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Uncovering Millennial Marriage

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Millennial Marriage Trends and Beliefs

by Cassie Knight



In the modern age, the increased complexity of our society may have an impact on marriages, making millennial marriages more difficult to navigate than marriages were in the past. The increase of media usage could be one of the reasons views of marriage have shifted from comparing the idealized expectations of marriage to the almost cynical expectations that some media sources present. A few of the new unique demands that can make these millennial marriages more complex include the equalizing of gender roles and career opportunities, the pervasive presence and use of media, and the individualistic culture that may result in assessing the balance between self-happiness and spouse's happiness in different ways.

Dr. Brian Willoughby, associate professor of Family Life at Brigham Young University, noted these shifts and sought to better understand the challenges married millennials are facing. His most recent project is named the Me-Marriage Project because of the prominent “me-centered” mentality that most individuals have when entering marriage. He conducted over 100 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with millennial couples across the United States to uncover the unique motivations and expectations behind these marriages.

More often than ever before, married millennials are asking the question about who the primary provider in the family will be. With more women educated and taking roles in the workplace, traditional roles are not as clearly defined as they once were. Some married millennials split the responsibility of providing for a family among both partners as equals, thus creating confusion for how the labor around the house will be split.

The Me-Marriage Project interviews indicate that most millennial couples intend to split labor around the house more fairly between the two spouses.¹ However, they struggle to manage this as well as to determine when and where having a family fits with these demands of equal school or career opportunities. Dr. Willoughby stated: “A lot of our couples are talking about the challenge of multiple career trajectories and trying to not just weave in those multiple job trajectories, but then trying to figure out where family fits. Many of the couples talk about struggling with decisions around kids, and when to have kids, and how to balance that.”

Another key difference regarding millennial marriages is the “itchy-trigger finger” or the deep concern and almost generalized expectation of something going wrong within the marriage. To protect themselves, some millennials prepare to eject themselves from the relationship as soon as they don't feel fulfilled anymore. These kinds of millennial marriages, which are becoming more common, tend to submit to a more “self-actualization” view of marriage where the individual's constant happiness within the marriage is essential. Focusing on self-fulfillment and one's own happiness within the marriage can keep these marriages on edge and anticipating possible failure more so than prior generations who expected to live out their lives with the same spouse.

These results from the ongoing Me-Marriage Project can give greater perspectives to help older generations understand the challenges of millennial marriages and be better prepared to lend a helping hand. Dr. Willoughby proposes that we provide new resources that better help these millennial marriages deal with the different marital motivations, expectations, and changes. The Me-Marriage Project is providing a new window into trends to help us understand the marriages of a new generation and the ways societal shifts are impacting the institution of marriage. Look for Dr. Willoughby's book to be published in 2020.

Endnotes

¹ Donnelly, K., Twenge, J. M., Clark, M. A., Shaikh, S. K., Beiler-May, A., & Carter, N. T. (2016). Attitudes toward women's work and family roles in the United States. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40(1), 41-54.