

Waiting to Marry

Smart Marriage 2008 Plenary

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J/ I am very fortunate for all of the researchers who were more than willing to pick up the phone and talk. For instance, I have had numerous conversations with four researchers who have extensively studied this topic but were unable to attend this Smart Marriage this year: David Popenoe, Barbara Defoe-Whitehead, Norval Glenn and Jeffrey Arnette. Jeffrey Arnette is the one who coined the term “Emerging Adults” which is the term we will use to refer to the span of time between entrance into adulthood and first marriage. Norval was even willing to rerun his data set for some specific questions I had in order to double check my conclusions. Tom and Beverly Rogers have also written an excellent book titled “The Singlehood Phenomenon” that helps singles navigate through the issues that they found related to delaying marriage.

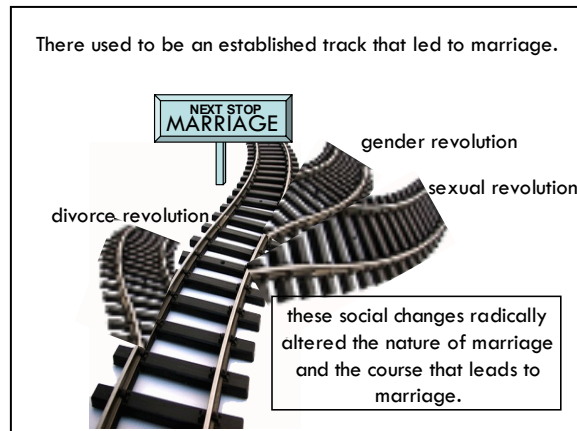
There used to be an established track in western society that led individuals from singlehood to marriage. It was a social track that after you stepped onto the train, before you knew it, you ended up where you needed to be. The first rail was clearly established social norms that guided the *progression of the relationship* from the first meeting to marriage. The second rail was a family guidance system that helped with *partner selection*. This family guidance system dated all the way back into arranged marriages which dominated 80 percent of marriages throughout all cultures.

Many of you may have a memory similar to the one that I have of my oldest sister getting married. It was at the end of the 1960s and Barbie was about to be married—I wonder if you can guess to whom? Ken... of course.

Now, my father always had a wonderful sense of humor and somehow he caught wind that Ken was going to propose, probably through my mother (you know how mothers are—they always know what is going to happen before it happens). My father decided to play a practical joke on Ken, who had just graduated from law school and was privately waxing eloquent with my father, working the conversation to the subject of marriage. Just when he was about to pop the question, “May I have your daughter’s hand in marriage?” my father politely excused himself, stood up and went into the kitchen, poured himself a glass of water, began drinking it and never came back. At which point Ken migrated to the kitchen just as my father went to another room, sat down, brought up a completely unrelated topic, and began talking endlessly. This went on literally all day long. I am sure Ken must have been thinking “Why do I want to marry into this family?” Eventually my father let him propose. And then afterwards, he let Ken in on his playful game. Ken was a good sport about it (although I am not sure of his options under the circumstances).

For most of history, singles were never just “out there” on their own, trying to find their own GPS system, you might say, for mate selection. However, in the last

hundred years particularly, there have been major social revolutions that have changed the course that leads to marriage. There is a dramatic trend with singles delaying the age at first marriage. The implications of this trend cover almost all of the major topics that have to do with marriage and especially premarital predictors of marital quality and longevity—cohabitation, premarital sex, attitudes and beliefs about marriage, and



the relationship between premarital attitudes/behaviors and marital outcomes.

There were several social revolutions that impacted the timing of first marriages. First, the gender revolution increased the number of females who entered the workforce and empowered them to become financially independent. For instance, we now have more women than men in college in the United States. This change definitely raised the bar for marriage. In the past, many

women stayed in an unhappy marriage because of economic dependency. Today, you often have two partners who are financially able to support themselves on their own and so they stay together because of the *quality* rather than the *necessity* of their relationship.

The sexual revolution also contributed to this social shift. It was around the 1950-60's that sex outside of a marriage began to be viewed as a legitimate and socially acceptable choice. This made marriage less necessary because it was no longer the prerequisite to a sexual relationship with a partner.

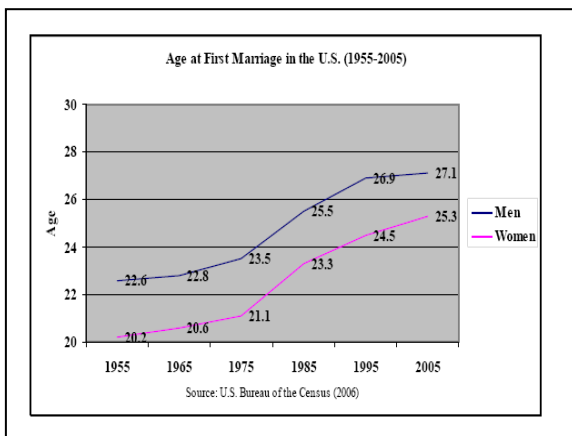
And finally, we also have witnessed five decades of over a fifty percent divorce rate in what can be referred to as a divorce revolution. This social change alone has increased the apprehensions about marriage. In fact, to many the institution of marriage has been blamed for divorce...which has deepened a negative attitude toward marriage.

I told Diane Sollee last year when I was conceptualizing this keynote that I would love to bring a panel of a dozen or so emerging adults on stage and just talk to them about their views on dating and marriage. However, because this is not real feasible I did the next best thing. I will be showing three video vignettes of various views of emerging adults from college campuses. I am very indebted to Chris Brickler and Michael Romero who wrote and produced "Song of Songs" and have been working on "Song of Songs II" now for the last year. They were more than willing to talk with me and incorporate questions in their interviews with college students over this past year; and then to allow me to have access to their video files so that I could to edit them for this presentation (so if there are any editing glitches it's no reflection of them).

singles today

- There are more singles today than ever before in history and most of them are hopeful about achieving a fulfilling and lasting marriage.
- However, more and more are putting marriage farther back on their horizons... wanting to marry at a later age than ever before in the past.

So how did we end up where we are? And is waiting helping? First, it is clear that emerging adults have high standards for what they want in marriage. There does not appear to be an antagonism toward marriage. On the contrary, there are deep beliefs and hopes that some day they are going to have a marriage that actually is better than the generation that came before them. They are going to find a soul mate and even though they are not completely sure how to achieve this they are nonetheless certain that they will not settle for anything less. ¹



These 90 million never-been-married adults really want to have a great marriage someday but they keep moving it farther and farther on their life horizon. If you look at this graph you can see from the 50s, even into the 60s, 22 and 20 were the ages of first marriage for men and women respectively. It has increased dramatically. In fact, you can see how it has shot up to 27 for men and 25 for women—and it is actually continuing to rise.

This is not just occurring in one socioeconomic stratum—it is not just a middle class phenomenon. This is happening in almost all subcultures, races and socioeconomic classes. For instance, in Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas book, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* there is an excellent quote about adults that are waiting to marry in poverty settings.

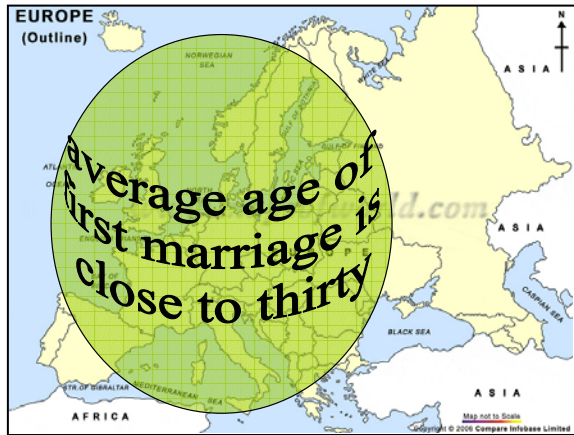
“Putting off marriage” is occurring among almost all subcultures & classes

“marriage was a dream that most still longed for, a luxury they hoped to indulge in someday when the time was right, but generally *not something they saw happening in the near, or even foreseeable future*”
-edin & kefalas (2005)

“The growing rarity of marriage among the poor, particularly prior to childbirth, has led some observers to claim that marriage has lost its meaning in low income communities. We spent five years talking in depth with women who populate some of America’s poorest inner-city neighborhoods and to our surprise found astonishingly little evidence of the much

touted rejection of the institution of marriage among the poor. In fact these mothers told us repeatedly that they revered marriage. They hoped to be married one day themselves, that marriage was a dream, actually that most still longed for. It was a

luxury they hoped to indulge in some day *when the time was right, but generally not something they saw happening in the near or even foreseeable future.*"



This is not just happening in the United States, it is an international phenomenon. The age of first marriage has been increasing in just about every country in Western Europe with Spain leading the way at average age of thirty. Because this is an average you would think that about half of this population is marrying at an age thirty and older. Sweden has a fifty-five percent unmarried rate compared to 45 percent married. These trends do not seem to be

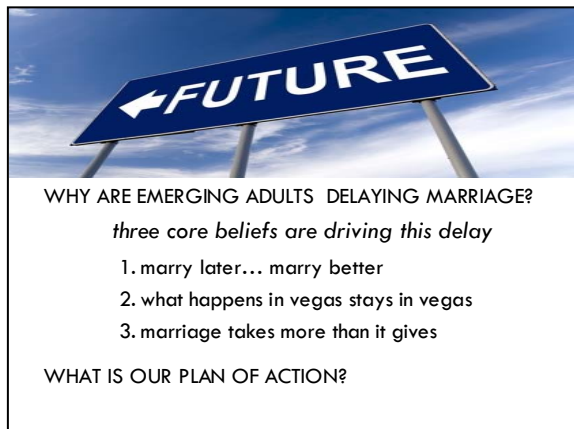
leveling off but continuing to rise.

So we come to this question, why are people delaying marriage? Some of the common reasons cited by singles are:

- desire to first get more education
 - women make up 54% of those enrolled in college (Mather & Adams, 2007)
- wanting to be established before marrying
- want more life experience
- need to find themselves
- date around and have more relationship experiences
- just have fun and not "settle down"

Many of these reasons have sound and legitimate logic behind them. And yet, there is doubt that the outcome of waiting will necessarily lead to any better marriages or a lowering divorce rate. In fact, there may be greater risks with delaying marriage into the thirties. An obvious reality with each year that marriage is delayed is the decrease in child bearing years and an increase in health risks with older pregnancies.

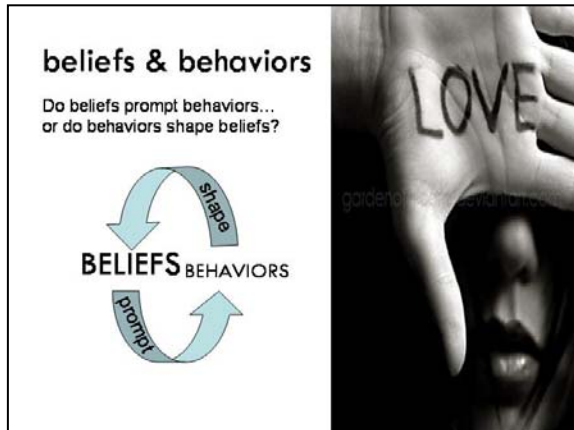
But there is more than just health risks with pregnancies. When this trend is



examined more closely there seems to be three core beliefs that contribute to this trend, and heighten multiple risks when marriage is delayed. The first belief is that *if you marry later you marry better*. The second is a deep-seated belief in *relationship discontinuity* (or what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas). The third belief that has influenced the postponement of marriage is that *marriage takes more than it gives*. These three core beliefs will be shown to be false but yet they are

some of the force behind the current trend among emerging adults to delay their decision to marry, and they definitely increase the likelihood of engaging in relationship activities that are known to lower the quality of marriage and increase the risk of divorce. We will end with a little bit of time to look at what is our plan of action. In other words, what do we do about this? What is our role?

To set the stage there is a philosophical quandary about beliefs and behavior and



it can be framed in this simple question, “Do beliefs prompt behaviors or do behaviors shape beliefs?” Research results often refer to this in their “Discussion” section when they consider the possibility of selection bias—are the results due to a specific type of person and what they think? Their mindset. Their attitude. Their belief structure. Or... are the results due to what they are actually doing. Their behavior. Their choices.

For instance, this quandary is one of the core areas of focus in research on cohabitation. Is it actually the *act* of living together or is it the people that are doing it and what they *think* and *believe*.

The answer to this quandary is very simple. It is not one or the other. It is *both*.

I am sure you have seen where someone learns something about a behavior they had been engaging in and decides to stop or change their behavior because of this new information. Most marketing approaches are based on this premise that changing the beliefs or mindset will result in a change of behavior. But then, how often have you seen the opposite where somebody began engaging in some behavior that they were totally against and the next thing you know they have rationalized that behavior by changing their mindset and their thinking. There are many examples to support each of these two propositions. In other words, we know that both of these two propositions are true... and that they are not completely independent of each other, they interact in ways that sometimes create a temporary “cognitive dissonance.” When there is a clash between what is believed and what is practiced the tension can only be avoided while the discrepancy is compartmentalized. But as soon as there is a clash between the beliefs and the behaviors then there is a tension that is only relieved when the beliefs win and the person changes his or her behavior; or the behavior wins out and the thinking is altered and rationalized.

Therefore, a fair examination of the effects of waiting to marry requires a consideration of both the *thinking* and also the *behaviors* of young adults? In other words, what specific beliefs of emerging adults are interacting with what specific behaviors—and if there are beliefs and expectations of a future “soul-mate marriage” are the relationship behaviors that singles engage in during the now 10-year span of

emerging adulthood in harmony with these beliefs or effecting changes contrary to the desired goals?

As I mentioned earlier, I wish I could have had a panel but that did not work out...so I'm going to climb out on a ledge here. We have some emerging adults in the audience. Can I get a volunteer to just come up and let me ask you a few questions? Yes- please come up.

J/ Thank you for allowing me to "interrogate" you. What is your name?

M/ Morgan.

J/ Isn't that a coincidence, I have a daughter named Morgan. Tell us a little bit about what you are doing Morgan.

M/ Well, I am a third year Ph.D. student in counseling psychology.

J/ Third year? So basically you've been in school all your life?

M/ Pretty much.

J/ So you don't have a life.

M/ Nope.

J/ Many of us can relate to that. For most PhD's, life begins at 40... and that's because you finally finish your dissertation and graduate! So, where are you living?

M/ I live at home with my parents.

J/ They must be quite the special parents. How long have they been married?

M/ 29 years.

J/ Is it a first marriage for them? And do you have any siblings?

M/ Yes- it is their first marriage and I have a sister, Jessica, four years younger than me.

J/ So... how old are you?

M/ I'm 26.

J/ We have just been looking at the stats about the average age of first marriage. You know, you will need to marry soon if you are going to be in the norm group.

M/ Actually I'm getting married in August.

J/ Good—way to go to stay in the bell curve!! By the way, do your parents know?

M/ Of course, they do know. Actually they are right here---If you haven't figured it out yet (speaking to the audience), this is my father and this entire dialogue was his idea, definitely not mine. In fact, any involvement I have in this is due to what I inherited from my father's gene pool.

J/ In all seriousness you have been studying this specific topic in many ways from your bachelors through your masters. Your bachelor's degree was in psychology and your master's was in family studies. And your thesis was on what?

M/ Pacing a relationship and readiness to marry.



J/ You have continued that into your doctoral work. You have a lot of research under your belt so I am going to ask you this...“Marry later – marry better”--that’s the belief that is prevalent among emerging adults. Is that true or not?

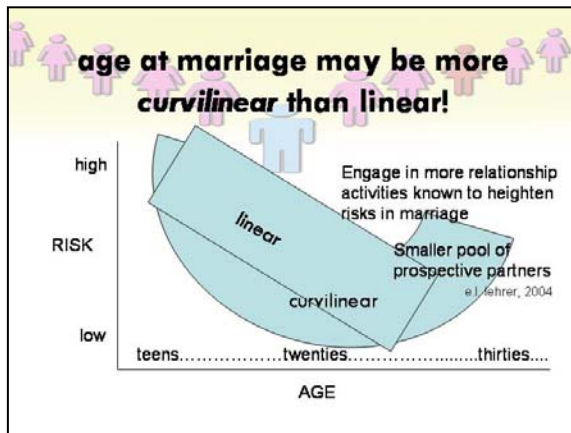
M/ Yes and no. There was actually a study conducted in 2002 by Tim Heaton.² This is an extensive study that had a sample of over

10,000 females ages 14 to 45. He was interested in looking at factors that contribute to marital stability and instability. What he found was that more premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and premarital birth led to higher rates of marital instability but that higher age of first marriage led to greater rates of marital stability.

J/ So, the older you are the more stable your marriage. So age does make a difference, right?

M/ It makes a difference *to an extent*. If you look at the graph, what he found in his study was that the high rates of marital instability were really related to marriages that occurred in the teenage years. So around age 21 to 23 it really started to level off and

there really wasn't much of a difference in marital instability between the ages of 21 and 30.



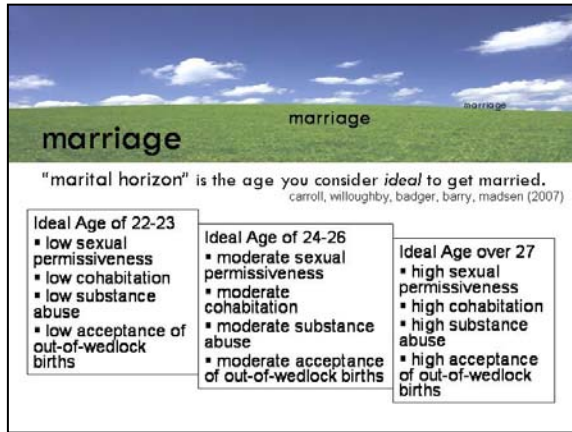
J/ There was another study that was conducted in 2004 by the University of Illinois.³ This study looked back to the 1970s and examined age as a predictor of marital stability. It suggested that the relationship of age to predicting marital stability is curvilinear and not linear. What they did was to examine age of first marriage starting with marrying during the teenage years. They correlated age with the risks of marital

problems and divorce. A linear approach would suggest that when you are young you have the highest risk of problems in marriage, but that risk would keep lessening as you matured and entered into adulthood.

As I stated, these researchers suggested a curvilinear model where you may have higher rates of instability in early-age marriages but then early in the 20s it levels out and from that point on age has little effect on improving the marriage quality or lessening the risk of divorce. This is the same as what Heaton found in his study. But what they added was that there may be a growing risk that actually works against the benefits of maturity. Through the twenties a single may gain more life experiences but the most important question is whether those experiences are known to lead to better chances of success in marriage or raising the risks of marital unhappiness and divorce.

The other contributor that would heighten risk is that once you reach your early thirties there becomes a smaller and smaller selection pool. For instance, they cite that by age thirty 75 percent of the population are married by age 30 so that you have only a twenty-five percent selection pool. All of a sudden the quality of the relationships that you may be able to develop lowers because of the difficulty with finding a partner. Norval Glenn found the same thing in a lot of his research. In fact, he reworked some of his latest research in between conversations I had with him just to check out this question. And he found that this curvilinear relationship is really creating more of an accurate picture of the correlation of age and timing of first marriage rather than the idea that just marrying later results in marrying better.

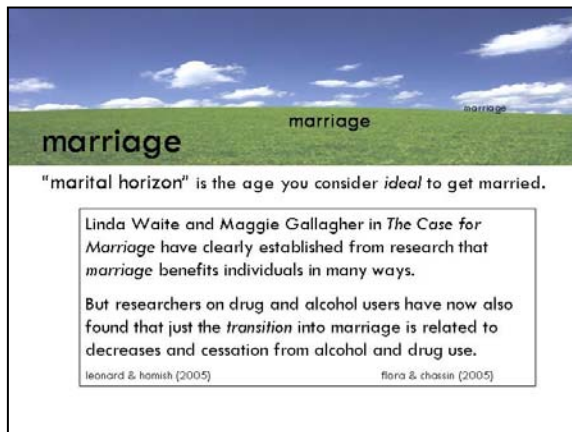
M/ There is another study that helps to explain the thought processes that lead to higher risks during this extended time of waiting. It was conducted by several researchers at four different universities.⁴ They looked at eight hundred emerging adults, ages 19 through 26. They coined a term, *marital horizon*, and defined this as the age an individual would state is ideal for becoming marriage.



What was so significant about this study and what the authors found was that having a more distant marital horizon was directly related to more risky premarital beliefs and behaviors. Specifically those who had an ideal age of first marriage at 22-23 were much less likely to engage in sexual permissiveness, beliefs in premarital cohabitation, substance abuse and out of wedlock childbearing. In contrast those who had a marital horizon around the age of 24 to

26 were significantly more likely to engage in these risky behaviors and those who had pushed their horizon to age 27 and beyond (basically out of their sites) were the most likely to indulge in these risky behaviors.

J/ Maggie Gallagher and Linda Waite have written book, "The Case for Marriage"



that established marriage as a framework that creates a protective type of influence on individuals and children. ⁵ They found that marriages are associated with improved mental and physical health for both the adults and the children, that married couples enjoy greater financial stability and longevity of life, and that they engage in less risky behaviors that are associated with physical and emotional conditions.

In a similar way, a case can be made for the closeness of marriage on one's *marital horizon*. Researchers have found that when people live in light of getting marriage, the anticipation of marriage actually brings them to a different level of functioning and relating which improves them in all kinds of ways. For instance, Kenneth Leonard and Gregory Homish⁶ conducted a study where they found that alcohol use decreased as emerging adults became engaged and anticipated marriage. And David Flora and Laurie Chassin conducted a second study that found similar results with drug use. ⁷ What these studies suggest is that it is not just the *experience* of marriage that has an effect on the attitude and behavior of a couple; it is also the *anticipation* of marriage. The mental attitude of when you expect to marry functions as a gatekeeper of your behavior. This is a clear commentary on our initial point of the interaction of beliefs and behavior. An individual's "marital horizon" taps into their beliefs about the importance and priority of marriage in their life, and this set of beliefs about marriage clearly prompts behaviors which ultimately affect one's future marriage... for better or worse.

J/ Have you seen this interaction with any of your peers—the connection between the place where your peers place marriage on their mental horizons and their corresponding behaviors?

M/ Yes, absolutely I see it with my peers, and I think the majority of my peers have marriage completely out of site on their mental horizons. In fact, some of my friends have given me flack for getting married at age twenty-six because I am “too young to be getting married.” Over the years, I have seen my friends rationalize engaging in risky behaviors because marriage is so far off in the distance. For instance, I had a friend in high school who was considered odd by some peers and even made fun of but, looking back, she was really honoring marriage in her belief systems. We were having a conversation once about marriage and family and what we wanted some day and she said something that impacted me and has stayed with me through the years. She said that “When I date I always keep my future husband in mind. That is what helps determine how I act in my relationships.”

J/ She said that when she was a teenager?

M/ She said that in high school. I was amazed because she had this incredible wisdom at such a young age and she was going completely against the current.

J/ That’s a perfect example of a marital horizon. It is the belief that marriage is close on the horizon.

M/ In high school she was teased for having this belief—so it’s something that is very hard to live up to in the trends of popular culture.

J/ You can see that the norm of what emerging adults believe about marriage has significantly changed over the last forty to fifty years. Marriage was an ideal that singles strove for as they entered into young adulthood. And this ideal or belief altered their behavior in their early twenties. However, as the general trend changed among young adults in their belief in the timing of first marriage it prompted a second belief—one which can be referred to as the belief in relationship discontinuity.

Relationship discontinuity is a belief that what one experiences in one relationship will not carry over or influence what happens in a subsequent relationship. You could refer to this as relationship compartmentalization where each relationship occurs in its own compartment and does not have any effect on another. Obviously, this cannot be true because each individual is affected in some way(s) by all of the experiences of their life. And what occurs in relationships, no matter how insignificant, carries some measure of influence on the individual and how they think and act in their

other relationships. This is especially true with some relationship behaviors that have already been shown by existing research to be serious risks to marriage.

I have referred to this misleading belief as “What I do in Vegas stays in Vegas.” As people push marriage farther out on their mental horizons they engage in more of these activities thinking that there will be no effect on their future marriage. This belief exempts them from feeling that their dating relationships or sexual activities will have any meaning beyond just the present...that living in the moment without any thought of tomorrow is justified by the current of their culture, the messages of their media, and the trends of their peers. It is like marriage is the mainland and singles are on the island of extended adolescence. And there is this unsupported viewpoint that when you head to the mainland of marriage whatever you did on the island of singlehood stays there and has no bearing on your mainland experience. Any suggestion of a future consequence to present relationship practices is perceived like a “Debbie-downer” or someone who is judgmental and moralizing. To the extent that just a few decades ago certain sexual and relationship practices were considered taboo, we *now* find that it is taboo to have taboos. But yet, there is extensive published research that supports the continuity of relationship experiences—that what you do in your present relationships actually program your future relationship patterns. And yet, these research findings stay on library shelves without being translated into the language of emerging adults.

Video clip

(College student) A friend whose goal it is when he goes out is to just see how many women he can hook up with and I believe he has a running list of around 30 to 40 women from our freshman year at Georgia so it's always just pretty interesting to be around him and see if he's going to add another tally to his list or what not. It's interesting for me.

Is that they're calling hooking up?

(Laura Sessions Stepp, author of *Unhooked*) I think from my experience is that hooking up means completely different things depending on the person you ask. I have seen some people refer to hooking up as making out with somebody they just met and that's as far as it goes. Then I've heard of hooking up referring to having intercourse or oral sex.

(student) I think if a girl says hookup it is to not have sex and if the guy says hookup it's to have sex.

(Laura Sessions Stepp, author of *Unhooked*) The defining characteristic of the hookup is the ability to unhook at any point. There is no commitment and both partners understand that going in.

(student) So as a single guy are you sexually active right now?

Yea.

How's that working out?

Oh, it's good.

(female students) As time goes on it seems like girls are more so evolving into the guy mentality of well shoot I am just going to get what I need and if you are trying to add emotions I'm done and leaving.

How many is too many?

(students) If you do fifty girls you would be alright...although you might be a little dirty.

If I'm going to date them? 35.

(Female)35? Geez! I think maybe 20. 20 is a lot. 15 is a lot. 10 is a lot.

(male student) Yea, she divided it by 3 which seems to be the common rule.

(female) You have to be realistic like you want someone who hasn't been sleeping around but honestly no offense guys like I find it very hard to find a guy who has had less than like 5 partners.

Have you ever hooked up with a girl and had her get really attached to you?

(male student) Oh yea, I think every guy has gone through that. But I mean at the same time you had to break it down – it's not happening I'm sorry. I can be your friend but I'm not looking for that right now. They are probably going to be upset but I mean it's better than lying to them.

Does it make you feel bad to have to see them go through that pain?

Yea, but I mean everybody has to go through that pain some time just to learn. That's part of the learning experience, in growing in relationships and just growing as a person.

(Laura Sessions Stepp, author of *Unhooked*) Of course what happens is usually one or the other will start to care for the other person and that's when it gets troublesome. The other person backs off. That person who was caring gets hurt and says oh my gosh why did I do that? So this lack of commitment that defines it but then one or the other partner often finally will want commitment and can't get it.

Female student(I'm very against sex out of marriage so I'm like completely against any casual sex. I don't think its right. I think it ruins relationships.

(David Popenoe, researcher and author)You have about 90 percent of people who have had sex prior to marriage. 100 years ago you probably would have had 90 percent of women entering marriage as virgins. So there has been an enormous shift in that respect.

Are you and your girlfriend physically intimate?

(Male student)No. Not anymore. We used to be but since we decided to follow the right steps and do things the proper way, no, not anymore.

(David Popenoe, researcher and author) The point is that it is a long period of time after one leaves ones home of origin and before one sets up a new family where you are living out there often single,

sometimes cohabitating and this can last for ten, 12, 15 years and especially for women this is completely historically unprecedented so its that phase of life that we are all looking at and asking ourselves well *does what one does in this phase of life have anything to do with what happens later on?*

J/ Hooking-up has become common on college campuses than even 10 years ago. But we also know that it is widely practiced outside of college by those who did not attend college as well as those who already graduated. As we saw in the research on marital horizons, there is a direct correlation between what a single adult thinks and believes about marriage and their sexual practices... the more distant they have placed marriage in their priorities (represented by their ideal age of first marriage) then the more likely they are to engage in hooking up and engaging in sex with larger numbers of partners.

I know that you have done extensive review of the research on teen sexuality... in fact you developed a program on teen sexual relationships as a project during your bachelor's coursework?

M/ Yes, it was an abstinence program for teens that was based on your PICK program but I called mine "Don't Get Screwed".

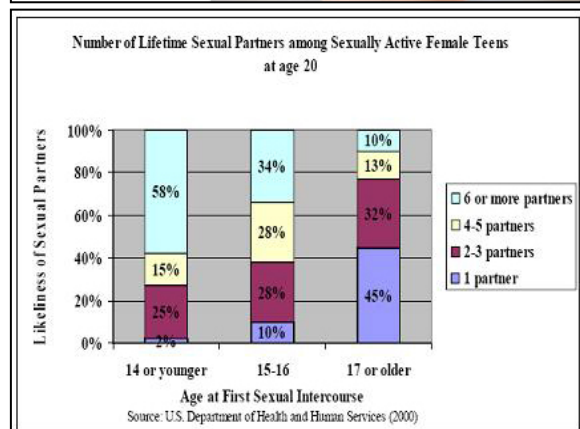
J/ I'm going to steal it. It's all in the family. But in all seriousness, describe what is happening in teen sexual activity.

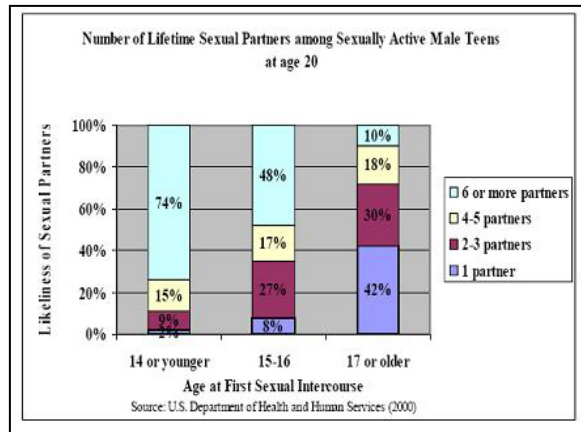
the state of teens
what happens in vegas doesn't stay in vegas

- those who marry in their teens are 2-3 times more likely to divorce than those in their 20s
- as of 2005, 46.8% of high schoolers had engaged in sexual intercourse (child trends database)
- 1 in 3 teenage girls became pregnant by age 20
- 1/2 of out-of-wedlock births were to teenage mothers

M/ The state of teens is really quite unsettling. Research has shown that those who marry in their teenage years are two to three times more likely to divorce than those who marry in their 20s. As of 2005, 46.8% of high school students had already had sexual intercourse. One in three teenage girls is likely to become pregnant by the age of 20 and half of all out-of-wedlock births were to teenage mothers.⁸

An early age of first sexual intercourse sets the stage for one's future sexual relationships as we can see this in this graph right here. What this represents is that males who had their sexual experience at age fourteen or younger, by the time they turned twenty, 74% of them have had six or more sexual partners; and for females, 58% of them had had six or more partners by the time they were twenty if they had first sexual





intercourse at fourteen or younger. So, this idea of what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas is just not really holding true.

J/ So we are creatures of habit. Present behaviors format future patterns. But the distant horizon point of one's marriage prompts the Vegas belief which exempts the consequences of risky behavior. Add all this up and you have a forceful social current of relationship discontinuity.

hooking up

more sexual partners...higher risk of divorce

- Jay Teachman, from Western Washington University, studied over 6,500 women who were married between 1970 and 1995 from the National Survey of Family Growth, and found there was an indisputable connection between the number of sexual partners they had before marriage and the likelihood of getting divorced.
- He took into account and controlled for the similarities and differences of family background, socio-economic characteristics, age, religion, race, culture, number of siblings and many more characteristics. Still, involvement with just one sexual partner other than her husband during the dating years raised her risk of divorce *three times higher* than those who only had sex with just her husband. Teachman, Jay, 2003

Jay Teachman from Western Washington University did a landmark study where he looked at 6,500 women who had been married from between 1970 and 1995. He examined data from the National Survey of Family Growth. He found indisputable evidence that connected the number of sexual partners before marriage with the likelihood of getting divorced. In fact, because of possible selection bias Teachman controlled


for as many characteristics as he could so his research could not be discounted because of a certain characteristic. He took into account family background, social economic characteristics, age, religion and religious beliefs, culture, and number of siblings, and many more characteristics and still found that involvement with just one sexual partner other than the person that you marry raised the risk of divorce *three times higher* than those who had only had sex with their husband.⁹ These findings are so counter-cultural that they seem mind boggling.

There is a third example of relationship continuity (the first was the finding that teen sexual practices predict adult sexual practices; the second was Teachman's research that premarital sexual practices are correlated with divorce rates). Richard White, John Cleland and Michel Carael's conducted a study in 2000 with data on men from four countries and found a clear correlation between the number of sexual partners before marriage and the likelihood of extramarital intercourse (EMI). Their results showed that three background factors were significantly associated with enhanced probability of EMI—1) younger age at sexual debut, 2) previous marriage to someone other than the debut partner and 3) a higher number of sex partners before first marriage. All three support the continuity of relationship patterns rather than the discontinuity theory. One of these three correlates provided very clear support challenging the pervasive belief that "what is done in Vegas stays in Vegas."

The researchers grouped married men according to the number of sexual partners before first marriage. They found a

cohabitation

- 77% of singles agreed that living together first is an acceptable way for couples who want to make sure their future marriage will last BUT...
- 65% of singles cohabit before marriage
- 46% of those who cohabit actually marry
- cohabiters have poorer relationship quality than marrieds
- 16% increase in divorce risk for those who cohabit
- 31% of cohabiting parents break up within 5 years, compared to only 16% of married couples



step-wise increase in the percentage of men who had committed EMI in each group (0 previous sexual partners, 1 previous sexual partner, 2 partners, 3 partners, etc.). In other words, the group of men who had no previous sexual partners had the lowest EMI. The group that had one previous sexual partner had a statistical increase in their percentage of EMI. This continued to increase with each group until the group that had five

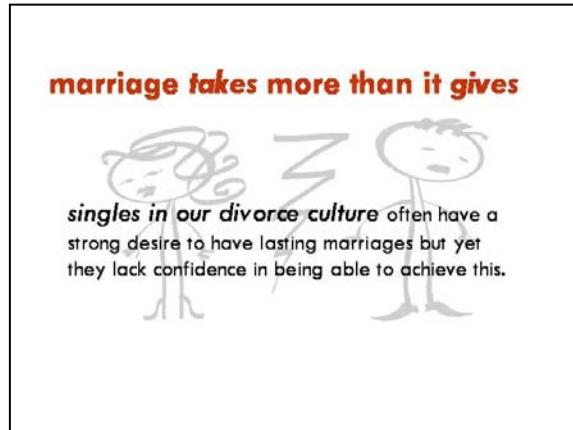
previous sexual partners. The difference of EMI between this group and the previous was much greater than the other four differences. Therefore, they concluded that although there was a statistically significant increase in EMI with each additional premarital sexual partner, there was an obvious and major increase in EMI with five or more previous sexual partners.¹⁰

A final example is found in the increase in unmarried cohabitation from 10% in the 1960s to now to close to 70%.¹¹ I don't want to take a lot of time with stats which most of you are familiar with—and you can read much of the research on cohabitation in Mike McMannis' book on cohabitation. But the findings for those who have cohabitated with someone other than the partner they marry have clear differences in their likelihood of divorce—about 16% greater risk than the average couple of same characteristics but who did not cohabit.

The point is that “relationship practices” before marriage clearly affect relationship experiences and outcomes after marriage. In spite of these studies and countless others which would substantiate that what one does in sexual and romantic relationships before marriage definitely continue into the marriage and have statistically significant connections with marital outcomes, our present day culture continues to propagate a philosophy of singlehood and sexual practices diametrically opposite. In fact, many of the most popular television shows consistently portray this untrue belief of relationship discontinuity in highly romanticized and sexualized plots!

If we are to change the course of marriage then we must begin with changing the experiences of love, sex and relationships before marriage. This requires that we debunk some of the myths that generate the cultural climate for hooking up, denying consequences and dismissing marriage.

The last belief that contributes to the trend of postponing marriage and engaging in riskier relationship activities is a subtle belief that *marriage takes more than it gives*. There is a fear that marriage will lead to heartache and divorce; that marriage will restrict the freedom and enjoyment of your life; and that marriage should be delayed as



long as possible so that you can find yourself, get settled, be on your own without any strings or demands.

In many ways, it is my generation that perpetuated this undefined and subtle view of marriage. It was common to hear parents in my era communicate those very ideas as words of advice to their children... "take your time, don't marry young, you have your entire life ahead of you, enjoy life a little before you have to settle down, we married

young but you can get settled, try out relationships, look around and wait until you are truly ready before you settle down and marry." Although I believe my generation meant well, the underlying assumption was that "marriage takes more than it gives" and you should delay this inevitable life sentence as long as possible. For many, the experience of divorce further reinforced this misguided belief and created a contradictory polarity in the attitudes about marriage. On the one hand, there was a clear desire to marry a soul mate and achieve a lasting and loving marriage that fulfills the deepest needs and desires of a human. But on the other hand, marriage was subtly portrayed and viewed to be a threat, a commitment that would put you in the greatest risk of heartache and emotional pain, and a structure of life that would restrict your opportunities of freedom and pleasure.

M/ This reminds me of an experience I had recently with Chad who is my finance. We went to one of his co-workers house for dinner. He had two sons, ages four and six. We are sitting around the dinner table and his two kids were playing off in a corner when the oldest called over to Chad, "Hey Chad, come here." Chad excused himself and crouched down when all of a sudden the six year old grabbed him by the collar and asked, "Izzat who you are marrying?" Chad said, "Yea—we're getting married in August." The boy looks at him intently and said, "Do you realize that she is "it" for the rest of your life?!?"

Age six! Where did this come from? His parents were married... happily married. So where did he learn this? I think it is expressed in subtle ways—but ways that a six year old could decipher and digest.

J/ Divorce is contagious. The effects of divorce are in the air. After more than five decades of a fifty-percent and higher divorce rate, there are underlying and generalized fears and apprehensions that even shape the attitudes toward marriage of six year olds. I am very aware that my wife and I (and especially my wife) instilled in you and your

sister, Jessica from day one that marriage is something that is a wonderful and exciting experience of life... and that we all cannot wait until you step into that next phase of life and our family expands. She instilled a belief that marriage is around the corner and that marriage *gives* way more than it takes.

Our last video clip interviews a couple of emerging adults who really let themselves be transparent. Unbelievable. But when you look at them what I want you to watch and see is the sad but very real polarizing dilemma. On the one hand, they want a great and lasting marriage but, on the other hand, they are really not sure how to go about accomplishing it. It is extremely emotional for them—there is apprehension and fear that some of the mistakes and pain they have seen in their parents divorces will repeat in their own lives. They conclude that they are trying to find their way as best they can without any kind role model for what a good marriage really looks like.

Video Clip

The institution of marriage in this country has a 50% rate of failure. Do young people still want to get married? If so, what do they see as their chances for a successful lifelong commitment?

(Laura Sessions Stepp, author of *Unhooked*) One of the things I found most interesting about the young women I interviewed was their concept of marriage. They weren't really sure what it was and what it should be. Many of them came from marriages that had divorced or partners who were together, parents who were together, but didn't seem to love each other. To them marriage seemed like a service contract and as much as they might deny it these girls were real romantics at heart. They wanted someone to be in love with them, to bring them flowers after five, ten, 15 years of marriage. They wanted romance and they didn't see it in their parents lives and so they wondered is it possible to be married and have that kind of romance and if not do I want to be married at all?

(female student #1) My parents just got a divorce I guess like a year and a half ago and my mom is now getting remarried. I don't know if it's the right decision really so I guess I'm kind of cynical about myself and about like if it will come.

(Willard Harley, author of *His Needs Her Needs*) I read an article the other day that said that only 16% of all divorces are amicable. That means that the rest of them are divorces where a husband and wife hate each other and do everything they can to undermine each other's success and the children are caught up in the middle of all of this.

What was it like watching your parents go through the process of separating?

(female student #1) Um, it was just hard because they changed completely. Their personalities completely changed and they are just different.

(David Popenoe, author and researcher) Feelings are the most notoriously changeable things in human kind and you cannot hold long-term relationships based on the idea that you are going to be romantically in love with someone for the rest of your life.

So you think based off of that you think maybe it's not possible for two people to stay together for a lifetime?

(female student #1) No, I do think it's possible, I definitely do. I think it's hard to find it though.

(Jeffrey Arnett, author of *Emerging Adulthood*) The ones who are the most determined to have a lifelong marriage are those who have come from divorced families because they vow they are not going to put their own kids through what they went through even though statistically the fact is that the ones who are from divorced families have a higher, not lower risk of divorce themselves.

(female student #2) Ever since I can remember my parents have always fought all the time. It's never been physical. It's always been just verbally so I want to throw that out there. They have never been private about it. It was always very public. They did it in the kitchen, the den, where everyone could hear it. But I think that they finally got a divorce I guess like three years ago and it was sad but everyone knew it was for the best because all they did was fight and they didn't stop living together though. I never understood why if you are going to get a divorce you are going to separate because that's the idea. And I started dating my boyfriend around that time and I made a conscious effort to change what they did wrong. They didn't communicate (tearfully). One of them was overbearing and they didn't let the other one speak when the needed to speak and one was weak, I don't want to say which ones, but one was weak and they didn't say what they needed to say. They didn't let their voices be heard.

I have always made an effort in my relationship, like I was saying before, I don't want to be the overbearing one, I don't want his opinions to go unheard because I don't want to end up like my parents and I want good communication. I want his opinions to count for something because I love him and I care about him (tearfully) and I don't want him to be behind me and in the dark and I want it to be a team effort.

With my parents they actually, it's kind of happy, they started working things out and they actually got remarried again this summer because they never stopped loving each other. I know that when they seemed that they just can't work it out that they were still in love and so they did work it out and they went on a second honeymoon so that was sweet. Things are going a lot better now. They are communicating better.

I know that a lot of that has come from me talking to one of them about my relationship because we all know who I take after of my parents and so it's been helpful for me to explain how I do things and how they can improve their relationship. I think it's helped. Hopefully they will stay together and get happier.

what is our plan of action?

1. clearly teach the benefits of marriage and correct the three false beliefs.
2. clarify the pace and progression of healthy relationship development and partner selection.
3. equip parents to be first teachers.
4. develop a 15-year educational game plan with new social structures for marriage education to adults from their teens through their 30's.

J/ I fully believe that if we are going to change the future of marriage we need to work with married couples. But if all we do is concentrate on helping the existing marriages to have better quality and last longer but we don't reach the generation that has been infected with core beliefs contrary to the benefit of marriage, contrary to the ability of staying married, beliefs that seem to actually set them up to have more problems in

marriage and higher divorce rates—if we don't go to that generation and work with them *also* then our work will only last one generation.

I know a lot of you are strapped into funding sources that demand that you stay focused on married couples. Meanwhile we have emerging adults pushing marriage off on the horizon, engaging in relationship activities, believing that what happens in Vegas... on and on. But we have to find a way to reach them. Change begins here.

I think back when my children were growing up. They played this game with other kids in a neighborhood pool. They would all get against the sides and march around in the same direction. It created a whirlpool effect. In time, the current was so strong that they could hardly run fast enough to keep up. But the best part of their game was when someone would yell "reverse." At that point, everyone had to turn against the current and try to move in the opposite direction. It was common for the rushing current to lift them off their feet and keep them moving in the same direction against their most arduous efforts. But eventually, if they would keep at it, the current would neutralize and then actually reverse...and a new current in the opposite direction would take form.

This is how our culture will change. We must educate and empower a few singles to shout out, "reverse" and go against the tide of their peers. If they persist and others join, then the current will eventually change. But for a while it will knock them off their feet and drive them back into conformity. But in time this can change. We saw this with the cultural trend and attitude toward cigarette and smoking. Just one generation earlier our culture made smoking an icon of the rich and sophisticated, a sign of being "cool". A cigarette was found in the hand of the doctor and the rock idol alike; every plane, restaurant and public facility allowed smoking. But the current culture eventually reversed through education and the persistent voice of dissent so that today it is now "uncool" to smoke.

We have got to clearly teach the benefits of marriage and correct these three false beliefs. If we do not change the belief that marriage takes more than it gives, if we don't correct that belief that what you do today programs you for your future relationships – if we don't change the belief that marriage is worth keeping close on your mental horizons—then we won't truly improve the course of marriages. We have to start changing these beliefs at age six, as Morgan said. We have to have a plan that spans early development through the twenties. Our mission is much more than to have instructors just teach our courses. We have a vision that we call, "It takes a village to raise a *marriage*." Let me briefly explain.

We created a school version that has a late elementary/middle school overview and also a complete high school version. It is during these years that mental templates about marriage and relationships are formed. We also developed a parent seminar that can be offered to the parents of the students in the class. This seminar reviews the core concepts that the students are being taught. But it also attempts to empower the parents

to be *first* teachers by addressing approaches and skills for talking with your children about dating and marriage. And finally, the seminar provides an opportunity to offer single and married parents adult classes on dating, relationships and marriage.

But kids also need role models. The third dimension of changing this cultural current is to establish “mentoring” clubs in High Schools that are official school clubs with a faculty advisor and run in collaboration with our organization, and which follow our monthly curriculum for facilitating group discussions about healthy relationships and dating. We are developing this curriculum for use in the Fall of 2009.

The final dimension of this “village” is to teach our PICK course in college settings. We have already helped some colleges and universities work through the curriculum approval process and establish the course as an elective. We have also worked with the department of Family and Consumer Sciences to set up a practicum/internship program in conjunction with the college course where selected college students help facilitate the monthly High School club meetings. Two primary themes are applied throughout these meetings – how to pace the development of a relationship in healthy and safe ways. And what are the character qualities, attitudes and behaviors that are indicative of healthy partners.

One of the vital premises of our approach is that healthy relationships promote character development. High school teens need to hear from those 2-3 years older that these themes are not just essential for “kids” but that they are the same stages of building relationships that apply to adults... that these college facilitators are also following these same principles and benefiting greatly in their own relationships.

It is in this “village” where late elementary children are introduced to these concepts, high school teens are formally taught these principles in more detail, parents are invited to learn both what their teens are being taught as well as to take classes of their own to improve their own relationships and to feel confident with talking to their kids about dating and marriage; and college classes continue to reinforce these concepts and provide opportunities for college students to teach and facilitate high school club meetings. The best way to learn is to teach. And the final aspect to complete *the village that works together over a 20-year period to make successful marriages* is to offer adult classes in the community for married couples, adult singles and singles-again.

The present cultural currents are too strong to reverse with just a high school class or a college intervention program. We must create *villages* in our society that often lacks neighborhoods and family structures. But with these efforts, the beliefs about sex and relationships can change—hooking-up can become “uncool”—higher standards for building trust can be established, and relationships can become structures where character is developed and boundaries are practiced.

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