

The Perspectives of Men Ages 24 to 40 on Marriage: A Qualitative Study

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The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of men between the ages of 24 and 40 on marriage. This researcher has observed that the beliefs about marriage have changed over the last decade. An understanding of the marriage patterns of those ages 24 to 40, better known as “millennials,” can allow social workers to better assist their clients.

Generally speaking, the millennial generation is loosely comprised of those born between the years 1980 and 1996 (Howe & Strauss, 1991). Alternative names for this cohort include nexters, generation Y, and the nexus generation. Born of the notoriously large baby boomer generation, millennials are occasionally referred to as the “baby boom echo” (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010). Surpassing their parents’ generation, millennials are now the largest generation in history, boasting 77.9 million people (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). The millennial generation also is the most diverse in American history with about 34 percent identifying as a minority (McGlynn, 2005).

According to Strauss-Howe Generational Theory, each societal “generation” has unique characteristics and cultural norms engrained from their upbringing (Howe & Strauss, 1991). The Strauss-Howe Generational Theory suggests that a major cultural shift takes place cyclically every 80 years. A period of societal unrest typically results from these shifts, lasting on average 20 years. In accordance with the predictions of Strauss and Howe, the millennial generation has entered adulthood in the midst of one such shift and the resulting turbulence (Howe & Strauss, 1991). For millennials, this shift comes in the form of technological advancement, growing diversity, and globalization (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010). Due to the economic, educational, and societal changes of this cycle, this generation has experienced delays in achievement of many cultural adulthood

milestones breaking the patterns set in place by the generations before them (Howe & Strauss, 1991). For the purpose of remaining congruent with current literature, this study will continue to use the term “millennials” (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010).

MARRIAGE AND CHILDREARING

In congruence with Strauss-Howe Generational Theory, generational characteristics are shaped by distinct shared environmental and cultural experiences during formative years (Howe & Strauss, 1991). For the millennial generation, this took the form of childhoods colored with higher rates of parental divorce, unwed parents, and single parents than any generation before them (Wang & Taylor, 2011). According to one study, 40 percent of millennials were raised in a single-parent home (Ray, 2013).

Millennials are half as likely to have married within the age range of 18 to 29 than the baby boomer generation (Taylor, Paul, Keeter & Scott, 2010). Of millennials who have married, the average age on the day of their wedding was 26.8 years old (Budig & Lim, 2016). This contrasts with the baby boomers who experienced their first nuptials at the age of 20.8 years old on average (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). It has been suggested that more millennials will remain single through their 40th birthday than any other generation in American history (Martin, Aston & Peters, 2014).

Millennials across the board seem to have a desire to break the divorce-riddled history of many of their families of origin and marry only once, maintaining a healthy marriage for life. A qualitative study performed by Gerson found that those millennials exposed to divorce or raised by single parents intended to find one life partner with whom to create a stable relationship at a rate of nine times out of 10. (Gerson, 2010). Of note, while this generation is choosing to marry later and at lower rates, about 65 percent of millennials have opted to cohabitate prior to marriage (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). A related study cites the percentage of cohabitating millennials at 70 percent and credits this with break ups which potentially deter couples headed towards marriage (Gerson, 2010).

Millennials were found to be more inclined than their predecessors to view single parenting as a suitable parenting model (Wang & Taylor, 2011). Though only about 21 percent of millennials were married as of 2010, 34 percent had become parents (Taylor, et al., 2010). In 2008, more than half the babies born to millennials were born to unwed parents. When surveyed, 52 percent of millennials noted being a good parent as being “one of the

most important things” in life, while only 30 percent felt similarly about marriage (Wang & Taylor, 2011).

MARRIAGE AND GOAL FULFILLMENT

Per the Pew Research Center, millennials reportedly do not view marriage as an asset when achieving their goals (Wang & Taylor, 2011). Over one-third of those interviewed perceived career advancement to be more attainable as a single individual. Eighty-two percent thought marriage had no positive effect on social status. Only 37 percent believed that marriage enhanced financial security, and only 28 percent thought it led to a fulfilling sex life. When asked about pursuing happiness, 67 percent of millennials reportedly perceived marriage to not be a factor (Wang & Taylor, 2011).

In the same study, millennials were asked what their main reasons for getting married would be if they were to take this step. Most (88 percent) millennials shared that love would be a driving factor. Seventy-six percent listed wanting the experience of making a lifelong commitment. Companionship topped the list at 71 percent. Children and financial stability were mentioned by 49 percent and 27 percent, respectively (Wang & Taylor, 2011).

DYNAMICS AMONG MARRIED MILLENNIALS

Marriage and the workforce. Studies conducted in the 1970s showed that marriage often added financial value to men in the workforce while detracting or having minimal effect on their female counterparts (Budig & Lim, 2016). For millennial men, marriage has markedly less effect on their income. However, as recently as the 2000s, one study found that women with children face a wage penalty of 7 percent per child (Budig & England, 2001). For married women with children, this percentage grows (Budig & Lim, 2016). Both male and female millennials expressed a shared desire to restructure the work-family balance of previous generations in hopes of a more egalitarian perspective on parenting and income (Gerson, 2010).

Gender dynamics. As gender equality movements have chipped away at the historical patriarchal power divide through education and employment, the effect of marriage has led to a change in power dynamics in the home (Budig & Lim, 2016). As millennial mothers, like their mothers before them, fulfill duties within the home and at work, the division of labor between husband and wife has changed (Budig & Lim, 2016). Millennials are

more inclined to accept and promote marriage equality, which has shifted the definition of marriage away from the traditionally recognized gender dynamics (Wang & Taylor, 2011). One study found that under 15 percent of millennial women and less than 30 percent of millennial men were interested in maintaining traditional gender roles in their relationships. Between 70-80 percent of millennials voiced a desire for equality and flexibility within the gender boundaries of their marriages (Gerson, 2010).

METHOD

In hopes of further understanding the thoughts and beliefs of unmarried millennial men about marriage, this researcher interviewed five single men between the ages of 24 and 40. The topics explored were (1) exposure to healthy relationships as a child, (2) elements of long-term healthy relationships, (3) personal and societal perspectives on marriage, and (4) the perceived effects of marriage.

Following Institutional Review Board approval and National Institutes of Health training, five participants were identified and contacted via face-to-face communication and email. Participants were sourced by convenience, often utilizing the snowballing method. Semi-structured interviews, consisting of about 10 questions, were completed, ranging in length from four to 11 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded.

Prior to the interviews, participants were provided informed consent forms detailing the purpose of the study and protections afforded. Each participant signed the form willingly at the start of the interview and was informed of the opportunity to ask for further information throughout the interview. One participant asked to review the questions before the interview was recorded and this was done. Demographic data was collected regarding age and ethnic identities at the start of each interview. The interview guide included questions that pertained to the participants' romantic relationship exposure during their childhood, their current understanding of marriage, and their interest in entering into this construct within their own future. When analyzing the compiled interviews, this researcher utilized axial and horizontal coding.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants ($N = 5$) gathered for this study all identified as Caucasian and aligned with their birth assignment of male. All participants were born

within the years identified as the birth years of the millennial generation and ranged in age from 24 to 38. Each of the participants was employed, unmarried, heterosexual, and not currently living with a romantic partner. All participants had received some level of college education and live on their own income. The participants were purposely chosen to share an ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity. As children, however, the participants did not all have the same family of origin experiences with some variance in the partner status of their parents

FINDINGS

Based on the content analysis of the interviews, four major themes arose: the importance of healthy relationships, marriage as a catalyst for positive life changes, marriage as a step to be taken in conjunction with other major life milestones, and the desire for marital stability.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

After being asked specifically to describe a healthy relationship, participants were asked to discuss romantic relationships witnessed in childhood and important circumstantial factors required prior to the decision to get married. Through these questions, participants detailed the components believed to be crucial to the creation and maintenance of a healthy relationship.

All of the participants ($N = 5$) reported that communication was the hallmark of a sustainable partnership. When asked to define this, they each touched on the importance of open dialogue during times of conflict. Two participants specifically cited good communication during conflict as an opportunity for relationship growth. One noted:

I think it is how you identify conflict. Some people see conflict as a chance to bash each other all the time. You know, “you never do anything right.” One thing that is important for me is, conflict always happens. It’ll happen. If you can communicate, never bash the other person, and really try to find the best answer, I think it’s a respect thing. That’s really important, I think. (Participant 2)

Independence and the ability to operate with separate identities also were discussed by four of the five participants when exploring healthy

relationships. Each of the four narrated the importance of social and physical space in a partnership. They argued that this creates room for an individual sense of self, which can contribute to a deeper connection and understanding of the other. One participant described the phenomenon of having separate selves in order to strengthen the relationship:

I think a healthy, long-term relationship looks like two people who are both individuals and not at the same time. I know that some relationships are just two people and they are never together so that doesn't work. And I think there are some relationships where the two people don't have separate identities and that ends up not working, too. I think a nice balance between those two is the most successful in long-term relationships. (Participant 5)

Another participant detailed the importance of knowing when to take space: "For a marriage to work, people have to know when to step back and take time. Not keep nagging the other one" (Participant 4).

Three of the participants spoke about respect, and its antithesis, abuse, when discussing what healthy relationships look like. These items of discussion arose specifically when talking about the unhealthy relationship patterns of the generations before them. Two participants bore witness to unhealthy relationships entered into by their mothers during their formative years. Both spoke of the relief they felt when those relationships ended. One detailed the contrast he witnessed as his mother subsequently entered into a healthy relationship.

He treated her good, never fought with her. He would go off and do his own thing. She took real good care of him and he took real good care of her. They'd talk and seemed like they had a real close relationship. My mother was real happy. I'd never really seen her happy until she met him. She came out of a horrible relationship with my stepdad... (He) was just a great guy, took care of her, gave her everything she asked for. I'd never seen her happier. (Participant 4)

Another participant shared that he condoned leaving marriages when abuse exists within it:

I read something about how marriages back in the 50s held together longer but there was a lot of abuse, too. I guess it's a

good thing, at least if people are getting divorced, they are getting out of bad situations. (Participant 2)

MARRIAGE AS A CATALYST FOR POSITIVE LIFE CHANGES

Across the board, participants credited marriage with the ability to inspire positive life change. All participants ($N = 5$) felt confident that following nuptials, their social lives would improve. Each pointed to the presence of a significant other as a resource for new friendships and increased social interactions. In the words of one participant:

I would definitely say that (marriage) would have a big impact on social life. I feel like I would be more socially active. There would be two different social groups. You have my social group and the partner's social group and part where they mingle and interact. I think that's a lot more social opportunities between the two groups from each side. I would definitely see myself being more socially active that way. (Participant 3)

Interestingly, all but one participant ($N = 4$) cited marriage as a launch point for personal growth and self-improvement. Each discussed areas within their own lives in which they are not currently working to expand upon, but would if they were to have a life partner dependent on them. One discussed diet and exercise as a means to longevity:

I'd try being a little bit healthier because at that point you are in it for the long-haul type of deal and this isn't like some type of 'ah, no I'm suicidal, I'm depressed' type of thing. But it's like, 'hey I'm not married, I don't have a partner.' I'm just like 'eh.' You know the whole YOLO type of thing. It's like whatever. (But) at that point you're living for more than somebody just yourself. You know? ... If I was married and had a plan to then have kids, I would want to be around for that type of stuff. So, I guess I would make healthier lifestyle choices at the same time, too. (Participant 1)

Another participant felt he would be more mindful when taking risks:

When you are not married you can do risks. I have kind of expensive hobbies. I still might be into them, but you

need to put your priorities more in maintaining that relationship. One thing that I do, that's kind of expensive, is I like flying airplanes. That's very expensive. If I were to get married that's something that I, hopefully, wouldn't have to, but I'd be willing to, give up. (Participant 2)

The remaining two participants discussed their expectations for an increased appetite for adventure and a desire to become less self-focused. One shared:

I feel like one of the bigger things would be having to pay attention to the partner more and figuring ways to support them more through the day. Not only supporting yourself but finding ways to support them as well. Kind of helping them with any struggles they may be dealing with. Just basically setting the time aside to be able to do that. (Participant 3)

A couple ($N = 2$) participants expanded on the idea of marriage as a catalyst for positive change by discussing the flow of support between partners. They illustrated the concept of challenging each other in order to promote individual growth. One argued that "iron sharpens iron" (Participant 4). Both noted that a successful relationship would result in the shared backing of each other's goals and dreams.

MARRIAGE IN CONJUNCTION WITH OTHER MILESTONES

When asked what markers would need to be present when making the decision to get married, not one participant labeled love alone as a suitable reason to marry. While love was among the markers listed by three participants, the majority of the participants cited financial stability ($N = 4$), and the desire to have children ($N = 3$) as important companions to emotion. One participant shared that he did not feel that marriage for love alone was wise:

If you are years into a relationship and you still are just madly in love with the person. Which I've never experienced, so, to me, if I was dating a woman for, you know 3 to 5 years and I'm like still madly in love with her after that long it's like, yeah, I probably want to get married to this person at some point, you know? And, to me like, you know, I'm a reasonable person, like some people get married and they like don't have

any interest in having kids which, I don't know, I think it's a little wacko when you do it that way. You know, it's a shit ton of money, you know, to me it's just kind of old school and unless you are going to have kids, I don't really think there's any point to getting married. (Participant 1)

Another participant echoed the need for happiness, the potential for children, and financial roots when making the step towards marriage:

If I were to get married, the person would need to be someone that's made my life better than it is right now. I'm pretty happy as is and if I see this person as someone who makes that better for specific reasons then I would be gung-ho for marriage. I want to have children eventually. Financial stability. I'm not there yet. They'd obviously need to be there, too. I think there is a certain social stability you get as you grow older, career-wise and social-wise, where it just becomes the next logical step. (Participant 5)

DESIRE FOR MARITAL STABILITY

As previously mentioned, two participants witnessed the end of their parents' romantic involvement. Both cited it as a memorable and negative time in their lives. Two others discussed the potential of divorce in any relationship and a desire to keep it at bay within their own. One stated, "I'm a little disappointed that a lot of people get married and it doesn't last. The divorce rate is like 50 percent, I think. Which is kind of depressing because marriage is a huge commitment" (Participant 2).

Another two reported that they would consider marriage only after multiple years of dating. One stated, "My opinion is that I hope the people are together a few years, at least, before they really dig into marriage. I think a lot of people jump in too soon" (Participant 2). While still three participants noted the ability to live together prior to marriage as important. One addressed this by saying some people say it's bad to live with somebody before you get married. But that's kind of important, because you don't want to get married and find out you can't live together" (Participant 2).

The weight of the decision to join with another person in marriage also was discussed by three participants. One stated that while he saw marriage as an important societal institution, he would not be rushing to the altar any time soon:

In general, I think marriage is a lovely thing. I think it is an important societal institution. Not for everyone, but in general. For me, I see it being in the cards eventually. Do I think it is important? Like, do I need to have it? No. (Participant 5)

Emotional Responses

The emotion displayed by the participants through the interview process was of interest to this researcher. Despite differing upbringings and views on marriage, each participant displayed disappointment in not yet having found a healthy and sustainable long-term partner. After having described his interpretation of a long-term relationship one participant was asked if he thought he would get married someday. He replied, “No time soon... everything I just described isn’t there in this current relationship and I’ve been trying for three years” (Participant 4).

When answering questions regarding relationship role models from their youth, those who witnessed the negative relationships of their parents, became emotionally invested in the topic. One became visibly emotional while remembering the love shared between his late mother and her last husband. The second seemed unable to clear his throat while stating:

You know, it was just, everyone was miserable. I mean my father had a drug problem; my mom didn’t have a ton of money. I mean, she didn’t even have a job for a good portion of that. So, you know, just seeing a relationship like that early on, definitely, it’s a dose of reality when you are that age and you carry that. You carry that forever. (Participant 1)

In contrast, when two participants spoke of their grandparents’ successful marriages, they became visibly passionate about the level of love shared. They discussed these unions with reverence. One stated:

My grandparents...they’ve been married since they were before my age. So, they’ve been married for over 50 years now. And just the way they treated each other and respected each other. You know, they had their differences... and uh, just, you know being genuinely happy with each other that long into a marriage, you know. That’s pretty nuts. Even to this day, you know? (Participant 1)

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of men between the ages 24 and 40 on marriage. After analyzing the compiled data, themes from their interviews were compared to the current literature.

Congruent with literature, a section of the population interviewed was raised in a home with a single parent or divorced parents (Wang & Taylor, 2011; Ray, 2013). Regardless of their family histories, all participants ($N = 5$) hoped for stable marriages with longevity (Gerson, 2010). Also congruent with the literature was the shared value that the ability to live together prior to marriage was important (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). One participant echoed the sentiment that cohabitation has the potential to pre-screen compatibility for those headed towards marriage as he reported having serious doubts about the future of his current relationship following the decision to no longer share a home.

The literature suggested that millennials view becoming parents and being married as two separate experiences. This proved to be different than previous generations where being married and having children were connected to one another. This finding was supported in this study, as one participant reported that he may soon be a father despite his single status (Taylor, et al., 2010).

Consistent with the findings of previous research, which suggested that marriage can improve career opportunities for millennial men, the men in this study did not emphasize this. All participants ($N = 5$) were unable to foresee any personal marketable career advancement that was connected to being married (Budig & England, 2001). These responses reflected the literature in that the men in this study desired relationships in which support flowed between partners and economic responsibility did not fall on one or the other, but was shared as a partnership with each person contributing (Wang & Taylor, 2011; Gerson, 2010).

While participants did name love as a driving factor for marriage, a finding inconsistent with the literature was recognized when the participants were asked to identify their own understanding of preparedness for marriage. Having children and building shared financial stability were widely mentioned as reasons to be married, rather than only love.

LIMITATIONS

This study was small and used a sample of convenience. A larger and more diverse sample would bring more insight to the broader perspectives of millennial males on marriage as the population included in this study was homogeneously Caucasian, educated, employed, and unmarried. A further limitation to the study was the lack of elaboration on many of the topics. While the interview protocol was designed to elicit 20- to 30-minute interviews, the participants selected averaged eight minutes with the shortest being just over four.

A further perceived limitation was the interviewer's generational alignment, but gender opposition, with the participants. As an unmarried millennial female, the participants could potentially have felt a sense of discomfort when discussing the study topic of marriage and relationships.

Lastly, this researcher's own bias against the institution of marriage may on some level have limited the validity of this study. Having done extensive personal work on the subject with no clear outcome yet, this researcher, like many millennials, is ambivalent about the role of marriage in her future. It is hoped that the interview guide and interactions with participants did not reflect this internal dialogue.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The inquiry into millennial marriage habits has only begun. As millennials age they continue to recreate marriage culture and the societal understanding of commitment. By interviewing five millennial men, this study merely scrapes the surface of the work left to be done. This researcher highly encourages the continuation of this study and the broadening of its scope. Directly examining the dating habits of millennials would provide much needed information surrounding the creation of millennial relationships, the role of monogamy, and the presence of alternative family structures.

This researcher suggests that a further study be conducted utilizing the same age range (24 to 40 years of age) and gender (male), however, broadening the participant pool to include more cultural, ethnic, socio-economic, educational, and sexual diversity. An additional study should structure its interview protocol with an increased focus on the topics of upbringing, family of origin structure, relationship histories, and the experience of stigma and emotion throughout the modern dating process. This researcher also suggests that the next step might focus on female,

transgender, and non-binary populations with the goal of assessing the commonalities and differences among the gender identities.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The goal of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the perception of marriage through the millennial male lens. In this study, millennial men affirmed that they view marriage as a means to improving their future. They indicated that they only intend to marry when a healthy, long-term relationship aligns with the achievement of other important milestones of adulthood.

As millennials take on adulthood it is imperative that providers acknowledge the unique characteristics of this generation. Millennials are approaching marriage and relationships in ways not yet seen before. They are delaying marriage with the plan to cohabit, gain financial stability, and screen potential life partners based on relationship longevity and stability. Furthermore, this cohort is more comfortable than those before it with single parenting and parenting out of wedlock. Providers working with this population and intending to work with those born of it should stay attuned to the ever-developing cultural shifts exhibited by its members. It is likely that this generation will alter the face of attachment style and family dynamics within American culture.

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