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On the Horizon: Marriage Timing, Beliefs, and Consequences in Emerging Adulthood

Brian J. Willoughby and Jason S. Carroll

Abstract

This chapter overviews marriage formation patterns and beliefs about marriage during emerging adulthood. Although marriage is no longer a transition occurring during emerging adulthood for many individuals, this chapter describes how marriage still has an important impact on emerging adult development and trajectories. The authors first note the major international demographic shifts in marriage that have occurred among emerging adults over the past several decades. They then highlight how research findings on beliefs about marriage have offered evidence that how emerging adults perceive their current or future marital transitions is strongly associated with other decisions during emerging adulthood. The chapter overviews major theoretical advancements in this area including marital paradigm theory and marital horizon theory. Research is summarized focusing on the age of marriage to highlight and discuss how marriage during emerging adulthood may impact well-being. Suggestions are provided for future directions of research in this area of scholarship.

Key Words: emerging adulthood, development, marriage, marital paradigm theory, marital horizon theory

The process and timing of marital formation in the United States and other industrialized countries has changed dramatically during the past several decades. In most Western countries, marriage is typically now delayed well into the 20s and early 30s (Johnson & Dye, 2005) and overall marital rates have been steadily declining (Lee & Payne, 2010). Pathways into marriage are also changing and becoming more varied (Amato, Landale, Havasevich-Brooks, & Booth, 2008; Schoen, Landale, & Daniels, 2007), with most individuals cohabiting with a romantic partner at least once prior to marriage (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). These changes have led to what some describe as the “deinstitutionalization of marriage” as social norms around marriage weaken and trajectories into marriage become more diverse and varied (Cherlin, 2004; Lauer & Yodanis, 2010).

With many young people delaying marriage, contemporary scholars have largely studied emerging

adulthood outside of the context of marriage. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Carroll et al., 2007; Cere, 2000; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009), scholars have largely disregarded the role of marriage during the transition to adulthood because getting married is increasingly regarded as part of a later stage in the life course. Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that emerging adults do not necessarily view their development outside of the context of marriage. About 80% of emerging adults in the United States describe marriage as an “important part of their life plans” with almost half of them labeling it as a “very important” part of their life goals (Hymowitz, Carroll, Wilcox, & Kaye, 2013). In fact, recent analyses show that by the time they are 25 years old, 63% of women in the United States are either already married or wish they were married (33% married; 30% wish they were married); whereas nearly half of 25-year-old men in the

United States are married (29%) or wish they were married (19%; Hymowitz et al., 2013). In general, the United States tends to have quicker trajectories toward marriage than other developed countries. For example, emerging adults in the United States typically marry earlier than their counterparts in Asia and Europe. According to the United Nations, in Japan, in 2005 only roughly a quarter of men (27.4%) and a third of women (38.2%) reported being married before the age of 30 (United Nations, 2013). Numbers in some European countries are even lower, with only 14% of men and 31.1% of women reporting being married by 30 in Italy in 2010. Northern European countries reported similar trends, with only 12.9% of men and 22.2% of women reporting being married by age 30 in Sweden.

Marriage has also not received much attention in emerging-adulthood scholarship due to the fact that most of the pioneering theory and studies on emerging adulthood have come from developmentally-oriented adolescence scholars who are “reaching forward” to examine the next step in the life course. Naturally, these scholars have emphasized aspects of individual development (e.g., identity development, risk taking, mental health, career directedness, etc.) and highlighted how emerging adulthood can be distinguished from adolescence. Much less research has been conducted with emerging adults by marriage and family scholars who are “reaching back” in the life course to examine the “step before” couple and family formation.

However, despite these trends, a number of scholars have begun to explore the bidirectional associations between marriage and emerging adulthood. In particular, this line of scholarship focuses on how young people’s attitudes about and personal plans for marriage influence their current behaviors and life choices, and, conversely, how emerging adults’ current behaviors influence their later marriage and family relationships. Within these lines of scholarship, emerging adulthood is largely defined as a *stage in the family life course*, a transitional period between a young person’s family of origin and his or her family of formation. This is in contrast to viewing emerging adulthood as simply a *period of individual development*. Indeed, within this perspective, emerging adults’ approaches to marriage and family formation become a central feature of this period in the life course.

The purpose of this chapter is to review the scholarship that has been done on marriage and emerging adulthood and to suggest future directions to deepen

and extend this domain of emerging-adulthood studies. Specific attention is given to the current trends in family formation that are connected to the rise of emerging adulthood and how these trends differ across socioeconomic populations. We also review the theoretical perspectives being used to study marital attitudes and behaviors among emerging adults. Next, using the primary components of marital paradigm theory (Willoughby, Hall, & Luczak, 2015) and marital horizon theory (Carroll et al., 2007), we overview studies that have been done on emerging adults’ beliefs about the *salience*, *timing*, and *context* of marriage, as well as outcome studies on the impact of marital timing on personal well-being and marriage outcomes. We conclude with a discussion of future directions for this line of emerging-adulthood scholarship.

Marriage and Family Formation Trends

One of the most notable changes in life course patterns in recent decades in the United States and other industrialized countries has been the documented rise in the average age at which people first marry. Since 1950, the median age at first marriage has substantially increased in the United States and is currently at a historic high—26.5 years for women and 28.7 years for men (Hymowitz et al., 2013). When demographic factors are examined in relation to 20-something marriage patterns, it appears that the delay of marriage is occurring for both men and women across all educational, economic, and racial groups in the United States. Between 1990 and 2010, emerging adults without college degrees pulled to nearly even in postponing marriage with their college-educated counterparts. In fact, the rate of increase in the delay of marriage is particularly sharp among less educated women between the ages of 20 and 24, in whom 50% had never married in 1990 compared to nearly 75% in 2010. This compares to an increase from nearly 80 to 85% among college-educated women of the same ages (Hymowitz et al., 2013).

Although emerging adults are currently delaying the age at which they marry, it is still very common for couples in their early 20s to move in with their romantic partner. In fact, emerging adults today are entering their first coresidential relationship at about the same age as in the past; now they are simply far more likely to be “living together” than married. In 1988, 53% of emerging adult women in their early 20s reported that they had entered into a cohabiting union, with 23% entering straight into marriage. By 2010, the overall number of women

in their early 20s entering into a cohabiting union with a romantic partner remained virtually the same (54%), but the number entering marriage dropped to 11% (Hymowitz et al., 2013).

The transition to parenthood has also shifted up during the same period with the average age of first birth in 1970 being between 21 to 22 years old for all women; in 2010, that age rose to just above 25 years of age. Taken together, these trends have created a crossover in the median age at first marriage and first birth in the United States. According to a new report from the National Center for Family and Marriage Research (Arroyo, Payne, Brown, & Manning, 2012), the median age at first birth exceeded the age at first marriage until 1991, but since that time women are entering marriage at increasingly later ages than they are entering motherhood. The gap in the age at first birth and marriage has widened since 2006, with the median age at first birth remaining at about 25 years whereas the median age of first marriage has increased by more than a year—from 25.3 to 26.5 years. These trends indicate a growing divergence in the timing of entry into motherhood and marriage (Arroyo et al., 2012). In some ways, this is a uniquely American trend because most European countries continue to report an average age of first marriage lower than the average age of first birth among women (Rontos, 2010). The crossover in the average age of marriage and the average age of first birth have contributed to a substantial increase in the number of children born to unwed mothers. In 1980, 18% of births were to unmarried women, but in 2010, more than 40% of children in the United States were born to mothers who were not currently married.

Such shifting demographic markers suggest that the timing and sequencing of couple formation, marriage, and childbirth has been drastically changing during the past 50 years. Emerging adulthood is now a time when many emerging adults are looking forward to a potential marriage, whereas other emerging adults are already grappling with issues of parenthood, marriage, and relationship formation and dissolution (often in the form of cohabitation). Thus, for some emerging adults, marriage is still distant in their life horizon, whereas for others it is a central part of this stage of life. However, even the distant marital relationship can still have a profound impact on the daily decisions made by emerging adults. Because of this, we focus much of this chapter on emerging adults' beliefs and attitudes about marriage to help us understand how marriage, despite being a distant and perhaps undesired goal,

is still an important component of understanding emerging adulthood.

A Theoretical Approach to Marriage During Emerging Adulthood *Framing Emerging Adulthood with a Family Development Lens*

As previously noted, the scholarship focused on the emerging-adulthood period has been dominated by scholars utilizing an individual lens to investigate how emerging adults move through this ambiguous period between adolescence and adulthood. This focus is not surprising, given that emerging-adulthood scholarship developed out of the psychological sciences and most emerging-adulthood scholars have backgrounds in human development or psychological theory. Although such an approach may certainly be used to study marriage within emerging adulthood, such an approach is limited in that it focuses on the individual instead of on the potential dyadic or familial aspects of emerging adulthood. As pointed out by some emerging-adult scholars with family science backgrounds (Carroll et al., 2007; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009), family-based perspectives offer an alternative theoretical framework through which to view marriage and marital beliefs during emerging adulthood. Such a framework focuses not just on how individuals move from one developmental period to another, but on how individuals move through phases of family development.

Such a “family development” lens has been articulated by several previous family scholars (for a review, see Rodgers & White, 1993). Inherent in this view and similar to other developmental theories is the assumption that families go through normative transitions across the life course. Borrowing ideas and concepts from the psychological field, such a developmental view of family life is in many ways a generalization of individual development applied to family systems. Instead of studying individuals as they move from one period of development to another, a family development lens is interested in how larger family systems across generations transition and change over time in normative and patterned ways. For example, most newlyweds in the United States go through a period of adjustment after a marriage, followed by a period of childbearing and the parenting of young children, followed then by a transition to parenting adolescents, and finally to a period of launching children. These transitions are both normative (in that they are influenced by cultural beliefs about what is “normal”)

and familial (in that they are transitions that involve multiple generations within the family system).

Applied to emerging adulthood, a family development lens helps us to understand that emerging adults, although typically not married and possibly living away from all immediate family members, do not exist in a familial vacuum. Not only do they still often have consistent and important interactions with family members (MacMillan & Copher, 2005; Thornton, Orbach, & Axinn, 1995), their behavior, perceptions, and values are partially attached to their “family life stage.” We use the word “stage” here not to imply that all emerging adults must accomplish a determined number of developmental tasks prior to moving on in their family developmental life cycle, but merely to point out that most emerging adults sit squarely between two normative stages in their family life. Most emerging adults have left their “family of origin” stage but have not entered their “family of procreation” stage, the period in the family life cycle created with the formation of long-term unions and the transition to parenting. Thus, emerging adulthood can be generally viewed as a period not only of individual ambiguity between individual developmental transitions, but also as a unique state in the family life course, between leaving one’s own family and the formation of a new family. This family development perspective on emerging adulthood offers important insights into understanding marriage beliefs and patterns among emerging adults.

The Marital Paradigms of Emerging Adults

Taking a family development lens to emerging adulthood is not simply an academic endeavor. Emerging adults themselves intrinsically understand that they are moving toward eventual family formation. Most emerging adults still expect and desire to marry in the future (Wilcox, 2010; Wilcox & Marquardt, 2011). Even in European countries where many emerging adults delay marriage or decide to not marry, the vast majority of emerging adults still hold favorable views of marriage as an institution (Rontos, 2010). Specifically, Rontos (2010) reported that among adolescents and emerging adults between the ages of 15 and 29, more than 70% in Belgium, more than 80% in Sweden, and more than 60% in the United Kingdom still held favorable views of marriage. This distant yet desired goal for most emerging adults likely has an impact on their current and future behavior in multiple aspects of their life and suggests that marital beliefs and attitudes may be a particularly

salient way to understand how marriage factors into emerging-adult development.

The study of marital beliefs and attitudes has recently accelerated as family scholars interested in emerging adulthood have argued that as more emerging adults delay marriage, beliefs about marriage should become a more important variable of interest among developmental and family scholars (Carroll et al., 2007; 2009). Generally, research has begun to show that such beliefs hold important associations with meaningful outcomes during emerging adulthood, including patterns of alcohol consumption and substance use (Carroll et al., 2007) and premarital sexual behavior (Willoughby, 2012; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009). Such beliefs are also important to consider because they are predictive of eventual transitions to marriage and other relational unions (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Willoughby, 2013). These results have been found both in samples gathered among emerging adults in the United States and in those from other countries such as Japan (Raymo, Iwasawa, & Bumpass, 2007). Beyond helping us understand an important correlate of future and current behavior, a study of marital beliefs and attitudes also may help scholars understand why and under what contexts marriage becomes delayed until later in the life course, a trend that scholars have recently suggested may carry the additional risks of increased nonmarital childbirth and decreased marital quality (Hymowitz et al., 2013).

To frame such a discussion of marital beliefs, a conceptual framework is helpful to organize ideas and create common terminology and phrasing. Such a theoretical framework was originally articulated by Carroll and colleagues (2007) in their *marital horizon theory* and then expanded and modified more recently by Willoughby and colleagues (2015) in their *marital paradigm theory*. Marital horizon theory suggests that the beliefs emerging adults hold regarding their future marital plans will influence their daily decisions and will put different emerging adults on different developmental and relational trajectories. In a series of studies, Carroll and colleagues (see Carroll et al., 2007; 2009; Willoughby & Carroll, 2010; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009) documented how varied beliefs about marriage in three areas—timing, importance, and criteria for readiness—create a “marital horizon” for emerging adults that influences their current behaviors and life choices. Carroll and others have argued that such marital horizons shape the very nature and trajectory through emerging adulthood. Willoughby

(2013) recently provided some quantitative evidence of this fact, showing that beliefs about marital timing and importance during high school were predictive of transitions to marriage during emerging adulthood, essentially shaping the very length of the emerging-adulthood period.

More recently, Willoughby and colleagues (2015) utilized marital horizon theory as a foundation to develop marital paradigm theory. This theory was developed as a framework to help scholars conceptualize and describe the way any individual views marriage as an institution. Although not limited to emerging adults or even those currently unmarried, marital paradigm theory offers important general insights into how the perceptions of emerging adults toward future marriages may impact their behaviors. Derived from the basic assumptions of symbolic interaction theory (Blumer, 1969), marital paradigm theory argues that each person (in this case, each emerging adult) develops and maintains over time a working internal conceptual model of marriage. This model develops and may change over time through interactions with family, friends, and the larger culture. Willoughby and colleagues (2015) argued that one's beliefs about marriage "become critical factors in understanding how one interacts in any situation that invokes that symbolic meaning." Such settings may include the obvious (dating encounters, wedding planning) but may also include less obvious connections. For example, although deciding on one's college major may seem unrelated to marriage, many emerging adults may make this decision partially due to the future earning potential of a career, which is often tied to a desire to provide for a future spouse and family.

The use of the term "marital paradigm" was selected to help capture the totality of how individuals think about marriage. Willoughby and colleagues (2015) split such a paradigm into two general belief sets: beliefs regarding *both* getting and being married. Beliefs about being married were derived based on previous scholarship by Hall (2006) describing various marital meanings and were focused on the beliefs one holds about what marriage will be like once one gets married. Although any individual, regardless of relationship status, may have beliefs about both getting and being married, the second set of beliefs—beliefs about getting married—may be particularly useful in terms of applications to the study of emerging adulthood. Beliefs about getting married were hypothesized according to the theory to lie across three distinct, yet interconnected dimensions: marital timing, marital salience,

and marital context. *Marital timing* refers to beliefs regarding the ideal and expected timing of marriage, formal engagement, and the ideal length of courtship. *Marital salience* refers to general beliefs about the importance of marriage and marrying, which includes not only the general importance placed on getting married, but also the relative importance of getting married in comparison to other life goals such as education and employment (Willoughby, 2010). *Marital context* refers to beliefs an individual has regarding within what individual, relational, and cultural context marriage should occur, including beliefs about mate selection and personal readiness. In other words, beliefs about marital context are beliefs that put constraints or limitations on the situations in which marriage is appropriate. This may include beliefs that marriage should happen after employment, that one needs to have a certain level of financial status, or that relationships generally should progress to a certain point (e.g., that they include sexual intercourse or cohabitation) before moving to marriage.

Marital paradigm theory further suggests that the power of such marital beliefs lies in their ability to influence specific intentions to engage in a certain behavior. For example, a belief in marrying later in life (marital timing) may decrease one's intention to stay in long-term romantic relationships while increasing one's intention to engage in short-term sexual relationships, an association suggested by some research (Carroll et al., 2007; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009). Across the three dimensions of beliefs about getting married, emerging adults may have a near infinite amount of specific attitudes about getting married. It is this very variability that then suggests the importance of marital paradigms according to marital paradigm theory. If emerging adults vary in the way they think about marriage, they will likewise vary in the way such beliefs influence their intentions to engage in behavior and then, by extension, their actual daily behavior. Such recent theoretical advancements have provided an important lens through which to understand emerging adulthood from a family perspective. Marital paradigm theory provides both a generalized and specific theoretical framework through which to understand how marriage and, more specifically, marital beliefs are important indicators of emerging-adult development. Next, we provide a more in-depth discussion of how the three general belief sets about getting married (marital salience, marital timing, and marital context) provide insights into emerging adulthood.

Salience of Marriage

Although marriage is certainly a changing institution, it is far from the dated or dying union that it is sometimes portrayed in popular media. Although most emerging adults will not transition to marriage until their late 20s or early 30s (Kreider, 2005), such a delay should not be interpreted as meaning that marriage is an afterthought among emerging adults. Recent analyses of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that nearly 8 out of 10 young adult men and women rate marriage as an important part of their life plans, with almost half of men and women rating it as “very important” (Hymowitz et al., 2013). Several other studies have also found that emerging adults still place a high degree of importance on marriage despite it being a distant goal for most (Burgoyne & Hames, 2002; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Overall, 90% of emerging adults in the United States rate “having a good marriage” as quite or extremely important to them (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001), and 94% of emerging adults report that they personally hope to get married someday (Krane & Cottreau, 1998). Generally, American emerging adults place more emphasis and have more traditional beliefs in marriage than do emerging adults in developed countries in most of Europe (Gubernskaya, 2010). Part of this difference may be the increasing influence of the Hispanic population within the United States. Oropesa (1996) reported that both Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in their sample reported more positive beliefs about the importance of marriage compared to non-Latino white participants. Research has also suggested that as adolescents move toward emerging adulthood, they begin to place even more importance on future marriages than they did early in adolescence (Willoughby, 2010). Although such research may suggest that marriage is still an important institution to most emerging adults, scholarship has also suggested that marital salience continues to be an area in which persistent gender differences exist, with women traditionally reporting higher marital salience than do men (Blakemore, Lawton & Vartanian, 2005; Carroll et al., 2007; Plotnick, 2007; Wilcox & Marquardt, 2011).

Although the majority of emerging adults want to eventually get married, many consider their marriage prospects with a certain amount of trepidation. In fact, delays in the age of marriage often reflect as much of a fear of divorce as they do a reluctance to marry. In the United States, divorce rates increased substantially during the 1980s and 1990s

and remain near 50% today (Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010). These trends have contributed to a profound fear of divorce among many young people that impacts how they think about, prepare for, and possibly avoid marriage. Emerging-adulthood scholar Jeffrey Arnett (2004) explains, “The fear of divorce, and the desire to avoid it, has contributed to the rise in the marriage age . . . postponing marriage also has fear as a motivation, fear of divorce and the desire to be as certain as possible that their marriage will succeed” (p. 113). Thus, for many emerging adults, their beliefs about marriage are a mixture of wariness and optimism as they both hope for, yet worry about, their future marriage.

Beyond simply describing how emerging adults value marriage, scholars exploring marital salience have also examined how such beliefs are associated with behavioral decisions. Such beliefs about marital salience have long been among the best marital beliefs predictors of emerging-adult behavior. The salience or importance placed on marriage has been found to be predictive of eventual marital and cohabiting transitions during and after emerging adulthood (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Clarkberg et al., 1995; Mahay & Lewin, 2007; Willoughby, 2013), binge drinking (Carroll et al., 2007), and sexual behavior (Willoughby & Carroll, 2010; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009). Such research has generally suggested that emerging adults who place a high importance on marriage typically exhibit fewer risk-taking behaviors, engage in more romantic relationships, and are more likely to form cohabiting and eventual marital unions earlier than emerging adults who place a lower importance on marriage.

Such statistics should not be taken to mean that all emerging adults plan for or aspire to marriage (although research suggests that the vast majority do). There are certainly some emerging adults who believe marriage is unnecessary, not for them, or even outdated. Others may simply believe they will never find a suitable or willing partner to marry. In the context of marital paradigms, however, it is important to keep in mind that a belief that marriage is not salient is still a belief about marital salience. Although research findings have generally been used to describe how positive or “pro-marriage” beliefs are associated with behavior, such findings also illustrate the influence of beliefs against marriage. For example, in their original marital horizon paper, Carroll and colleagues (2007) found that the importance placed on marriage was negatively associated with binge drinking.

One interpretation of this finding would suggest that emerging adults who place a high importance on marriage are less likely to binge drink, perhaps because they are undergoing anticipatory socialization (Burr, Day, & Bahr, 1993) and are avoiding activities they believe are incompatible with future marital roles. However, the same finding also suggests that emerging adults who do not place a high importance on marriage are possibly at risk for engaging in elevated levels of binge drinking. This may be because such emerging adults who do not place importance on establishing long-term committed unions feel freer to engage in a care-free lifestyle and more fully embrace a belief that emerging adulthood is a time of experimentation and risk-taking. Such an example is also an illustration of how beliefs about marriage are likely connected to beliefs about emerging adulthood as a time period in one's individual life course.

Although we have, up to this point, discussed marital salience as beliefs about marriage being either important or not, it is essential to remember that such beliefs do not exist for emerging adults as absolute beliefs defined in yes/no terms. Most emerging adults are not entirely for or against marriage. Instead, the importance placed on marriage lies on a continuum and is also linked to other domains of emerging adults' life. Although emerging adults hold a marital paradigm, they also hold an educational paradigm and a recreational paradigm. All these beliefs must be weighed together as emerging adults make decisions. In recognition of this fact, some scholars have suggested that the relative importance of marriage may be an important factor to consider in this area (Willoughby, 2010). Although most emerging adults may generally value marriage and expect to marry, larger variation likely exists when looking at how emerging adults relatively prioritize marriage compared to other life goals. Indeed, this may be one of the biggest factors in understanding why emerging adults delay marriage. Although most emerging adults value marriage (high general marital salience), they may prioritize their education, their career, or even their recreation over marriage during emerging adulthood. Research has suggested that when emerging adults prioritize careers and education over marriage, they may eventually develop a lower desire to marry (Blakemore et al., 2005), thus suggesting a reciprocal relationship between beliefs about marriage and beliefs in other areas of one's life. As emerging adults begin to devalue marriage, their

decisions in other life domains may strengthen and reinforce such marital beliefs.

That such beliefs about marital salience change over time has been a recent discovery in the emerging-adult and adolescent scholarship. Willoughby (2010) recently found that across high school, adolescents about to enter emerging adulthood generally start to give more relative importance to marriage compared to both friendships and careers. In fact, by their senior year in high school, Willoughby found that students believed that marriage would be more important in their lives than friendships. Newer data have also shown that emerging adults expect to place more importance and expend more resources on their future marital role than they will with their career, friendships, or leisure activities (Hoffnung, 2004; Willoughby, Goff, & Hall, 2013). Taken together, it appears that as adolescents move into emerging adulthood and then through emerging adulthood, marriage becomes not only more salient and important in their minds, but also begins to become more important than other domains in their lives. Although only conjecture at this point, it is possible that such research hints at a "marriage tipping point" among emerging adults, at which marriage eventually becomes more relatively salient compared to other life goals and priorities and thus puts emerging adults on a trajectory to eventually marry.

Before moving to the next major domain of marital beliefs, it is important to note that scholars have documented important racial and socioeconomic differences in how emerging adults report marital salience. Whereas some research has suggested that few differences exist in the importance placed on marriage among various ethnic groups (Curran, Utley, & Muraco, 2010), other studies have suggested that important variation in the importance placed on marriage does exist across racial and socioeconomic lines (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). One of the most documented shifts in this area has been the documented retreat from marriage among low-income couples and some ethnic minority groups (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005), not because marriage is viewed as less important among these segments of the population, but because marriage is perceived as unobtainable by many with few economic or social resources. Some scholars have argued that such a retreat is not based on a devaluing of marriage, but rather on an apprehension that a successful marriage is even possible given one's economic standing

and the availability of suitable partners (Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton, & Garrett-Peters, 2008). From this vantage point, the importance of marriage is not receding among the those in poverty; rather, marriage is held in such high regard that most feel it is impossible to maintain or obtain.

The Timing of Marriage

As previously noted, there has been a noted rise in the median age of marriage in the United States and other industrialized nations. Specifically, over the past four decades there have been significant changes in the number of people who marry during their 20s. In 1970, in the United States, more than 60% of women between the ages of 20 and 24 and 90% of women between the ages of 25 and 29 had married; whereas in 2010, only 20% of women ages 20–24 had married and slightly more than 50% had married by age 29. A similar pattern exists for men, with nearly 50% of men being married by the ages of 20–24 and more than 80% by the ages of 25–29 in 1970, but only slightly more than 10% and less than 40% being married at similar ages in 2010 (Hymowitz et al., 2013).

Desired Age of Marriage

Although it is clear that many 20-somethings are delaying marriage, it is unclear if this is a desired pattern or one in which they do not feel that marriage is a realistic option for them. Although the median age of marriage has reached the late 20s for both men and women, a recent study of college-attending young adults found that 25 years old is the average desired age for marriage for both men and women (Carroll et al., 2007). Also, recent analyses from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (ADD Health; Hymowitz et al., 2013) show that by age 25 the majority of young adults are either currently married or desire to be currently married. In fact, by age 25, more than 50% of men and 80% of women are either married or wish they were married. This means that, by age 25, while about 25% of men are married, another 25% of men desire to be married but are not. For women, while slightly more than 30% are married by age 25, another 50% of women desire to be married but are not. It appears that many emerging adults today are experiencing a “backward horizon” (Carroll et al., 2007) when it comes to marriage, with nearly one-quarter of men and one-half of women passing their desired age of marriage by about age 25.

Desired Marital Timing and Current Behaviors

Although few studies have explicitly focused on individual’s specific beliefs and expectations regarding the timing of dating, engagement, and future marriage, limited research has suggested that beliefs about such timing are important. This timing is likely linked to many contextual factors such as dating patterns, pregnancy history, employment, and educational trajectories. All of these factors have been found to influence the likelihood that one expects to transition to marriage in the near future (Gassanov, Nicholson, & Koch-Turner, 2008).

Along these lines, other research has suggested that beliefs about marital timing influence individual decision making in similar ways as marital salience. Carroll and colleagues (2007) found that expecting to marry past the mid-20s was associated with higher levels of substance use, more endorsement of cohabitation, and more sexual permissiveness for college men and women. Using the ADD Health dataset, Willoughby and Dworkin (2009) found that those who desired to marry soon tended to have more sexual and relational experiences than those who put marital timing further out in the life course, mirroring results also found in other areas of the world (Clark, Poulin, & Kohler, 2009). The results of these studies suggest that many of these changes in lifestyle patterns may be initiated when young people begin to anticipate marriage in their near future, even before they actually transition to marriage.

Marital timing beliefs may also influence long-term relational outcomes. Willoughby (2013) found that when high school seniors expected to marry younger, this belief was predictive of an earlier transition to marriage compared to high school seniors who expected to marry later. Although similar findings are not currently available regarding if timing beliefs in relation to engagement or dating length are likewise associated with short- and long-term outcomes, it would appear that the expected and hoped for timing for later marriage helps emerging adults shape their decisions through the emerging-adulthood period.

Beliefs About Marital Context

The third aspect of marital paradigms is marital contexts or the criteria one feels are needed to be ready or prepared for marriage. Beliefs about marital context include a range of factors, such as specific educational, financial, cultural, or experiential benchmarks that need to be met by the

individual holding the beliefs or by that individual's potential spouse before one feels ready to marry. Previous research has suggested the importance of several of these factors in determining mate selection and marital behavior. For example, religious beliefs serve as an important contextual factor for many individuals, evidenced by the fact that male partner religiosity has been found to be a significant predictor of women's positive expectations to marry (Manning & Smock, 2002). Additionally, although most individuals intend to get married regardless of socioeconomic status, many marriages of low-income couples are prevented by unmet expectations regarding marriage financial prerequisites (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Specifically, Gibson-Davis and colleagues found that almost three-fourths of low-income unmarried couples interviewed mentioned financial concerns as a major barrier to marrying. Sexual compatibility with one's partner as an important prerequisite for marriage is another contextual factor many modern couples and individuals consider important as they move toward marriage (Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby, 2010; Clark et al., 2009).

Much of this research has focused on emerging adults' perceived readiness for marriage and what contextual factors may influence such readiness. More than 30 years ago, Blood (1976) invited scholars to investigate understudied issues in family research, noting that readiness for marriage was a particular area of neglect. Since that time, marriage readiness has only received modest attention from scholars, and there is still relatively little known about the factors that influence an individual's perception of whether or not they are ready to get married (Larson, 1988). Indeed, research on marriage readiness remains meager, with much of this research now dated in reference to today's emerging-adulthood culture. This is surprising given that perceived readiness for marriage, along with feelings and attitudes about marriage, has been found to be a key variable in the decision to marry and a significant predictor of later marital satisfaction (Waller & McLanahan, 2005). Sassler and Shoen (1999) found that emerging adult's perceptions of their own and their partner's readiness for marriage in areas such as completing schooling and being established in a job were associated with the timing of marriage for both men and women. However, despite these apparent links between marriage readiness attitudes and future couple formation patterns, little is known about the contexts that

shape the criteria emerging adults actually use when making decisions to marry.

To transition to marriage, most individuals need to feel personally ready, and that readiness is based on a self-defined group of criteria. Marriage readiness is often influenced by multiple factors, including family background and religious affiliation (Larson, Benson, Wilson, & Medora, 1998; Mosko & Pistole, 2010) and has been linked to individual decision making premaritally. For example, young adults who believe sexual experience is an important criterion for marriage tend to engage in more high-risk behavior prior to marriage (Carroll et al., 2009).

Although some studies have investigated perceived readiness for marriage among emerging adults (Holman & Li, 1997; Larson, 1988; Stinnett, 1969), these studies have focused on the question "do you feel ready to get married?" What is less known currently is the answer to questions, such as the one asking "what do you believe will make you ready for marriage?" For example, what level of economic independence is needed to be ready for marriage? What life experiences need to be had? Are the markers centered on aspects of interpersonal relationships or on preparation to fulfill adult roles? These are just some of the numerous aspects of readiness that emerging adults can emphasize or minimize in their personal philosophies of marriage readiness.

Many of these marital context beliefs and beliefs about marital readiness are often based on larger cultural norms. For example, many Americans hold to common contextual elements considered as prerequisites to marriage, including mutual love (Campbell & Wright, 2010) and a relationship that is emotionally fulfilling. In effect, most Americans continue to search for the ideal partner or "soul mate" (Campbell & Wright, 2010), displaying a largely romanticized view of marriage and expecting that with one's "soul mate" an individual can find marital satisfaction, acceptance, and happiness with little work or effort (Hall, 2006). Individuals who hold strong soul mate beliefs regarding marriage will likely have specific requirements of both their partner and relationship before deciding to marry, influencing both dating and marital decision making.

Career and educational contexts are perhaps the most studied aspects of marital context beliefs in the current literature. High education levels are traditionally related to higher marriage rates in both men and women (Carlson, McLanahan, & England,

include spousal specialization, economies of scale, and the insurance functions of marriage, which all increase the economic well-being of spouses and children and that research studies have shown to typically be quite substantial.

But do these benefits of marriage apply to 20-something marriages? Does the timing of marriage influence these benefits? In their recent report on age of marriage, Hymowitz and colleagues (2013) examined the impact of marriage on the emotional health, physical health, and economic well-being of emerging adults who married in their 20s compared to those who have not yet married. Overall, their analyses using primarily the ADD Health dataset suggested that married emerging adults tend to do better across a range of emotional and physical outcomes. Men and women who are married prior to 30 report significantly less depression, less drunkenness, and increased life satisfaction than do single young adults. This study also found that emerging adult men and women who are married are more likely to experience the benefits of good physical health than are the unmarried. Much of this benefit comes from the fact that marriage appears to discourage unhealthy behaviors. For example, it was found that single men report drinking much more than married men and are more likely to report life problems stemming from their drinking.

Scholars have also examined how the timing of marriage is connected to economic well-being. Studies have found that married men earn substantially more than otherwise similar unmarried men. The wage premium married men receive is one of the most well-documented phenomena in social science, in the United States and in many other countries (Doherty, Carroll, & Waite, 2007). Married men earn at least 10% more than single men and perhaps as high as 40% more. Economists call this the “marriage premium” (Waldfoegel, 1997) and generally agree that the greater productivity of married men plays a substantial role in their higher earnings. This productivity boost comes with the more settled, stable lifestyle of marriage (Grossbard-Shechtman, 1993).

However, these studies tend to look at individuals in more established marriages and tell us more about the eventual outcome of marital status than they do patterns of marital timing. One of the greatest concerns many have about marriage in the 20s is that such a pattern will interrupt educational trajectories and undermine young people’s ability to establish stable careers. Hymowitz and colleagues (2013) examined the relationship between

age of marriage and economic outcomes among 35-year-olds, thus allowing them to examine the “end result” of various marriage timing trajectories during the 20s. In particular, they examined age at first marriage, age at first birth, and three measures of economic outcomes: personal income, household income, and educational attainment using the 2008–2010 American Community Survey. They found that, for women, both personal income and household income at age 35 increases with older ages of first marriage, with an average difference of approximately \$18,000 in annual personal income between women who marry before 20 and those who wait until after 30. However, additional analyses revealed that the economic liabilities associated with earlier marriage for women are less pronounced if childbirth is delayed and educational trajectories are maintained. Overall, these findings also suggest that, for women, the timing of childbirth is a better predictor of economic well-being in later life than is timing of marriage.

Although there is a gradual linear association between age at marriage and economic outcomes for women, Hymowitz and colleagues (2013) found that the association is different for men, in whom the association appears to be more curvilinear. Men who marry between the ages of 20 and 23 had the highest level of personal income of any group by age 35, although this level was generally similar to men who marry between the ages of 24 and 26. This pattern was true for men across all levels of educational attainment from high school dropouts to college graduates. Also, these analyses found that men who never marry consistently have the lowest levels of personal income—even less than those who marry before age 20. These patterns likely reflect some degree of reverse causality, with low-income men being less likely to marry.

It is also important to note that some scholars question how much of the differences between married and unmarried individuals are more the result of a selection effect rather than a casual one (Essig & Owens, 2009). However, although it is challenging to support the causation hypothesis unequivocally due to the ethical impossibility of using experimental methods to study the effects of marriage (i.e., we cannot randomly assign couples to marry or not), recent longitudinal studies continue to show that at least some of the observed benefits of marriage are causal (Horn, Xu, Beam, Turkheimer, & Emery, 2013). Others also emphasize the importance of including relationship quality into the discussion of marital benefits, pointing out that although single

people are typically are not as happy and healthy, on average, as people in happy marriages, they are typically happier and better off than unhappily married people or individuals who are divorced (DePaulo, 2006).

It is also important to note that the strength of the associations between marital status and personal health and income outcomes in research to date are moderate and should not be exaggerated. Consequently, to state that the difference between married and unmarried emerging adults is large would be an error. Clearly, there are many other aspects of personal health behaviors that impact health outcomes, regardless of marital status. However, the findings of studies to date looking at marital timing and individual outcomes also suggest that to state that couples who get married in their 20s are disadvantaged or at greater risk for poor emotional and physical health is also an error. Thus, although there is some evidence that marriage acts as a transition of gain, even in 20-something marriages, the evidence is clear that labeling 20-something marriage as a transition of loss seems unwarranted.

Age of Marriage and Marital Success

One of the primary concerns about 20-something marriage is the common belief that such marriages lead to poor-quality relationships that do not work out. Is this true? A series of studies have been done that examine how age at marriage is related to the quality and stability of today's marriages.

For many, these concerns about "early marriages" stem from the widely known fact that teenage marriages have much higher divorce rates than later-age marriages (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977; Bumpass et al., 1991; Heaton, 1990; Lehrer, 2008; Teachman, 2002; Waite & Lillard, 1991). As awareness of the divorce-proneness of teenage marriages has spread, the widely held belief is that age has a continuous linear relationship with divorce, or, in other words "the older the better" is a common mantra when it comes to well-timed marriage. In particular, the patterns found in teen marriages are largely assumed to apply as well to marriages begun in the early to mid-20.

Similarly, the long-standing research literature on age at marriage and marital outcomes has focused on possible risks associated with early marriage while devoting little attention to marriages that begin at older ages (Glenn, Uecker, & Love, 2010). This pattern is partly explained by the fact that, until recently, the number of people who

married in their late 20s and later was quite small in most studies of marital outcomes. However, this pattern also reflects that, until recently, scholars have paid less attention to patterns of "later marriage" and how these couples fare in patterns of later marital success.

So what do studies tell us about marriage during emerging adulthood and marital success? To date, most studies on age at marriage and marital success have used divorce as the only measure of marital success. Although marital stability is an important measure of marital success, it is not the only measure of whether or not a marriage is a good marriage. Recently, Glenn and colleagues (2010) published the first academic study that tried to simultaneously take into account both marital stability and quality. This study analyzed data from five American datasets and found that later marriages—namely, those begun in the late 20s and after 30—fare very well in avoiding divorce but rather poorly in terms of marital quality and happiness. This study found that divorce is indeed less likely for individuals who marry after emerging adulthood in their late 20s and 30s. However, this study also found that "the greatest indicated likelihood of being in an intact marriage of the highest quality is among those who married at ages 22–25" (Glenn et al., 2010, p. 787). However, the authors correctly pointed out that the negative relationship beyond the early to mid-20s between age at marriage and marital success is likely to be at least partially spurious, and thus it would be premature to conclude that the optimal time for first marriage for most persons is at age 22–25. However, the authors note that their findings suggest that "for most persons, little or nothing in the way of marital success is likely to be gained by deliberately delaying marriage beyond the mid-twenties" (p. 799).

To further assess the association between age at marriage and marital success, Hymowitz and colleagues (2013) analyzed data from the National Fatherhood Initiative National Marriage Survey. These analyses show that women marrying at age 23 or younger appear to face greater odds of divorce than those marrying at age 24 or older. Consistent with existing research, women marrying under the age of 20 were found to have the greatest risk of divorce, with those marrying in the early 20s having a slightly higher level of divorce than those marrying in their mid-20s or later. However, similar to Glenn and colleagues (2010), these findings also suggested that although marital stability is indeed greater for later-age marriages, most people have little to gain in

divorce prevention by marrying beyond the mid-20s. Conversely, these analyses also showed that marital happiness and satisfaction was highest among couples marrying in their early to mid-20s. Thus, it appears that the increased stability of later marriages cannot be attributed to these marriages being higher in quality. Taken together, while research continues to show that marriage during the teenage years carries increased risk of marital disruption and negative individual outcomes, scholars have also begun to note that marriage during emerging adulthood may represent an optimal window for marital transitions.

Moving Forward: Conclusion and Goals for Future Research

These findings connecting marital beliefs and emerging adult development and scholarship on the consequences of marriage during emerging adulthood highlight that marriage remains a vital key to understanding the emerging-adult time period. A wealth of recent scholarship has provided important theoretical and empirical advances in understanding the role that marital beliefs and behaviors play in the lives of emerging adults. Although marriage may never occur or be sought out by some emerging adults, the implications for how emerging adults situate marriage into their long-term plans appears to shape the very nature, context, and length of emerging adulthood itself. Here, we summarize what we believe are three important implications of these findings to the broader study of emerging adulthood, as well as some suggestions for where the scholarship in this area can move next.

1. *Marriage still matters.* Perhaps the clearest implication of the recent research linking marriage, marital beliefs, and emerging adulthood is that emerging adults in general have not rejected marriage as an important and hoped for institution. Although the course toward marriage has certainly changed drastically over the past several decades, most emerging adults still express a strong desire to be married and value marriage as an important relationship goal. If emerging adults are not rejecting marriage, then the burden remains on emerging-adult scholars to understand emerging adulthood from a marriage and family perspective.

2. *The flourishing versus floundering debate.* Various scholars have debated whether the very nature of emerging adulthood hinders individual development or provides a safe haven for healthy identity exploration (Arnett, 2007; 2013; Dworkin, 2005; Twenge, 2013). Scholarship on marriage and

marital beliefs does suggest that how emerging adults sequence and think about marriage may inform if they are indeed flourishing or floundering. That many studies have now documented links between marital beliefs and risk-taking behaviors during emerging adulthood speaks to the fact that marriage may be a key factor in influencing if individual emerging adults are flourishing or floundering.

3. *Capstone versus cornerstone.* Studies on marital beliefs among emerging adults suggest that scholars studying marriage, relationship formation, and adult development in the 30s, 40s, and beyond would be wise to consider how emerging adults are approaching and thinking about marriage. If marital beliefs put emerging adults on probable trajectories toward or away from healthy marital formation and adjustment, these adult development and marital scholars should consider the implications of emerging adulthood on these later transitions.

Culturally, emerging adults have increasingly come to see marriage as a “capstone” rather than a “cornerstone”—that is, something they do after they have all their other ducks in a row, rather than a foundation for launching into adulthood and parenthood. But this capstone model is not working well for Middle Americans. One widely discussed reason for this is that Middle American men are having difficulty finding decent-paying, stable work capable of supporting a family. This may in effect place marriage out of reach for many middle- and low-income emerging adults who aspire to marry but never feel they can reach that “capstone” of their lives.

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