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In the Season of Marriage, a Question. Why Bother?

By ANDREW J. CHERLIN | NY Times



IT'S surprising how many people still marry. As everyone knows, it's a risky proposition; the divorce rate, though down from its peak of one in two marriages in the early 1980s, remains substantial. Besides, you can have a perfectly respectable life these days without marrying.

When the Pew Research Center asked a sample of Americans in 2010 what they thought about the “growing variety in the types of family arrangements that people live in,” 34 percent responded that it was a good thing, and 32 percent said it made no difference. Having a child outside of marriage has also become common. According to a report by the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, 47 percent of American women who give birth in their 20s are unmarried at the time.

And still, demographers project that at least 80 percent of Americans will marry at some point in their lives.

Why?

The answer is that Americans are now marrying for a different reason. Marriage has become a status symbol — a highly regarded marker of a successful personal life. This transformed meaning is evident in the Obama administration's briefs in the two same-sex marriage cases now in front of the Supreme Court. Those documents reflect, in part, the assumption that marriage represents not only a bundle of rights but also a privileged position.

In the case of *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, the Justice Department wrote that marriage “confers a special validation of the relationship between two individuals and conveys a message to society that domestic partnerships or civil unions cannot match.” Apparently, that special validation has little to do with rights, since domestic partners would have all of them if, as the department's other brief urged, federal benefits were extended to same-sex couples. In fact, in its brief for *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, the government is careful to highlight the “social recognition conferred by the institution of marriage.”

This is not to say that marriage is less important than it was in the past. But it is important for different reasons. In the mid-20th century, there was nothing exceptional about marriage. Respectable people married; there was no other decent way to share a home with a partner. Shame attached to those who bore children out

of wedlock. Spinsters and bachelors were suspect, the subject of collective social wonder.

Today, marriage is more discretionary than ever, and also more distinctive. It is something young adults do after they and their live-in partners have good jobs and a nice apartment. It has become the capstone experience of personal life — the last brick put in place after everything else is set. People marry to show their family and friends how well their lives are going, even if deep down they are unsure whether their partnership will last a lifetime.

Consider weddings, which typically were formal ceremonies planned and paid for by the parents. Not anymore: According to the American Wedding Study, commissioned by Brides magazine, 36 percent of couples paid the entire cost of their wedding receptions in 2012, up from 29 percent in 2009; and another 26 percent contributed to the cost. As more couples plan and pay for the occasion, its central meaning is shifting from uniting two families to celebrating the bride and groom themselves.

YOUNG adults with greater earning potential, who can afford the capstone celebration, are still marrying in large numbers, while those with poorer economic prospects are holding off. According to the National Center for Family and Marriage Research, 88 percent of 35- to 44-year-old women with four-year college degrees have married, compared with 79 percent of those without high-school diplomas. In fact, young adults without college degrees are increasingly likely to put off marriage and have their first children in cohabiting relationships, sometimes years before they marry. Nearly all of the increase in childbearing outside of marriage in the last two decades is from births to cohabiting couples, most without college degrees, rather than to single mothers.

The weakening link between marriage and childbearing is perhaps best explained by the hollowing out of the middle of the American economy. As jobs have been automated or moved overseas, it has become more difficult for high-school-educated young men to find the kind of steady, well-paying industrial work that sustained their fathers' families. Faced with this situation, many of them are willing to live in short-term cohabiting relationships but not to make a lifetime commitment to marriage. Young women, for their part, may choose to have children in these short-term unions rather than wait for the uncertain prospect of marriage. In a cultural climate in which having children outside of marriage is increasingly acceptable, non-college-educated young adults seem to treat reproduction as mandatory or at least axiomatic, and marriage as more of an optional add-on. Most do eventually marry, although not necessarily to the person they had their first child with.



In contrast, more than 90 percent of American women with four-year college degrees wait until after they are married to have children. College-educated young adults foresee a brighter economic future that can sustain marriages. They may live with a partner first, and may postpone marriage until after earning graduate school degrees or establishing themselves in careers, but they are content to wait until marriage before having children. Moreover, their marriages are lasting longer — since

1980 the divorce rate has dropped faster for those with college degrees, so that about one in six of their marriages ends in divorce in the first 10 years, compared with nearly one in two marriages among people without high school degrees.

College-educated Americans constitute the winners in our new economy and they are sticking with long-term marriage as a context for rearing children.

In the 1970s, when cohabitation began to increase and divorce rates skyrocketed, it seemed marriage might fade away. Four decades later it remains an important part of American life — not in its older role as the first step into adulthood, but in its newer role as the last step one takes after becoming an adult in almost all other respects.

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