationship between women and marriage. Economic factors, a rise in

feminism, parents? influence, attitudes about sex, educational

pursuits, and divorce statistics are discussed and their influence on

women?s attitudes toward marriage are explored. Cultural changes that

have impacted women?s lives are also examined. The purpose of the

paper is to explore the changes affecting women, their attitudes

toward marriage, and their expectations of marriage. This paper will

primarily concentrate on the question of why women delay marriage. The

sources used to develop this paper are published journals, the text

for this course along with other books related to this issue, and the

Internet.

The Changing Relationship Between Women and Marriage

Over the past four decades there has been substantial changes

in the attitudes toward marriage among women in the United States.

These attitudes relate to gender roles and social changes in today?s

society and have contributed to women marrying later than their

ancestors married. Studies show American women are waiting longer

than ever to get married. Their median age at first marriage hit a

record high of 24.5 years in 1994, up from 20 years in the mid 1950?s

(Crispell, 1996). That?s the oldest age since the Census Bureau

started to ask about age at marriage in 1890. Of course postponing

marriage means an increase, at any given time, in the number of people

who have never wed, and that is also reflected in the census study.

From 1970 to 1994 the number of Americans aged 18 and over who never

married more than doubled from 21.4 million to 44.2 million.

Additionally, women may be less likely to marry in the future.

Projections show the proportion of never married women increasing

between 1992 and 2010 for all age groups under 55 (Crispell).

According to Allen & Kalish (1984), the timing of a first

marriage is related to the attractiveness of the alternatives to

marrying. When women value roles that provide viable alternatives to

the role of wife, they delay marriage. The role of women has undergone

significant transformation brought about by changes in society.

Today?s families are smaller and live longer, thereby allowing women

to devote a smaller part of their lives to raising children than was

the case in earlier times (Allen & Kalish). Thus, more time is left

for other pursuits. A woman who enters her first marriage at an older

age is less likely to exchange dependence on her parents for

dependence on a husband (Unger & Crawford, 1992). Elder (1974) found

that women who married later were more likely to have careers,

financial stability and be middle class as opposed to lower class

background. What has transformed societal attitudes toward marriage so

that young women delay it, older women get out of it, and some women

skip it altogether? Economic factors, a rise in feminism, parental

influences, attitudes about sex, educational pursuits, and the divorce

rate have all undergone significant cultural changes and are among

some of the reasons being credited for influencing the ideas women

have about marriage. Let?s examine these influences and the attitudes

of women which determine their decision to marry or delay marriage. We

will also examine the expectations of marriage that today?s educated

women may have and how these expectations differ from other women?s

expectations.

Economic factors have resulted in women working outside the

home, and have had a strong influence over a woman?s decision to

marry. ?The ever increasing opportunities for women to work outside

the home make her less and less dependent, economically, upon a

husband? (Casler, 1974, p. 30). Late marrying women indicated that

careers took relative precedence over marriage during the period of

their lives when their ?less achievement – oriented peers were opting

for marriage? (Allen & Kalish, p. 141). Women now in the labor market

want more than just a ?job?, and therefore, actively pursue a

?career?. Between 1969 and 1979, for example, percentages of women

endorsing wanting to be ?an authority in my field? increased from

54.3% to 70.5% and in 1979 were only 4.8% lower than the percentage

for men. Women endorsing wanting ?to raise a family? declined in these

years from 77.8% to64.8% which equals the percentage for men. (Long,

1983).

Becker?s (1981) theories of marriage and family behavior

hypothesize that women?s increasing labor force participation has had

a critical and presumably irreversible impact on the family. If half

of all marriages are to fail, and with alimony for ex-wives less

common, a woman cannot count upon marriage for a lifetime of economic

security (Allen & Kalish). Men?s economic status has substantially

deteriorated since the 1970?s (Oppenheimer, 1994). The median income

of men aged 25 to 34 fell by 26% between 1972 and 1994 (Koontz, 1997).

The institution of marriage underwent a particularly rebellious and

dramatic shift when women entered the work force. ?People don?t have

to stay married because of economic forces now . . . we are in the

midst of trying to renegotiate what the marriage contracts is – what

men and women are suppose to do as partners? (Gleick, 1995). Studies

show the lowest marriage rate of all is for women professionals (i.e.,

doctors, lawyers). While over three-fourths of all women in the United

States aged 35 to 39 are married, fewer than two thirds of these

are professional women. Further, when they do marry, professional

women are more likely to divorce than their age peers. As for

childbearing, these women have significantly fewer children than their

nonprofessional counterparts, when they have children at all (Allen &

Kalish). In the case of having children Oppenheimer argues that ?the

major component of the cost of children is the ?indirect? cost – the

cost of the mother?s time? (p. 295).

A rise in feminism is credited for being another strong

influence in women?s lives. Feminism movements, with emphasis upon

educational and vocational achievements for women, seem to encourage

departure from traditional sex roles which were chiefly organized

around marriage and children, and toward more extensive careers for

women, especially those who are well educated (Becker). ?Even though

not all young women label themselves feminists, the idea that women

can and should have aspirations other than wife and mother has been

widely accepted? (Unger & Crawford, pg. 364). While it is true the

woman?s movement has made significant progress in its attempt to

equalize opportunities, the situation continues to be blatantly

unjust. ?It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is

often true; but almost always it annihilates woman? (Casler, p. 30).

Women, struggling to rise above the ?housewife? role, have a strong

desire to be valued for some of the same qualities men are valued

for: ambition, intelligence, and independence. Unfortunately,

subservient status of the married woman is deeply embedded in history.

?Conventional matrimony is seen by some to be a major stumbling block

in the path toward women?s liberation? (Casler, pg. 177).

?Modernization has inevitably led to the growth of individualism with

its emphasis on the importance of self fulfillment as opposed to the

subordination of individual needs? (Oppenheimer). As a result, women

not only are beginning to lead less traditional lives, but are also

increasingly tolerant of differences in life styles among others

(Becker). The old status order that granted men a privileged position

in the family is crumbling. Proponents of women?s empowerment have

emphasized the effect of women?s education and income on their

decision making authority within the household (Lundberg & Pollack,

1996). Policies that empower women have been supported with claims

that they will increase the well being of children. The belief that

?kids do better? when their mothers control a larger fraction of

family has been proven (Lundberg & Pollack).

Parental influence and upbringing, no doubt, have a

penetrating influence on a woman?s ideas and her perceptions on

marriage. Several studies have focused on parents? influence on a

woman?s marital timing. Late marriers had less dating experience and

more parental restrictions than earlier marriers did (Elder). It was

found that the parents of late marrying women did not stress education

and career over marriage but, valued career in its own right in such a

way that they provided their daughters with permission to pursue a

non-normative path (Allen & Kalish). So, it appears that parents of

late marrying women have put less pressure on their daughters to marry

than parents of the normative groups. In studies of women?s

educational achievements and family influences, it seems that women

who pursue higher education goals and careers during the average

marrying years have, if not encouragement, at least acceptance of

their choice by their parents. Furthermore, father?s occupation and

education and mother?s education account for one-half of the variance

in marital timing for women, which is consistent with the idea that

both parents support their daughter in academic and career achievement

if they themselves have achieved more (Allen & Kalish). In another

study, parents of high educational and occupational level status,

exert positive influences on their daughter?s education and career

plans. Working mothers or mothers who are career oriented, tend to

influence their daughters in that direction. A close relationship with

parents and identification with their fathers are also positive

predictors of career orientations of young women. A number of studies

also have indicated that women who marry late are close to their

parents. Frequently, their career goals are consistent with their

family backgrounds (Allen & Kalish).

Modern attitudes about sex are also influencing women.

Traditionally, marriage was seen as a way to legitimize sexual

relations. With the arrival of easily available birth control, sexual

freedom is no longer a ?reward? to be associated with marriage

(Allen & Kalish). Premarital sex and living together arrangements have

become more acceptable to many (Unger & Crawford). Women who married

late will have been more able to have adequate sexual lives before

marriage than women who married during the average marrying years.

Late marriers considered premarital sex more acceptable than normative

marriers. Willingness to participate in intimate personal and sexual

relationships outside of marriage reduces the attractiveness of the

marriage role (Gottman, 1994).

The pursuit of an education is another significant influence

on women, with the level of education achieved by women being directly

related to their marital age (Elder). College attendance among women

has doubled – one out of five women obtained some college education in

the mid 1960?s compared to two out of five in the early 1980?s. ?With

their rapid increase in college attendance, by 1983 women constituted

over half of the student body at two-year colleges and closed to half

of the students attending four-year colleges? (McLaughlin, 1988,

p.35). The most dramatic changes have occurred in the professions of

law and medicine. The number of women becoming lawyers increased from

230 in 1960 to approximately 12,000 in 1982 up from 3 to 33% of all

lawyers. Similarly, the number of women who received medical degrees

increased from 3% in 1960 to approximately 4,000 in 1981, representing

a jump from 6 to 25% of all medical degrees. Women are also rapidly

growing in the professions of architecture and business

administration, professions previously dominated by males. By 1985

women were earning half of all bachelor and master degrees and over a

third of the doctorates, compared to the 42% of all bachelor degrees,

32% of master degrees and 10% of all doctorates in the 1960?s

(O?Neill, 1989). The result is that both education and experience

levels of the female labor force have begun to increase at a faster

rate than they have for the male labor force (McLaughlin). Koontz

found that highly educated women in professional careers are less

likely than women in general to be involved in marriage and parenting.

In recent decades, the percentage of young women obtaining advanced

degrees and pursuing a professional career has increased dramatically.

Between 1971 and 1980 the percentage of women aged 30-39 who completed

four or more years of college rose from 10.3 to 18.8 percent (Koontz).

A positive relationship between educational attainment and the timing

of marriage for women exists.

A woman?s completed fertility level is also highly correlated

with her educational attainment in part because of the effect of

delayed childbearing on fertility. Educational attainment is

negatively associated with the likelihood that women will ever marry

and/or bear children. Educational attainment is also related to the

likelihood of divorce, for women but not for men. Women who have

completed six or more years of college have significantly higher rates

of divorce than woman at all other education levels, except high

school drop-outs. High levels of education by women is highly

predictive of delayed and reduced involvement in marital and parental

roles (Allen & Kalish).

Acknowledging the prevalence of divorce may influence a

woman?s future decision to marry. Plenty of young women have seen

unhappy marriages as they grew up – giving them an understandable fear

of committing themselves. This may account for the rapid growth in the

proportion of women rejecting marriage. We all know the statistics –

half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce and nearly a

third of all children are born out of wedlock. As a result four out of

10 kids don?t live with both of their biological parents (Chollar,

1993). Delayed marriage and continued high divorce levels will combine

to shrink the share of currently married men and women in most age

groups. In the 21st century, men will remain more married than women

because of the surplus of adult women in all but the under age 25

group (McLaughlin). Gottman found that a major complaint of divorced

women was that their ex-husband?s had the majority of power. Moreover,

it is still overwhelming women, not men, who are called upon to

adjust their work lives to the demands of child rearing by quitting

their jobs, working part-time or choosing a flexible job over one that

offers higher pay (Cherlin, 1990). Women are also showing less

patience with problem marriages as growing numbers unravel the

marriage bond with divorce.

The decline in the ideal of marital permanence – one of the

most well documented value changes among Americans in recent decades –

also has tended to make persons less willing and able to make the

needed commitments to and investments in marriage (Gleick, 1993, p.

28). While entering into marriage with the ?utmost care and deepest

consideration can only be to the good, it may be marriage itself –

along with the most basic institutions like the work place – that

continues to need refining? (Gleick, p. 28). Today?s women, all too

aware of the current divorce numbers, may be hesitant to enter into

marriage.

I would say we?re in a stalled revolution . . . women have

gone into the labor force, but not much else has changed to adapt to

that new situation. We have not rewired the notion of manhood so that

it makes sense to men to participate at home (Gleick, pg. 56).

Many married women report although their role has changed when

they entered the work force, men primary have kept doing what they

have always been doing, thus, putting additional burdens on women

(Gleick). ?However it seems that it is not the increased workload

itself but rather the increased inequality that makes mothers less

satisfied with their marriages than nonmothers? (Unger & Crawford, pg.

375). Men are making some progress though, in taking on household

tasks, including child care, but women still shoulder most of the

burden in families.

One of the most likely reasons for the decline in marital

success is an increase in what persons expect of marriage. The levels

of intimacy, emotional support, companionship, and sexual

gratification that people believe they should get from marriage differ

because of the breakdown of what it means to be husband or wife.

Whereas, until recently, the rights and obligations of

spouse?s were prescribed culturally and fairly well understood by just

about everyone, they have become a matter for regulation in the

individual marriages for some this has led to discord and

disappointment (Gleick, p. 26).

Altogether then, cultural changes related to sex roles would

seem to produce different expectations of marriage. A woman who has

supported herself to the age of 25 or above and has lived on her own

until that age has had time to get more education, be exposed more to

a variety of view points and experiences, and therefore, is more

likely to expect a peer relationship with her husband. ?All in all,

she is more likely than a younger woman to enter marriage with a well

developed sense of self worth and broad horizons for her life? (Unger

& Crawford, pg. 364). Compared with a woman who marries younger – she

is more likely to expect a more traditional relationship in which

the husband is dominant (Everett, 1991). According to Everett,

younger women expect greater communication, companionship, and

compatibility with their spouses than older women. Possibly younger

women, still maturing, have not yet developed their own sense of self

worth and, therefore, depend on their spouse to fulfill their needs of

worthiness. As opposed to older women who, in most cases, have a more

stronger sense of self worth.

The traditional bargain struck between men and women –

financial support for domestic services – is no longer valid. Women

have shown outstanding improvements in education, and played a major

part in the work force. With education and occupation in their hands,

women do not need to rely on men for economic support, thus marriage

is not an immediate concern anymore. However, it should be noted that

when both husband and wife are employed the marriage is given an

economic boost.

Nonetheless, all of these changes have spurred women to

greater autonomy. Each has affected marriage in a different way, but

all have worked in unity toward the same result – to make marriage

less urgent and more arbitrary. Marriage may change for the better if

people are committed to making the institution work, although in a new

format. Still, studies show young adult women still care about

marriage enough that the conflict between work life and family life

remains intense. It?s resolution remains a major issue on the public

agenda for the future.

—

References

Allen, S. M. & Kalish, R. A. (1984). Professional women and

marriage. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 46(5), 375-382.

Becker, G. S. (1981). A Theory of Marriage: Marriage, Children

and Human Capital. Chicago, IL:University of Chicago Press.

Casler, L. (1974). Is Marriage Necessary? New York:Human

Sciences Press.

Cherlin, A. (1990). The strange career of the Harvard Yale

study. Public Opinion Quarterly, 54, 117-124.

Chollar, S. (1993). Happy families. American Health,

July/Aug., 52-57.

Crispell, D. (1996). Marital Bust. [On-line].

Available:http://www.marketingtools.com

Elder, G.H. (1974). Role orientation, marital age, and life

patterns in adulthood. Merrill-Palmer Quarterly of Behavior and

Development, 18(1), 3-24.

Everett, C. A. (1991). Marital Instability and Divorce

Outcomes. Binghamton, NY:Haworth Press.

Gleick, E. (1995, February 7). Should this marriage be saved?

Time, 48-53, 56.

Gottman, J. M. (1994). What Predicts Divorce? The Relationship

Between Marital Processes and Marital Outcomes. Hillsdale, NJ:Lawrence

Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Koontz, S. (1997). The way we weren?t. National Forum, (75),

11-14.

Long, B. (1983). Evaluations and intentions concerning

marriage among unmarried female undergraduates. The Journal of Social

Psychology, 119, 235-242.

Lundberg, S. & Pollack, R. A. (1996). Bargaining and

distribution in marriage. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 10(4),

139-158.

McLaughlin, S. D. (1988). The Changing Lives of American

Women. Charlotte, NC:University of North Carolina Press.

O?Neill, W. (1989). Feminism in America: A History. Princeton,

NJ:Transaction Publishers.

Oppenheimer, V. K. (1994). Women?s rising employment and the

future of the family in industrial societies. Population and

Development Review, 20 (2), 293-337.

Unger, R. & Crawford, M. (1992). Women & Gender: A Feminist

Psychology. Philadelphia:Temple University Press.