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Is Marriage Still Relevant in Today's Society?

Stacey Harris²

The original idea of marriage is different from today's current idea of marriage. Although the idea of marriage is different all over the world, the idea of a marriage based on love is an ever-growing trend throughout the world. This idea of marriage for love is no longer secluded to the western cultures. In this paper there is a critique of different literatures on what marriage means and the idea of cohabitation as well as a study conducted to review how undergraduate college students feel about the relevancy of marriage in today's society. The study was conducted to test the idea that marriage is no longer relevant in today's society. With more people cohabiting this seems to be a relevant idea to test. The method used was a random assignment of undergraduate students who took a ten question survey that addressed questions on marriage as well as cohabitation. The participants in the study, however, seem to favor marriage over cohabitation.

Marriage in the western world is an idea of falling in love with the right person, getting married, spending the rest of our lives with that person and being happily ever after. According to Whitbourne and Whitbourne (2011) the definition of marriage is a union of between a man and a woman that is legally sanctioned. Many people have asked if this idea of marriage is attainable. However, with the hopefuls there are the ones who oppose this fantasy idea of marriage with as much vigor as the people who do believe. The discrepancy comes when we add up the numbers of divorce rates, marriage rates and the rates at which cohabitation occurs in society. Whitbourne and Whitbourne (2011) also suggest that only 50% of the US. Population is currently married and about half of that number will end in divorce. They also state that the number of couples who cohabit today compared to the 1960s has more than quadrupled. However, around 50% of these cohabiting couples according to Whitbourne and Whitbourne (2011) end up marrying one another. Another interesting concept that has been newly introduced

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in the relevancy issue is the idea of a marriage contract in nuptials (Ritchel, 2013). This paper examines the studies and opinions of these important factors that play a role; or potentially play a role, in the ideas concerning marriage, cohabitation, divorce, as well as marriage contracts.

According to an article published in "Psychology Today," (2008) the history of marriage was seen more as a contract between families for monetary purposes, survival and power. The authors also provide a time-line that explains how different cultures viewed marriage. The Antiquity-Renaissance (1450 to 1600 CE) described love in Ancient Greece as a contractual marriage that had more to do with inheritance. The Greeks believed that if one were in love then they were insane (Coontz, 2005). During this period love was only honored between two men. Also during this time, a woman could be forced to divorce her husband and marry her male relative if her father were to die sonless.

According to Coontz (2005) Plato was a believer in love; however, his love did not encompass a bond between a man and a woman rather, a bond between a man and a man. It is not clear if Coontz believed whether this was a romantic love or an intimate love between men. The French, according to Coontz (2005) also considered the idea of love between two people to be a psychological problem and had a common belief that sufferers of lovesickness should engage in sexual intercourse with whomever to move on with the insanity and get to more important things. China was also privy to this type of thinking. The people of China believed that if love was to grow in excess between married couples then it could affect the "solidarity of the extended family" Coontz (2005). According to Coontz (2005), the Chinese considered traditional love in the language did not mean the love we think of today. Love in their language was used as a disapproving union between two people. It was not until the 1920s that another word for love was invented to encompass a passionate and acceptable love westerners believe in today.

In "Psychology Today" (2008), the author also talked about how "wife swapping" in Rome was a normal occurrence. This was used primarily for "career moves" to make bonds between states and family stronger. This was seen as responsible and admirable. It did not matter if the couple were in love or not. If they had not engaged in the "wife swapping" it would have been considered irresponsible and a threat to the social norms. The same pattern could be seen in Ancient India where loving a person before marriage was frowned upon. It was seen as disruptive and "anti-social" and a flimsy basis for marriage (Coontz, 2005).

During the 1600s the belief of marriage was seen as a contract between families and husband and wives did not look to each other for passion, rather they looked to people who were close to them outside of their union. Even up until the 1700s this was a prevalent idea of marriage. Close to the 18th century, the state of Virginia in the United States suggests that passionate love between husband and wife was still almost repulsive to most people. People did not find the idea of true and passionate love as appropriate ("Psychology Today", 2008).

Well into the 17th century women started to like and almost dream about the idea of marriage for love and even considered the idea that marriage was used for purposes of money and gain as unfortunate. Even with the trends of love for women were changing they were changing for men as well. Not really in a good way though. "Psychology Today" (2008) wrote that in 1840 Queen Victoria broke the traditional rules of a gem embedded gowns and started a trend with a virginal white gown and men started to see their wives as not being the lustier sex they once had been and "would rather have sex with prostitutes than their virtuous wives." The idea of what is considered "normal" in current US society's idea of a honeymoon was not always what was considered "normal." In Psychology Today (2008) what used to be considered "normal" was, a couple who were just married, would visit relatives who were unable to make the travel to

be at their union. That evolved into something like a honeymoon; however, the wife's friend would come along on this trip. This could have to do with the idea of women still being virgins during that time period and still needing a chauffeur. Dates were not a common idea until the 1920s according to "Psychology Today" (2008). The critics during this time had their reservations about love and the expression of love being the start of the end of marriage. The idea of love as a solid influence of love, in the universal sense, in the US did not occur until the 1970s. At this time love was embraced and led up to the sort of love that we expect and pawn after in today's current society. The thought of marriage as love (which is primarily a Western belief) is spanning around the globe in current society. However, this idea of marriage for love has its fair share of problems.

Divorce was an unheard of societal norm. If a person was to get divorced as recently as the 1960s they were not considered to be fit to be remarried by law (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). The Supreme Court ruled in favor of remarriage in the United States with the *Love vs. Virginia* (388 U.S.1) case. The judge in the rulings said it was a basic human right to have the ability to get married (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). The Supreme Court ruling was what set the stage for the reformation of marriage. It was not until 1973 that the Supreme Court ruled in favor of men having to financially support their illegitimate children in the case of *Gomez v. Perez* (409 U.S. 535) (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007). This was a time of change in the legal systems of marriage and social norms (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007). With these new laws in place Stevenson and Wolfers (2007) imply that this is why some of the marriage rates declined. Women no longer needed to have a shot-gun marriage to make ends meet. The father of an unborn child was still held responsible for their unborn child.

The rules of divorce for most states in and before the 1950s stated that there had to be a fault on at least one of the partners to get a divorce. However, in the 1960s according to Stevenson and Wolfers (2007) some states in the US introduced the ability to sever a marriage based on the idea that two people could no longer get along. There was no longer the need to stay in a marriage that did not suit both parties, and with the new found responsibility on the man's part from the *Gomez v. Perez* (409 U.S. 535) case, the woman had monetary rights regarding her children. This made it less likely for her to be fearful to leave the union. Stevenson and Wolfers (2007) suggested that incidences of suicide and violence occurring in the household declined indicating that this had a significant effect on the divorce rate, as well as the following two years after the induction of the law; divorce rates dramatically rose. Stevenson and Wolfers (2007) also said factors contributing to the rates of divorce are the wages between men and women being more equivalently divided, the laws that allowed women to use birth control when they were married and eventually even when they were not married, the ability to have an abortion, and women wanting to go to school and get degrees. The marriage rates have had troubles due to this last statement in that the workplace has a unisex atmosphere and it is easier for opposite sexes to meet, date, and sometimes even have affairs. Another factor that plays a part is current technology. It is easier for men and women to get online and flirt, meet and even carry out fantasies online, which could lead to extramarital affairs.

One of the main reasons why marriage is seen to be, by some, as a failing institution is current society's, with the younger generations', idea of what marriage is meant to stand for in current western society. Lapp (2012) asked younger people if they still believed in the institution of marriage. He found that most of the younger generations' does in fact want to make a commitment and get married. However, when they were asked if it was ok for people to get

divorced, the common answer was if they were not happy then they should not be together. The idea of flimsy unions based on love is very prevalent in this group. The idea of love is something that is conditional upon one's own happiness. There is not a pattern in the thought process that points to the union of two people being a sacred bond that has to have loyalty, sacrifice and fierce commitment. The younger generation is confused as to what they want in a marriage. These generations do not seem to put much thought into the unconditional part of marriage as much as the "if I am unhappy I will just leave" aspect of divorce. As Lapp (2012), put it love should be like fighting for your country. The younger generation and generations to come need to understand what a marriage is supposed to entail as far as responsibilities from them and their partners.

Kilmann & Vendemia, (2013) also have the same sentiments. They found that couples who were married longer were able to be considerate of each other's needs, not so easy to anger and had less personal distress compared to shorter or intermediate marriages with whom had all of these negative traits. The idea is that the selfish and conditional love that some believe is love is what may be causing these shorter marriages. The authors suggest that this is caused by the wide personality differences between couples.

Cohabitation is the idea of two people living together as a married couple but not actually having a marriage. In Stevenson and Wolfers' (2007) research they find that couples who engage in cohabitation are using it as a permanent or semi-permanent state. A lot of people go into cohabitation with their partners expecting a marriage to ensue. However, couples who cohabit are more likely to end up in divorce than couples who did not cohabit (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). They also suggest that some may have a lower commitment to their partners when they decide to cohabit, but with some people the institution of marriage is not seen as important to

them as to others. According to Whitbourne and Whitbourne (2011), the idea of the higher divorce rate after cohabitation has to do with what they call cohabitation effect. This concept states that people decide to get married because they have been together so long and get married even though they were not a good match to begin with. Some couples choose to get married for tax breaks while others who cohabit decide not to get married because of marriage penalties because their incomes combined would be too much. Cohabitation is currently seen as a transitional role in the US. Some people may like the idea of marriage and decide that cohabitation may not be their idea of a permanent goal. Some may see the divorce rates and think the idea of marriage is too risky (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007).

Some think the answer to this dilemma could be marriage contracts. The idea is that a couple who goes forward with marriage would only marry for a certain amount of time. "Lawmakers in Mexico City proposed the creation of short-term, renewable marriage contracts with terms as brief as two years" (Ritchell, 2012). He also attributes this law to the common thought that marriages fail half the time; he also talked to a divorce attorney who thought this was not such a bad idea. Given that most marriages, according to the divorce attorney, end in divorce this could save some money that is going out, in the billions, per year because of divorce. During his work with divorces he sees a pattern with divorces; 7 year itch and the 20-year mark are the most common times for people to get or even consider a divorce from their spouse.

The purpose of the present study was to see if the idea of marriage for love is still relevant in current society. With all of the conflicting ideas of what marriage is and how it should be between two people; the idea of the study is to determine whether marriage as being the sought after goal in relationships and cohabitation as being an acceptable idea concerning long term goals in relationships.

Participants that engaged in the study were asked to fill out a demographic survey that asked them questions regarding sex, age, religious affiliation and if they came from a home that suffered from divorce or separation. The participants were then asked to fill out a 10 question survey asking how much they disagreed or agreed to different ideas concerning marriage and cohabitation.

Method

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample that included 18 undergraduate-student volunteers recruited through the Lindenwood Participant Pool (LPP), who received a small amount of extra credit in a college course they are enrolled in. In this study there were no exclusions in regards to the participants. Data were collected on the participants' age, sex, religious affiliation, marital status and if they had come from a home with a divorce or separation. There were 13 women and 5 men. Out of the 18 participants, 10 were single, 1 was married, and 1 was divorced. There were 6 freshman, 6 sophomores, five juniors, and 1 senior. Out of the 18 participants 8 reported they had come from a divorced household and 10 reported they were from a household that was still united in marriage. When participants reported their religious beliefs there were 17 who reported they were affiliated with a religion, while only 1 reported to have no religious affiliation.

Materials and Procedure

In the study, participants' were first asked to fill out a consent form (see Appendix A). This form was primarily used to get consent of each participant, let them know the time expected for the study, risks associated with the study and contact information. Participants' were then asked to fill out a demographic survey (see Appendix B) that asked information mentioned in the

participants section. A marriage/cohabitation survey (see Appendix C) was given to participants to assess their current views in regards to marriage and cohabitation. After the marriage survey, participants' were asked to look over a debriefing document (see Appendix D) that explained the study and provided contact information if they would like to know the results of the study once it was finished.

Participants signed up using a sign-up sheet that was downloaded from the Lindenwood Participant Pool (LPP). Participants signed up for the time that worked best for them under certain dates listed on the sign in sheet. The study took place in Young Hall in the psychology labs on the first floor. The room the participants used had one large round table with four chairs, two rectangle tables with two chairs at each. When the participants showed up for the time and date selected they were provided with an informed consent form. With this form was an identifying number to use on all other forms and surveys. The participant's identity was not used on any other forms other than the consent form. Upon completion of the informed consent each participant was provided with a demographic survey and the survey on marriage. The participants were informed the survey should only take 15 min. to complete, however, if more time was needed then they could take the extra time. This was not a timed survey. Once the participants finished the surveys they were provided with a debriefing form that explained the nature of the study and invited them to call or email the Investigator for the results of the study when it finished. The participants were verbally told and it was written on the debriefing form that results would be available in May 2013.

Results

The present study was intended to test the idea that marriage is not still relevant in current society and cohabitation is just as acceptable. There are several factors taken into account when

considering the results; such as, the correlation between sex and marriage, religious beliefs and marriage, past home experiences and marriage, as well as age and idea of marriage.

The statistics used for this study were descriptive statistics. The results of sex and marriage were 10 women who favored the idea of marriage while 4 men favored marriage, 1 woman favored cohabitation and no males favored cohabitation, and 2 women were undecided about marriage or cohabitation; while only 1 man was undecided. The results of religious beliefs section of the demographic survey were, 14 participants were religious and believed in marriage over cohabitation, 1 participant who reported religious affiliation believed in cohabitation over marriage, 2 participants who had religious affiliation were undecided, and the participant who was not affiliated with religion was also undecided. Past home experiences and marriage results were 5 participants who were from a home with a divorce still believed in marriage over cohabitation, 1 participant who was from a divorced home believed in cohabitation over marriage, 2 participant from a divorced home were undecided; while 9 participants not from a divorced home reported they believed in marriage, none of the participants from the married homes believed in cohabitation and 2 were undecided between the two. The results from the level of college education and marriage were; 6 freshman believed in marriage over cohabitation and 1 freshman was undecided; 3 sophomores believed in marriage, 1 believed in cohabitation, and 2 were undecided; out of the juniors 4 believed in marriage, none believed in cohabitation over marriage, and 2 were undecided; the senior believed in marriage over cohabitation.

According to the results of the study more of the participants believed in marriage over cohabitation. Out of all the participants 14 favored marriage, 1 favored cohabitation, and 3 participants were undecided. The answers on the marriage survey were scored by a scoring and counting method. Answers that fell in the range of 1-5 were not counted as a positive for the

questions. When scoring questions 6-8 were counted as a positive for that answer. The scores from the survey were then counted up for each participant and then there was a counting method for the demographics part of the study as well. According to the results of the study more of the participants believed in marriage over cohabitation. Out of all the participants 14 favored marriage, 1 favored cohabitation, and 3 participants were undecided.

Discussion

The researcher was unable to obtain an appropriate amount of participants due to the time the study was proposed during the semester. This study needed to include more participants to increase the sample size, because of this there could only be a descriptive statistics done on the results. Another aspect to consider if this study was to be replicated is there should also be more questions that address each of these topics being studied on marriage and cohabitation.

What we have learned so far is the idea of marriage is an ever changing concept throughout history. More studies on how these changes affect the society as a whole, as well as how these changes make sense at the time they happen in society is imperative to understanding the mechanisms that play a role in our social norms concerning marriage.

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Appendix A
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 School of Education
 209 S. Kingshighway
 St. Charles, Missouri 63301

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

“How Relevant is Marriage in Today’s Society?”

Principal Investigator _____ Stacey Harris _____
 Telephone: 314-630-2023 E-mail: seh106@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Participant _____ Contact info

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Stacey Harris under the guidance of Dr. Nohara-LeClair. The purpose of this research is to assess the validity of marriage.

2. a) Your participation will involve

A demographic survey and a survey that best gauges how strongly you agree to statements asked regarding marriage and cohabitation; you will be asked to circle a number 1-8 (one being not at all agree and 8 being agree completely), as well as a demographic survey.

b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be *15 minutes*.

Approximately [100] participants will be involved in this research. Participants are recruited through the LPP.

3. There may be certain risks or discomforts associated with this research. They include:

Psychological distress due to past experiences or memories of divorce in families in which you lived in or relationships you are currently in or ended.

4. Your participation will contribute to the knowledge about the relevancies of marriage in current society and may help society make adjustments to our current institution and views of marriage.

5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location.
7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, (Stacey Harris) or the Supervising Faculty, (Dr.Nohara Le-Clair in Young Hall room 407A). You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at 636-949-4846.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

 Participant's Signature

 Date

 Participant's Printed Name

 Signature of Principal Investigator

 Date

 Investigator Printed Name

Appendix B
Demographic Survey

Subject ID # _____

1) Gender Male

Female

2) Age _____

3) Marital Status:

Single Divorced Married Separated Other

4) What is your grade level?

Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

5) Do you come from a home with a divorce or separation? (Immediate family only)

Yes No

6) What religious affiliation are you (if none, write none)?

Appendix C Survey

You are able to skip any questions and/or withdraw at any time during the study.

Student ID# _____

- 1) I believe marriage (*a legal agreement between two people with a marriage license and a priest/court house to form a union*) is good for society.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8

Not at all
agree

agree completely

- 2) Cohabitation (*the state or condition of living together as husband and wife without being married*) is just as good as marriage.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8

Not at all
agree

agree completely

- 3) Marriage makes a bond stronger.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8

Not at all
agree

agree completely

4) Marriage is just a piece of paper.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8

Not at all
agree completely
agree

5) Marriage is an outdated bond between two people.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8

Not at all
agree completely
agree

6) Marriage is tough...but worth the work.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8

Not at all
agree completely
agree

7) Marriage makes a family stronger. (*a family is a situational circumstance that involves two or more people*)

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8

Not at all
agree completely
agree

8) Marriage was created as a contract between families for money and social purposes.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8

Not at all agree completely

agree

9) Marriage was created for love between two people.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8

Not at all agree completely

agree

10) Marriage puts a strain on relationships.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8

Not at all agree completely

agree

Appendix D

Debriefing Document

Study Title: How Relevant is Marriage in Today's Society?

About this Study:

This study was to see how people feel about marriage in today's society. In this study you were asked to fill out a demographic survey, consent form and fill out the study survey questions about marriage and cohabitation. You were asked how much you agree with each statement on a scale from one to eight. One being: do not agree at all; and eight being: agree completely. With the survey questions I am looking to see how people view the institution of marriage today. I am seeking this information about marriage and cohabitation to see if there should be new laws that would accommodate current beliefs about marriage, if they differ from our conventional beliefs.

If you would like to know the results of this study you are more than welcome to contact the number or the email address listed under experimenters at the bottom of the page. Please be informed that the study will not be completed until the end of May 2013.

If you have questions, contact the experimenters.

Experimenter: Stacey Harris

Contact Information: 314-630-2023 seh106@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Thank you for your participation!