

Predictors Of Success And Failure In Marriage

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Americans value marriage and seek it as a personal life goal. At the same time, many are finding it harder to achieve this goal. People today are more likely to live together before marriage, to postpone marriage until older ages, to divorce more and to remarry less, and never to marry at all. Why are so many Americans enchanted with the idea of marriage but increasingly disenchanted with being married? Social science research can help answer this question. Here are some key reasons:

Deinstitutionalization of Marriage In the past, marriage was the social institution organizing and regulating sex, childbearing, parenthood and family life. Today, these aspects of adult life have become “unbundled” from marriage. For many Americans, and particularly for younger Americans, sex has no necessary connection to the expectation or promise of marriage. Living together as an unmarried couple is now a socially acceptable alternative to living together as a married couple. Procreation and parenthood are more loosely connected to marriage. Consider the results of a 2001 national survey of single and married young adults, ages 20-29. Only 16 percent agree that the main purpose of marriage is to have children, while 62 percent agree that, while it may not be ideal, it’s okay for an adult woman to have a child on her own if she has not found the right man to marry. Among the sample’s singles, less than half (42 percent) agree that it is important to find a spouse who shares their own religious faith. Four out of ten (43 percent) agree that the government should provide cohabiting couples the same benefits provided married couples.

Delay of marriage The age of first marriage is getting older. Young people today are spending more years completing education, paying off student loans and credit card debt, and gaining work experience before they enter marriage. Moreover, the threshold requirements for entering marriage are higher today. In the minds of many young people, marriage is reserved for couples who are able to afford a “decent” wedding as well as a house with furniture, a nice car or two, and an occasional vacation or dinner out. Until young adults are able to afford these material goods, they are putting off marriage. However, they are not putting off sex or living together.

Cohabitation Between 1960 and 2004, the number of unmarried couples increased from less than 500,000 to more than five million. Over half of all first marriages are now preceded by a living together relationship.

In a survey of high school seniors, sixty percent responded that it was “usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married.” In a 2001 Gallup survey of young men and women, 20-29, over 4 in 10 agree with the statement that they would only marry someone who agreed to live together first.

Although many young people believe that cohabitation will improve their chances for having a lasting marriage, there is no evidence to support that belief. On the contrary, a substantial body of evidence suggests that cohabiting couples are more likely to break up after marriage than those who do not live together before marriage. [One exception: a recent study based on a nationally representative sample of women concluded that premarital cohabitation, when limited to a woman’s future husband, and a clear, public, plan to marry is not associated with an elevated risk of marital disruption.] (Teachman, 2003)

More than forty percent of cohabiting couple households include children. These households are less likely to convert to married parent households than in the past. The proportion of cohabiting mothers who eventually marry the fathers of their children has declined from 57 to 44 percent in the decade between 1987-97. Nor are these cohabiting parent households as stable as married parent households. At the five year mark, half of cohabiting couples with children will have broken up compared to 15 percent of married parents.

“Soulmate” Marriage

While marriage is losing much of its public and institutional character, it is gaining popularity as a “soulmate” relationship – a private couple relationship whose main purpose is to promote the psychological well-being and emotional satisfaction of each adult. For example, ninety-four percent of never-married young singles agree with the statement that “when you marry you want your spouse to be your soulmate, first and foremost.” Over eighty percent of all young women, married and single, agree that “it is more important to them to have a husband who can communicate about his deepest feelings than to have a husband who makes a good living.” There is a good reason for the popularity of soulmate marriage. People are living longer and healthier lives. Women want emotional closeness with their husband. According to one recent study, the high quality time men spend with their wives and the love and affection they show to their wives – is the most *crucial* determinant of women’s marital satisfaction. However, a successful “soulmate” marriage requires high maintenance. The problem is that many couples – and especially parents of small children – are chronically time-starved, sleep-deprived, distracted and harried. This may explain why parents now report significantly lower marital satisfaction than nonparents.

A Culture of Divorce

Since its peak in the early 1980s, the divorce rate has fallen from a high of 22.6 per 1000 married women in 1980 to 17.7 per 1000 married women in 2004. However, the threat of divorce has led to attitudes that have now taken on a life and momentum of their own among the young. (Dafoe Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture: Rethinking Our Commitments to Marriage and the Family*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

Fear of divorce is one of the reasons young people commonly cite for their decision to cohabit and for their [mistaken] belief that living together actually improves their chances of avoiding divorce. The fear of divorce has also eroded confidence in the permanence of marriage. People who worry a lot about the possibility of divorce are more likely to limit their investments in the marriage and to evaluate their satisfaction in the marriage on the basis of a short-term satisfaction – one of the predictors of poor marital quality.

Here’s how social science defines a successful marriage: a long-lasting union in which both spouses express mutual satisfaction with their relationship; hold similar values, attitudes and beliefs; are sexually faithful to each other; have adequate resources to care for each other and their children; share a common commitment to the well-being of their children; live together peaceably without persistent conflict, abuse or violence; are embedded within a supportive social network of family, friends and community; and are sustained by the larger society’s support for marriage as the favored institution for sex, procreation and parenthood.

To read this definition is to be reminded of how very challenging it is to achieve a successful marriage today. Indeed, a happy and lasting marriage ranks as one of the most highly prized and hardest-to-achieve accomplishments in contemporary American life. It is also one of the most richly rewarding.

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