

**The Extent of the Retreat from Marriage on a College Campus:
A Quantitative Analysis of Student Perspectives on Marriage**

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THE EXTENT OF THE RETREAT FROM MARRIAGE ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS:
A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON MARRIAGE

While the retreat from marriage has been studied many times as a sociological phenomenon, the college demographic has not been isolated as an important population of study for research on marriage. Therefore this study concerns itself with this under-examined population, examining the extent to which the retreat from marriage is present on a college campus. Guided by life course theory, this research is conducted through the use of a quantitative survey distributed to current undergraduate students at a small, Catholic liberal arts college in order to understand student perspectives of marriage. The survey is finding that the majority of students do want to get married in the future, but the preferences guiding each individual's marriage decisions vary due to the complexity of unique personal experience. The results of this study suggest that the extent of a complete *retreat* from marriage on a college campus is actually very small. Rather, there is evidence that the overlap of various personal and institutional influences supports delays in marriage among students.

The meaning of marriage as an institution has greatly shifted over time, creating the phenomenon known as the retreat from marriage. To further examine sentiments of marriage, this paper will study and discuss the extent to which the retreat from marriage is present on a college campus. From the mid-20th century and into the 21st century, there has been a type of moral panic over declining marriage rates. Because of this, sociological research and theory address the phenomenon frequently, but most of the time current college enrollment is not isolated as an important factor in regards to attitudes about marriage. Rather, most studies analyze completed educational attainment as a spectrum, such as Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson (2018) reviewing PSID survey data to examine the influence of educational levels on marriage. Similarly, Sassler and Schoen (1999) use data from the NSFH to examine respondents aged 19 and older, but current college attendance was similarly not isolated as an important variable among those respondents. The discussion on the retreat from marriage typically focuses on those who have surpassed the typical age for marrying, and college students are—oppositely—the “normal” age for marrying (or thereabouts are). Recent research shows the median age at first marriage has increased significantly. In 1950, the median age at first marriage for men was about 22-23, and women were aged about 20-21. However, in 2024, the median ages for first marriage were 30 for men and 28-29 for women (United States Census Bureau 2024). Because college students are within the demographic of the “traditional age” at first marriage (as per 1950), there is an interest in exploring the perspectives on marriage as seen on a college campus. College students maintain a very different set of responsibilities as compared to non-student adults, so their perspectives could offer important insight into how younger generations evaluate marriage. Additionally, it must

be noted that this study is being conducted at a small, Catholic liberal arts college, which might produce particularly interesting results due to the school's religious identity.

Overall, the retreat from marriage is worthy of study because it has been less studied over time. As the median age of first marriage continues to rise (United States Census Bureau 2024), the retreat from marriage is more concretely supported, dissuading continued research. Again, studies such as Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson's (2018) often include analysis of panel survey results, which offer data on many ages and educational backgrounds. Therefore, college students as an isolated population remain understudied. Many social factors influence the retreat from marriage, such as increased economic pressures or increased rates of cohabitation (for example, see Smock 2004; Cherlin 2004; and Fry and Parker 2021). However, factors such as these are less relevant and applicable to college students who are more likely to live in dormitories or with platonic roommates. Therefore, the "college perspective" on marriage is less likely to exist in previous studies. Because the retreat from marriage describes those who are marrying "late" in life or not marrying at all, college-aged individuals are usually left to be underrepresented in research. Using Elder's (1994) life course theory and a quantitative survey, this research explores and analyzes students' perspectives, expectations, and experiences with marriage. Through this method, this study will ultimately examine the extent to which the retreat from marriage exists on a college campus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The retreat from marriage is marked by several social indicators, but some of the most prevalent include cohabitation and economic factors. In the first place, the retreat

from marriage has involved a fall in the proportion of men and women who ever marry in their lifetime; overall, lifetime non-marriage has increased. From just 1990 to 2019, the percentage of American adults living without a spouse or partner rose from 29% to 38% (Fry and Parker 2021). Similarly, 2021 saw a record high of 40-year-olds in the United States who had never been married at 25% (Fry 2023). Among this 25%, 40-year-old men are more likely to have never been married than 40-year-old women (Fry 2023). In addition to Americans marrying later (if at all), previous research has seen a pattern of pronounced divides in the entry into marriage through various social factors, such as race and class (Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2018). These preliminary patterns of the retreat from marriage already support the need for research on the college demographic because it would offer more specific conclusions. While existing findings do consider various social forces in the retreat from marriage, they are less specific in studying age as a demographic.

While the retreat from marriage has largely been identified as a result of the weakening of the social norms defining people's behaviors in social institutions (Cherlin 2004), there are still many other contributing factors to the delay in American marriage. Other important indicators of the retreat from marriage include declining fertility; increasing age at marriage; high levels of marital disruption; the ongoing separation between marriage and childbearing; and growth of nonmarital cohabitation (Smock 2004). Additionally, some of the most significant factors influencing marital trajectories since 1980 include declining mortality, narrowing sex differences in mortality, more educational assortative mating, and educational expansion (Hendi 2019). All of these indicators reflect marriage to be both a shifting value and tradition in American society

and culture. But, there is also the implication that structural factors are also limiting the possibility of marriage, including a less-affordable economy and a lack of suitable partners (Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2018; Schoen and Cheng 2006).

Theorizing the Retreat from Marriage

Amato (2004) offers two primary theoretical perspectives on declining marriage in American society—marital decline perspective and marital resilience perspective. Marital decline perspective understands American culture to be one which is increasingly individualistic. Because of this, the pursuit of personal happiness has become increasingly valued, eroding traditional institutions such as marriage. Therefore, marital decline perspective supposes marital commitment to last only as long as people are happy in their marriages (Amato 2004). This decline perspective thus emphasizes institutional marriage and how marriage meets the needs of society. Amato (2004) explains that through the lens of marital decline perspective, marriage is seen as beneficial to society in that it supports commitment. If there is a dwindling supply of well-functioning marriages, it will become more difficult to maintain social order (an important need of society) when members of society act in their own self-interests. As an institution, marriage is argued from this perspective to be something that teaches society what it means to have obligations and commitments, which would therefore be supportive of positive social behavior.

Marital resilience perspective understands (problematic) marriages to endure because divorce is time-consuming, expensive, and stigmatized (Amato 2004). From this perspective, divorce is seen as an opportunity for a second chance at happiness. With this opportunity in mind, the resilience perspective emphasizes individual rights and

enhanced freedom to be valued in egalitarian relationships (Amato 2004). Both of these perspectives offer significant insight into why marriage has declined in the United States—marriage is only successful as long as people are happy, and marriage is not successful unless individuals are rightfully recognized in their rights and freedoms. However, while these perspectives are important, they do not consider the experiences of those who are not yet married or are about to marry. Both marital decline and marital resilience largely operate under assumptions of individuals having previous relationships and marital experiences, which reiterates the potential benefits from studying a younger—and largely unmarried—demographic.

Related to these perspectives on the decline in marriage, previous research highlights important transitions of marriage over time in the United States. First and foremost, American marriage was seen as an institution, but during the 1950s, this institutional identity began to shift into what is known as companionate marriage (Cherlin 2004). Companionate marriage emphasizes emotional satisfaction and romantic love within a marital bond; through this view, marriages are meant to be bonds of sentiment (Cherlin 2004). Marital resilience relates to this companionate marriage in that they both hold happiness as a primary importance within marriage. Yet, companionate marriage does not isolate the importance of the individual. Instead, this is seen in the next social shift of marriage. Companionate marriage transitioned into individualized marriage in the 1960s and 1970s, now emphasizing how each person in a marriage should be a fulfilled, independent individual (Cherlin 2004). In addition to recognition of each person in the relationship, individualized marriage puts significant importance on marriage roles being

flexible and negotiable, prioritizing communication and openness when confronting marital problems (Cherlin 2004).

Another theory on marriage trajectory is found in Hendi's (2019) research on assortative mating based on age and education. From 1960-2010, the gender gap in educational attainment decreased, allowing spouses to become more similar in education and age (Hendi 2019). Because of this, an increase in assortative mating may be linked to an increase in the duration of first marriage (Hendi 2019). While marriage has shifted into a more individualistic institution, maintaining independence is seen as critical. Therefore, those engaging in the marriage market are likely to be searching for a partner who has a similar background where these values of independence and individualism can be maintained by both partners. While Hendi (2019) highlights the potential importance of assortative mating, there remains a gap in the understanding of how this concept may vary from generation to generation. While it has been supported that those with similar backgrounds and values may have a more successful marriage, there is still a need to understand how the college demographic—who are on the brink of making marital decisions—values similarity in marriage. Even more, similarity alone is often not enough to convince individuals to get married. So, assortative mating may not be able to combat all of the other factors influencing the delay and rejection of marriage in the United States.

All of these theories and perspectives explain marriage to be an institution which has changed and shifted over time. Particularly, these theories highlight how marriage has become much more individualized in the sense that the happiness and satisfaction of both partners is prioritized over general marital success and similarity. Therefore, all of these

perspectives acknowledge the ways in which individualized culture has contributed to the decline of marriage in the United States, but again, the focus is primarily on those who have already experienced marriage or who have delayed marriage. How might these theories relate to individuals who are young and not yet married?

Economic and Demographic Factors in the Retreat from Marriage

The literature examining the retreat from marriage has largely identified economic status as an important factor in why people are not getting married sooner rather than later. For example, research has shown the retreat from marriage to occur most among those with less than a college education, where the connection between higher education and higher economic status is lacking (Harknett and Kuperberg 2011). The changes and differences between men's and women's paid employment over time has also contributed to the delays in American marriage (Schoen and Cheng 2006; Sassler and Schoen 1999). Furthermore, other demographic factors such as education and race contribute to the delay and rejection of marriage in the United States.

Financial stability has been isolated as an important prerequisite for marriage (Harknett and Kuperberg 2011), and various studies have explored this factor in different ways. For example, men and women have different experiences pertaining to the labor market and their economic successes and failures, and these ultimately influence their decisions and views on marriage. The retreat from marriage can be understood partially from increases in women's paid employment, declines in gender wage differences, greater income inequality between working men, and racial gaps in economic status (Schoen and Cheng 2006). Through the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century, women have seen increased financial independence and success, which decreased

women's dependence on marriage for support (Sassler and Schoen 1999). With this in mind, the assumption would be that women who are financially successful are contributing to the retreat from marriage, but the opposite is actually true. Research has shown financial stability among all genders to be supportive of marriage. Sassler and Schoen (1999) found that both men and women desire a partner with economically attractive traits, meaning marriage is more probable when both partners in a relationship are financially stable. This research demonstrates that full-time work increases the probability of marriage for both men and women. Even so, men who were working full-time were found to be marrying between the ages of 20 and 23, but women working full-time were marrying between the ages of 28 and 31 (Sassler and Schoen 1999). This pattern may be related to the ways in which adherence to traditional gender roles negatively affects the likelihood of marriage for women, but positively affects the odds of marriage for men (Sassler and Schoen 1999). Women working full-time experience an economic independence that increases their likelihood for marriage at older ages, and this may be a reflection of defying traditional gender roles. Therefore, even though financial stability makes marriage more probable for both men and women, there is a gendered discrepancy in the age at which full-time work encourages or delays marriage. Lee and Payne's (2010) research also supports this concept in that men and women thinking about marriage are often searching for positive economic criteria in a potential spouse, such as success and stability.

Education also plays important roles in the economic statuses of marriage. Harknett and Kuperberg (2011) found marriage to be decreasing and nonmarital childbearing and divorce to be increasing especially among those with less than a high

school degree. Therefore, marriage rates tend to vary by level of education because level of education is a predictor of economic status. The retreat from marriage is thus largely based on economic factors in that many Americans feel they are not stable enough to pursue marriage. Because of this, it has been found that marriage rates for varying levels of education would be more similar if economic opportunities were equivalent (Harknett and Kuperberg 2011).

In another example, Choi (2018) examined the relationship between large-scale expansion in higher education and low fertility and marriage rates in South Korea. To do this Choi (2018) compared the changes in the entry into marriage and motherhood among women who became college graduates because of college expansion—increases in college enrollment due to government policies—versus those whose decisions were not impacted by college expansion. This research discusses how the rates of marriage and fertility are likely to decline in two ways. First, college increases human capital for women, so marriage and fertility substantially decrease the longer women stay in higher education (Choi 2018). Second, there are many changes between non-college educated women and college-educated women in marriage and childbearing due to forces such as social and economic factors, education-sensitive ideational changes, and cultural changes (Choi 2018). This second perspective, known as the return effect, highlights how even though education is a significant predictor of marriage for women, additional social factors are always influencing the decision-making of college-aged women. Even more, these factors vary from person to person because of their own unique experiences. While Choi's (2018) research does reflect a marriage study conducted on a college demographic, it cannot be universally applied because it was conducted in South Korea

as a result of government policies creating large-scale expansion in education.

Additionally, this study isolated women as a study sample, negating discussion of how both college-aged men and women might make decisions in regards to marriage.

To discuss age as a demographic influence more specifically, Lehrer and Son (2017) note how there are two opposing ways in which marriage is impacted by age. In the retreat from marriage, some theorize older age to signal maturity and better decision-making in the marriage market (Lehrer and Son 2017). Others theorize older age to create stress—for women especially—that one's biological clock is ticking, leading them to settle for poorer matches (Lehrer and Son 2017). Because the retreat from marriage has seen the age at first marriage increase, Lehrer and Son (2017) analyze how age impacts marital stability, ultimately concluding that as age increases, marital instability decreases. If this conclusion is true, how might it apply to a college demographic? While this study offers some valuable insights into how age impacts marital stability and marital dissolution, it does not offer discussion on how age might influence an individual's perspectives when they might not be actively in the marriage market.

Race influences these economic and educational factors even more. In line with other research, Schoen and Cheng (2006) conclude groups associated with more economic resources (White people and people with more education) are more likely to get married than those with fewer resources (Black people and people with less education). Race also contributes to the retreat from marriage in that incarceration rates negatively correlate to marriage for Black men (Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson 2018). This contribution of incarceration to the retreat from marriage is important in that

men of color are disproportionately incarcerated as compared to White men, therefore making the rates of marriage (by race) systematically unequal. For Black women who would prefer to marry within their own racial group, the availability of suitable partners is significantly impacted by the incarceration of Black men. Referring back to age, research has found marital instability to decrease up to the ages of 30-32 for White women, but only up to ages 24-26 for Black women (Lehrer and Son 2017). Therefore, age and race intersect in a way which might dissuade marriage for minority groups who have experienced more marital dissolution and instability in their communities.

Overall, marriage is tied to economic security, and those with less education and those who are within racial minority groups are less likely to possess this security. Therefore, the retreat from marriage is seen most among people of color and lower socioeconomic statuses. However, the literature also identifies economic security as important to all classes of people considering marriage. Many of those in the middle-class desire financial stability in order to have a “real” wedding and to not have to worry about affording a home or paying off debts after marriage (Smock 2004). So, even though financial situations impact the likelihood of marriage more among lower socioeconomic statuses, this trend can be seen across social classes in the United States. In general, though, weaker economies create more incentive for pursuing education and work opportunities before marriage. Additionally, weaker economies lower the probability of marriage in that individuals are likely to be less confident in their (or their potential partner’s) financial prospects.

Cultural Factors in the Retreat from Marriage

Despite the retreat from marriage increasing in its prevalence in the last few decades, previous research identifies marriage to remain a highly valued aspect of American society (Smock 2004). While the perspective of marriage being essential for a fulfilling life has decreased, 54% of Americans still view marriage as important to a fulfilling life (Barroso 2020). With nearly 30% of Americans viewing marriage as unimportant to a fulfilling life, many instead view a committed romantic relationship as important at 59% for men and 57% for women (Barroso 2020). What is significant about this information is that this higher importance for a committed relationship is not defined by the specificity of a *married* relationship. Rather, Americans have grown more supportive of any kind of marital status for fulfillment so long as the relationship is committed. This research reveals how the influences of factors such as cohabitation and career independence have diminished the “essential” nature of marriage in the United States, even for committed partnerships. Despite the wider assumption of any romantic relationship being important, marriage does continue to be valued and seen as important. Lee and Payne (2010) explore the tensions between the scale of valuing marriage in the United States. First, they find decreased value on marriage to be attributed to the emphasis on the individual, supporting the typical view of declining marriage rates. But, they also argue the retreat from marriage to be a result of too much value and reverence being placed on marriage, making it a difficult status to attain (Lee and Payne 2010). While these findings are important in the discussion of why individuals are fleeing from marriage, they do not succeed in specifically identifying cultural influences on the phenomenon.

Ultimately, cohabitation can be cited as the most influential cultural factor in the retreat from marriage, but same-sex marriage has also made an impact (Cherlin 2004). Because same-sex marriage receives less institutional support than heterosexual marriages, it is often not recognized as a “real” marriage, traditionally leaving a significant proportion of the population unaccounted for in the analysis of declining marriages. Even with the legalization of same-sex marriage, stigma persists, and there remains limited knowledge and research on how same-sex marriage relates to the overall retreat from marriage. For example, Nicolas (2017) argues that the apparent duration of a marriage for a same-sex couple is often skewed because many were married (in their own way) before their marriage was recognized civilly. Because of this many same-sex relationships appear artificially short in endurance when measured by a civil marriage date (Nicolas 2017), which reveals how same-sex relationships are often overlooked or miscalculated when analyzing the declining marriage rates in the United States. On the other hand, Cherlin (2004) identifies cohabitation to largely be seen as an alternative to marriage. As companionate marriage shifted into individualized marriage, many young adults began staying single into their mid-late 20s, with some even completing college and starting careers. This is largely because the new values of individualism resulted in nonmarital childbearing, divorce, and cohabitation becoming more accepted and less stigmatized (Cherlin 2004). As a result, the companionate marriage was overtaken by forms of marriage where husbands and wives both worked outside of the home, and where people now sought personal growth and deeper intimacy in marriage. Overall, Cherlin (2004) argues the deinstitutionalization of marriage to have occurred when companionate marriage was no longer the cultural ideal. With individualized marriage,

many cultural pressures on marriage began to lose authority. Combined with economic pressures to enter into marriage with stability and support, the United States saw its retreat from marriage begin to form.

Application to this Study

The existing literature on the retreat from marriage finds social context to be vital for marriage (Smock 2004). While the literature identifies demographic, structural, and cultural explanations as to why the retreat from marriage exists, it is not very focused on the college demographic. College students may be likely to experience the cultural influences of individualism and weakening values of tradition, but structural causes, such as economic explanations, may vary. On the one hand, the relationship between economic pressures and marriage may be less relevant to students who are currently more focused on completing their education, making marriage a subject of concern for a later time. On the other hand, college students may be more confident about their future incomes due to their higher level of education. This likelihood of financial security could either support or dissuade marriage, depending on students' perspectives on the relationship between financial security and marriage—do students want to be financially stable before they marry, or do they view financial security as reason to not marry? Previous research identifies factors of economic insecurity to be the primary reason for delayed and nonexistent marriages, and these factors potentially hold little influence over the college demographic where having a college degree is more likely to stimulate economic security, creating less of a barrier to marriage. However, the possibility remains for college students to feel economically vulnerable where their identity as students means they cannot yet work full-time in the workforce, which may ultimately influence their

economic considerations to marriage. While college students are privileged in their educational attainment, the majority of them do not have complete independence yet, making the connection between their economic status and other life decisions weaker than those living postsecondary lives. Even more, the existence of student loans may impact marriage decisions because students' economic standing is greatly impacted by the presence and severity of loans.

THEORY

In order to answer the question of to what extent the retreat from marriage is present on a college campus, this study utilizes life course theory. The paradigm of the life course has largely been developed by Elder (1994) who argues that the human life course is shaped not only by individual decisions, but also by social, economic, and historical forces. Life course theory can be summarized through four main themes: the interplay of human lives and historical times, the timing of lives, the linking and interdependence of lives, and human agency. Elder (1994) understands human life courses to be significantly related to the historical contexts in which people live. Meaning, the timing of one's education, marriage, or career decisions plays a role in their life trajectory, and the impact of these forces varies according to the time in which they occur. Even more, social timing highlights how the incidence, duration, and sequence of social roles and relevant expectations in one's life varies by their age (Elder 1994). This reveals how the shifting of age over the life course impacts what one's social roles and expectations are. Additionally, life course theory understands the interdependence of human lives. Since human lives are embedded in social relationships, social regulation and support occur in these relationships. Therefore the misfortunes or opportunities one

has in their life has the likelihood of becoming generational (Elder 1994). Finally, Elder recognizes the role of human agency in the life course where individuals have the capacity to make choices which will influence their life outcomes. However, according to the paradigm, the agency an individual has is limited to their historical, cultural, and economic conditions (Elder 1994). Overall, life course theory addresses the ways in which individual lives are shaped by both human agency and broader social contexts where humans make the best possible choices for themselves according to their conditions.

Because life course theory analyzes the way lives are shaped by individual choices, various contexts, and interconnectedness, it becomes significant to the perspectives of college students. The theory emphasizes the importance of social contexts and historical circumstances, arguing that they have lifelong effects on individuals. Therefore, life course theory is relevant in looking at the perspectives of college students because these individuals have very specific social forces influencing their lives. Economically, these are individuals who have the resources and opportunity to be attending a university. Additionally, the social and historical contexts of the students at a small, Catholic liberal arts college may be influential enough to have resulted in their attending this college specifically. Attending college is a significant life event for many people, and it therefore creates perspectives and views which may differ from those who did not attend a university. The choice to attend college and the forces allowing students to attend college may combine to produce specific or unique views about marriage. At this point in students' lives, educational commitments and opportunities may encourage a delay in marriage. On the other hand, various structural issues may also dissuade college

students from marriage, such as the economy or the relationships of their parents. In summary, life course theory supports this proposed research in that it combines the influences of human agency and structural influence to examine what college students believe of marriage, thus supporting the study of to what extent the retreat from marriage is present on a college campus.

METHODS

In order to explore the extent to which the retreat from marriage is present on a college campus, this research has gathered data through a quantitative survey on a college campus. As the study is guided by life course theory (Elder 1994), a quantitative survey best suits the research in that it creates an opportunity to gather information on what kinds of structural issues impact students' views on marriage. In a survey format, the study has built questions for various kinds of these structural issues (economic status, cultural views, etc.) to be analyzed quantitatively through descriptive and exploratory statistical methods. This approach is similar to previous research on the retreat from marriage. For example, Sassler and Schoen (1999) used quantitative data from the National Survey of Families and Households in order to study never-married adults from an initial survey taken in 1987. Additionally, Schoen and Cheng (2006) analyzed electronic marriage census data from three states, and Schneider, Harknett, and Stimpson (2018) used PSID survey data to examine men's and women's entry into first marriage. These studies all support the use of quantitative data in the analysis of wider social patterns' influences on marriage, and some additionally support the use of survey data. However, this research differs from these previous methods in that it analyzes primary

survey data. Furthermore, this study's survey data is of a special population: college students attending a small, Catholic liberal arts school.

The unit of analysis for this study is current college students, and these students were sampled from a small, Catholic liberal arts college in the Rocky Mountain West. In order to survey these students, the Google Form questionnaire was digitally distributed through the form of email to all current students at the college. The form requires respondents to assert that they are undergraduate students, which then leads them into varied survey questions depending on how respondents answer. Studying the perspectives of current college students on marriage is measured through a variety of variables. These include the economic status and history of the students; the history of marriage in the students' families; the cultural values of the students; and the students' plans for the remainder of their education or beginning of their careers. The survey asks students about these concepts, and, using likert scales, it explores how much students believe these factors to influence their perspectives of marriage and whether they desire to get married in the future.

Because the survey was digitally administered to current college students through their school email, the questionnaire is shorter in length. Without a research team reciting the questionnaire in person, students will have been able to complete the survey in no more than 20 minutes, with the hope of maximizing the response rate. Additionally, because the survey was conducted through Google Forms, the data is organized into an analyzable form automatically, allowing for the study to pull data directly from the responses. However, in order to best analyze the data from this project, the responses from the Google Form were entered into SPSS Statistics software. This research needed a

couple months' time in order to gather enough response data (at minimum 200 responses) for statistical analysis.

The study's research question is answered by analyzing the responses of current college students and how they believe various social structures influence their potential marriage decisions. Variables such as socioeconomic status, religion, and sociocultural histories are analyzed for their impact on college students' decision to marry. This data is ultimately analyzed through descriptive statistics using cross-tabulations and frequency tables, as well as explanatory statistics using measures of association and tests of significance. Using SPSS Statistics for these analyses, the study hopes to determine if these variables truly impact perceptions of marriage and if they contribute to a retreat from marriage among college students.

RESULTS

Survey data has been collected from 362 respondents from a student population of 1,167, resulting in a 31% response rate. 92% of survey respondents report being single and living alone (in terms of living with a romantic partner). Married students are represented in this study at 3.9% of respondents. Also worthy of note is that the majority of respondents are women (73.6%), and the majority of respondents are also White (91.4%), which may offer skewed perspectives within the responses. Additionally, the majority of respondents are between the ages of 18-20 (65.9%), whereas only 30.5% of the respondents were between the ages of 21-25. Finally, only 3.6% of the respondents are over the age of 26. With Catholicism being rooted in the school's identity, it is also consistent that this survey has collected data where respondents report being Catholic at a rate of 46.8% and other denominations of Christianity at a rate of 49.1%.

Students Who Want to Get Married in the Future

Among the respondents who report being unmarried, 88.2% report that they do want to get married in the future. Among those students who do want to get married in the future, 54.3% report wanting to get married between the ages of 25-29, while 41.1% want to get married when they are 24 or younger. Only 4.6% of students answer that they desire to get married over the age of 30.

When a respondent answers “yes” to getting married in the future, the survey then prompts them to rate how likely various factors were to influence their decision. An overwhelming majority of students respond that marrying for love and companionship are very likely to influence their decision to get married in the future (87.1% and 60.3% respectively), but the other factors listed in the survey see more varied responses. For example, more respondents (38.8%) report that they were neutral on whether or not they would get married for economic stability, but 29.9% did report that this could be likely. With such an emphasis on love and companionship in a marriage, only a small percentage of respondents say that they would get married because of social expectations at 11.9%. For those who report that they would get married for social reasons, the survey prompts a qualitative, open-response question asking what social expectations specifically respondents believe they would consider in their marriage decisions. The most common responses for this question include sentiments about the pressure to be economically stable as an adult and in marriage, as well as the social tradition of not having children until one is married. A fair amount of students also respond that they feel the pressure of their particular religious values contributing to their marriage decisions. Even though this open response data describes pressure of religious values, the percentage of students who

desire to get married in the future are more evenly divided in whether they believe religious expectations influence their decisions. 44.9% of students report that this was either very unlikely or unlikely, but 36.4% report that this was either very likely or likely. 18.7% of respondents are neutral in viewing religious expectation as an important influence.

Even with divided perspectives on religion's influence on marriage decisions, the majority of students wanting to get married in the future respond that marrying to have children is likely to impact their decision (72.5%). Finally, this portion of the survey asks respondents how the relationship between their own parental figures might influence their decision to marry in the future. 51.1% of students say they would want to get married to have a relationship like their parents' relationship, and 34.4% say they would want to get married to have a relationship different from their parents'.

Additionally, students reporting that they want to get married in the future were asked if they feel like they need to reach certain achievements before they get married. 67.1% of students report that they do feel as if they need to reach certain achievements, and 20.39% say that they do not feel as if they need to reach certain achievements. Among those who feel as if they do need to reach certain achievements before marriage, the most common are as follows: being in an unmarried relationship for a certain period of time (59%); having an established career (63%); approval of the relationship by family and friends (66%); having a stable income (73.13%); and reaching a certain educational attainment (74%). Particularly interesting among the list of potential desired achievements is the need to live with a partner for a particular amount of time before getting married. For this variable, the majority response is "no" at 62%. Also of note,

many students did not report reaching a certain age as a necessary milestone for marriage (only 25.5% see this as an important factor in the marriage decision).

Statistical Analysis: Getting Married in the Future

In order to understand what causes students to want to get married in the future, bivariate analyses were run to investigate potential relationships among several variables. First, the relationship between a student wanting to get married based on their parents' marital status was analyzed. This analysis reveals that students desire to get married regardless of their parents' marital status, and this is supported by insignificant chi square values (see row 1 in Figure 1). Rather it could be inferred that college students want to get married in order to be specifically similar or different from the parental figures in their lives. Additionally, the influence of religion on a student's desire to get married in the future was isolated for analysis (see row 2 in Figure 1). The crosstab between religion and whether a student wants to get married in the future indicates that there is no significant relationship between a student's religion and their desire to get married. Without a strong correlation, it might be inferred that students' religious values impact the values within an established marriage more than they impact the initial desire to get married.

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Lambda/Gamma Value	Chi Square Value
Does the respondent want to get married in the future	Marital status between respondents primary parental figures	.000	.122
Does the respondent want to get married in the future	Respondent's religious identity	.000	.964
Does the respondent feel as if they need to reach certain achievements before marriage	Respondent's age	.036 [^]	.184
At what age would the respondent ideally like to get married	Does the respondent feel as if they need to reach certain achievements before marriage	-.279 ^{^^}	.007 ^{**}
How has/had the respondent's marriage met their expectations	Duration of respondent's marriage	-.727 ^{^^}	.269
How has/had the respondent's marriage met their expectations	At what age did the respondent get married	.059 [^]	.019 [*]

Figure 1: Summary of various crosstabulations between variables

[^] moderate or ^{^^} strong association between variables

^{*} significant at the <.05 level

^{**} significant at the <.005 level

Statistical Analysis: Achievements Before Marriage

In order to understand why students might feel as if they need to reach certain achievements before marriage, a crosstabulation was run with respondent age as the independent variable and whether the student feels as if they need to reach certain achievements before marriage as the dependent variable (see row 3 in Figure 1). The

results of this procedure show that students aged 19 and 22 are most likely to feel as if they need to reach certain achievements before marriage. However, it is important to note that there is a higher count of respondents aged 19 as compared to those aged 22, which would slightly skew comparability between the percentages (19% versus 6%). With a gamma value of .036, it can be stated that there is evidence of a moderate positive correlation between students' age and whether they feel as if they need to reach certain achievements before marriage, but a chi square value of .184 does not support the statistical significance of this relationship.

Additionally, the relationship between the age at which respondents want to get married and whether or not they believe they need to reach certain achievements first was more closely analyzed. From this crosstab, it is found that students who do not feel as if they need to reach certain achievements before marriage are more likely to want to get married at a younger age. Those who do feel as if they need to reach certain achievements are more likely to want to get married later in life, but the majority of those students still want to get married relatively young at the 25-29 range. Referring to row 4 in Figure 1, the gamma value for feeling the need to reach certain achievements and the ideal age at marriage suggests a moderate negative correlation: the belief in needing to reach certain achievements before marriage results in a desire to get married at an older age. The chi square value for this analysis also suggests that the relationship between wanting to reach certain achievements and ideal age at marriage is significant.

Students Who Do Not Want to Get Married in the Future

Students report not wanting to get married in the future at a rate of 1.7%. After answering "no" to the question of getting married in the future, respondents were directed

to a series of questions which had them rank various factors on how they influence their decision to marry. Among students who do not want to get married in the future, 50% answer that it is in part because they do not see marriage as necessary for happiness. 50% of students who do not want to get married also note that they do not feel pressure from their families to get married, and 33.3% note that they do not feel social pressure to get married.

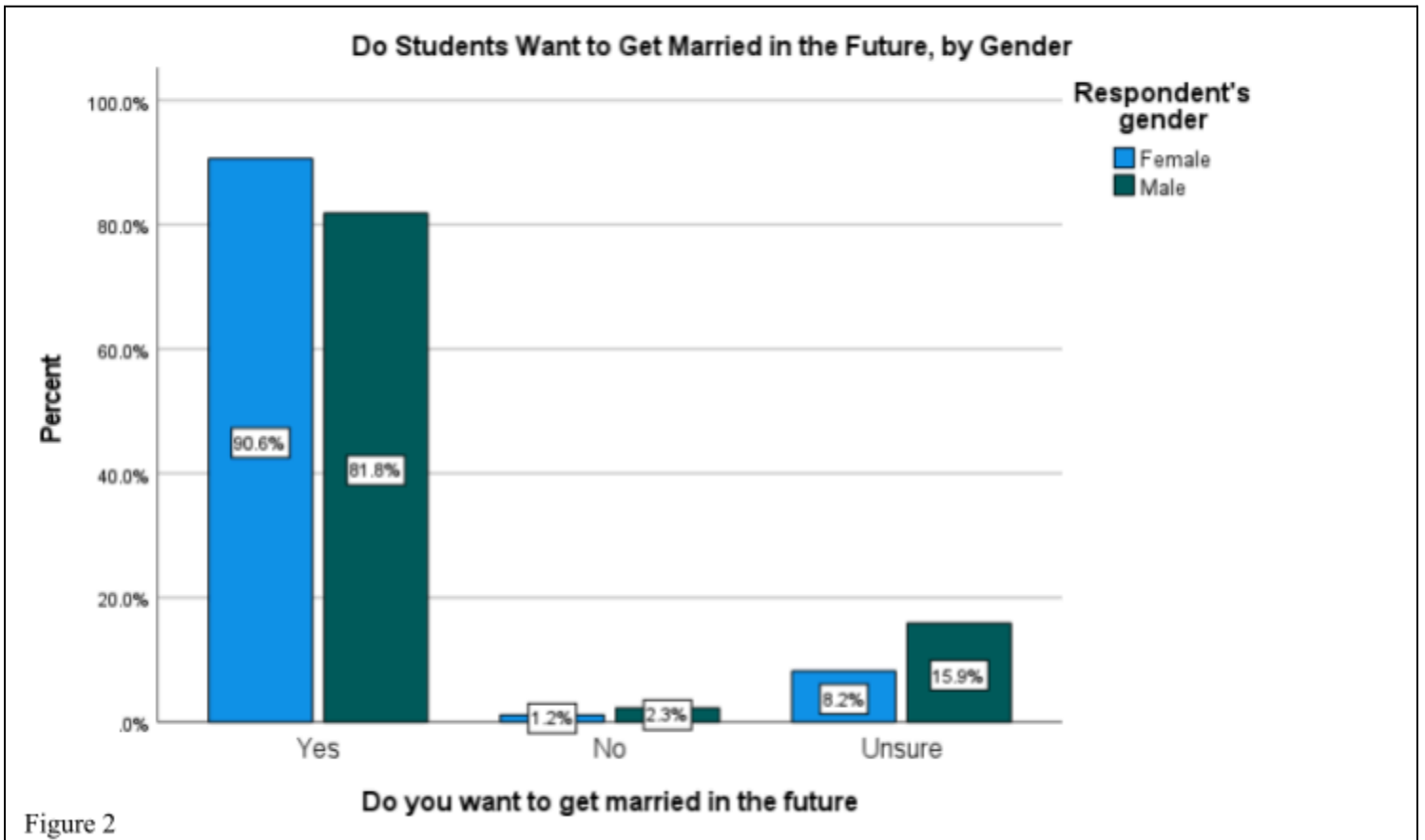
Within the percentage of those who do not wish to get married, a relatively consistent rate of about 16% also do not view marriage as: necessary for long-term commitment; necessary for economic stability; necessary for having a family; and necessary for living with a partner. Because the percentage of students who do not want to get married in the future is so small, this study is ultimately limited in how well it is able to examine the influences on this particular belief in marriage and their likelihood of being represented in the larger student population

Students Who Are Unsure if They Want to Get Married in the Future

Additionally, 10.1% of students report being unsure if they want to get married in the future. Within this category of respondents, male students answer more frequently that they are unsure if they want to get married in the future than female students (15.9% versus 8.2%).

Because it would be difficult to quantitatively evaluate why college students are unsure if they want to get married, the survey prompted these students to explain their reasons in an open-response format. One of the most common responses within this category is discernment of priesthood, which would help to explain the gendered variation in students being unsure if they want to get married in the future. Additionally,

there is a large number of students who responded that they are unsure if they want to get married because they are unsure if there is “somebody out there.” The final common response to this open-ended question is students expressing fears or hesitation about marriage because of the risk of divorce. Less common influences on students being unsure if they want to get married in the future include: enjoyment of being alone; the state of current (dating) culture; and stigma around lesbian marriage.



Students Who are Already Married

The data of this survey finds that 3.9% of students at the college are already married. 66.7% of these students have been married for 0-2 years, and the other 33.3% have been married for 5+ years. If respondents answered that they were already married, the survey then prompted them to select which factors influenced their decision to get

married. 93.3% answer that they got married for love, followed by 73.3% getting married for companionship. Fewer of these respondents believe they were getting married for social and religious expectations (about 13%), and nearly 25% got married both to have children and for economic stability. In an open-ended question about social expectations, several respondents note how they thought their marriage actually goes *against* social standards in that they got married young and before graduating college. An interesting pattern discovered in the analysis of these influences is that of the students who are already married, a higher percentage got married to have a relationship different from their parents (33.3%) than those who wanted a relationship like their parents (20%).

Following the reasons for marriage, respondents were then asked to rank how their marriage has met their expectations. Only one student says that their marriage has not met their expectations at all, and the rest say their marriages have met most (13.3%) or all (80%) of their expectations. In order to better understand these responses, an open-response question was provided for students to elaborate on their answer. Common responses are that students view their marriage as a partnership where they do things with their spouse as a team, and the majority of married students view their marriage as generally good and as a source of stability.

Statistical Analysis

In terms of analyzing the perspectives of marriage from college students who are already married, a crosstab between the duration of marriage and the meeting of expectations was produced (see row 5 in Figure 1). From this analysis, it can be concluded that the longer a respondent has been married, the less their marriage has met their expectations. While this relationship is supported by the table, it is necessary to note

the data came from a small number of subjects, which means the relationship could vary if analyzed in a larger sample. Even so, this dataset suggests a strong negative relationship between marriage duration and marriage expectations (gamma $-.727$), but the chi square value (.269) does not suggest statistical significance.

Additionally, marriage expectations were analyzed with the age at which students got married. For these students, the meeting of their marriage to their expectations does vary among the ages in which they all got married. Therefore, it is difficult from this measurement alone to determine if there is a relationship. Upon further analysis, a gamma of $.059$ and chi square of $.019$ suggest a strong positive—and statistically significant—relationship between age at marriage and how the marriage has met the respondent's expectations (see row 6 in Figure 1). Again this analysis was done with a small sample of data (15 respondents), which means it might not produce the same results if done with a larger sample of married students. With such a small sample size and a quantitative method, it is therefore more difficult to discuss what this relationship between age at marriage and the meeting of marital expectations might mean. With a sample of younger people, those who got married at an “older age” were really getting married between the ages of 21-23, as compared to younger college students aged 18-20. Even with this limitation, the positive relationship between age at marriage and how the marriage has met the respondent's expectations could imply that getting married at an older age gives students more time to know their preferences and expectations when making marriage decisions.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the data collected from this study does not display any strong sentiments against marriage among college students from this population. This is seen in the fact that 88.2% of single students surveyed respond that they would indeed like to get married in the future. So, in terms of completely *retreating* from marriage, this study reveals that the extent to which the retreat from marriage exists on a college campus is in fact very small. However, there are many interacting factors influencing these students' perceptions of marriage—as well as their decision to get married—which might influence both varied delays in marriage and early marriages among college students.

Students Who Want to Get Married in the Future

Among the 88% of students who want to get married in the future, their reasons and timing for marriage represent a wide variety of perspectives. For example, the majority of these students have responded with a desire to get married between the ages of 25-29, which would mean most of these students are hoping to marry after they are done with their education. So, while marriage is something valued amongst this subset of the research sample, the data reflects how nuanced social experiences and perspectives are guiding when and how students want to get married.

According to life course theory (Elder 1994), people make decisions from their own agency, but they also make decisions based on their conditions, which are determined by the social, economic, and historical circumstances they experience. In this study, the data shows that 67.1% of students who want to get married in the future believe they need to reach certain achievements before they do so. The ability for students to reach perceived achievements before marriage will vary according to each individual's social and economic experiences, and the historical experiences of each individual

influence how they perceive these achievements and when they perceive it possible to reach these achievements. Many respondents identify reaching a certain educational attainment as something they believe necessary to achieve for marriage. As students at a private liberal arts college, the educational attainment they wish to reach is likely different from other people their age living their lives elsewhere. Additionally, having an established career and a stable income are commonly identified as achievements to reach before marriage. Again, as college students, the standards these individuals might have for a career and income would vary considerably as compared to other similar-aged people who might not have attended college. Therefore, this research shows that while the retreat from marriage is not widely present on this private college campus, structural forces are indeed present, potentially contributing to delays in marriage rather than a complete retreat.

Because life course theory emphasizes the importance of agency in the life decisions people make, it is also important to discuss the variation in personal experiences amongst students who desire to get married. While structural forces such as education and economic status are influencing college student perceptions on marriage, each student also has a unique perception of what a marriage *is* based on their more micro-level experiences. A wide majority of students respond that it is very likely for them to get married for both love and companionship, because the evolution of marriage into a companionate and individualized institution (Cherlin 2004) understands these to be widely accepted standards of marriage in recent years. However, other factors of marriage are more varied in their ranking amongst respondents. Marrying for social and religious expectations are much more evenly represented among students because each individual

possesses different religious beliefs systems, and the intersection of one's various social identities (race, gender, sexuality, etc.) will lead them to perceive different social expectations potentially influencing their future marriages. For students, the experience of seeing the marriage of one's primary parental figures also has an impact on the decision to get married in the future. A considerable proportion of students want to get married to have a relationship both like and unlike their parents' relationships, which reflects how micro-level experiences also have a considerable influence on the decision to get married. Even though a large percentage of college students responded with a desire to get married, how and when they get married will vary according to what they do and do not want to emulate from their personal histories.

Students Who are Unsure or Who Do Not Want to Get Married in the Future

While representing a very small percentage of college students surveyed, those who do not wish to get married in the future represent Elder's (1994) emphasis on human agency in life decisions. The majority of those who do not wish to get married in the future respond that they do not see marriage as necessary for happiness, and that they do not feel pressure to get married. In terms of happiness, these perspectives could be a reflection of the more individualized nature of contemporary society. With divorce being more common and singleness being less stigmatized, these students are able to make the decision not to marry based on social conditions which support their perspectives. In this way, the retreat from marriage—in the truest sense—is represented very minimally on a college campus.

Students who are unsure if they want to get married in the future are much more represented in the study's data, as compared to students who do not want to get married

in the future. Particularly of note is that of those who are unsure if they want to get married, the majority are male students. These male students display a common trend of discerning the priesthood. Therefore, the influences on decision-making in the lifecourse are strongly represented by this group. In one way, religion has very different meanings to different groups of people, and it therefore can have very little or very much influence on the decisions people make. That 15% of male college students say they are unsure if they want to get married, and for most of that percentage to say they are discerning priesthood, reflects the socio-cultural environment in which they live. At a private, Catholic college, the influence of religion is likely to be much stronger than at a public university. Following life course theory, the decisions students make are partially dependent on the conditions in which they live. Therefore, these students might be discerning priesthood at a higher level because they are attending a Catholic college.

Other students who are unsure about marriage respond with concerns over the risk of divorce and that there “isn’t somebody out there” for them. Again, the identity of the college being partially rooted in religion might contribute to the fears of divorce. On the other hand, students might be hesitant of marriage if they have experienced divorce between parental figures, reflecting the intersection of current conditions and historical experiences in the process of making life decisions. One student presents uncertainty for marriage due to the stigma of lesbian marriage. In contemporary society, homosexual marriage is both legal and generally tolerated, so the stigma perceived by this student could be more closely related to the college environment in which they live. At a private, Catholic school in a more rural state, the student might have a different understanding of how their potential marriage would be received by others in the social realm. Overall, the

data for students unsure about marriage can help explain the overlap of various sociocultural factors which present possibilities for delays in marriage rather than a widespread retreat from marriage.

Students Who are Already Married

In general, the presence of married students on a college campus represents a lesser presence of the retreat from marriage. When answering questions about their marriage, many of these students respond with the belief that their marriage goes against social expectations in that they got married young and before graduating college. Therefore, the presence of married students on a small liberal arts campus reflects potential advantages amongst students. Life course theory highlights how social and economic forces influence decisions, and if students are able to get married while attending a private college, they might have more socioeconomic capital than other students their age. However, nearly 25% of married students identify economic stability as a reason for getting married, so it could also be possible that their marriage operates as an economic strategy to successfully attend college in addition to being a loving companionate relationship. Additionally, the perception that their marriages go against social expectations could also be related to the school's religious identity where the students' faith might support getting married young. This might be supported by the 25% of married students who list having children as one of the reasons they chose to get married.

Final Student Thoughts on Marriage

The final question presented to all students who took the survey is an open-ended question asking for additional thoughts on the subject of marriage. Two of the most

common responses reflect sentiments that marriage is something to be taken seriously, and that marriage is less traditional or less valued in contemporary society. These sentiments might interact in that if students believe marriage to be less valued, they might wait to marry until they perceive themselves as stable and capable enough to take it seriously. This would then again support the presence of delays in marriage on a college campus. Another common response presented in the open-response question is that marriage should be rooted in God. This would reflect the influence of students attending a Catholic school where they either conform to the school's culture, or they are attending this school in particular to engage with their religious beliefs. Either way, this sentiment reflects Elder's belief that humans make the best possible decisions for themselves based on the conditions in which they live. Many students also present a fear of divorce and a dislike for the current dating culture, which would both contribute to possible delays in marriage among college students.

CONCLUSION

Even though the retreat from marriage has been studied many times in recent decades, the college demographic is often overlooked as the primary population of study. The retreat from marriage is impacted by various overlapping factors. Studying the college demographic creates an opportunity to look at more specific ways these factors interact to impact perceptions of marriage. Previous research identifies marriage to be reliant on socioeconomic stability where having a stable income and increased access to resources is positively correlated to the likelihood of marriage. Therefore, minority groups are often less likely to get married due to lack of resources. Additionally, previous studies note how the increased sense of individualism in American society has

contributed to the retreat from marriage where people prioritize personal happiness over traditional institutions. With all of these factors in mind, college students' perspectives on marriage still remain understudied.

Through the use of a quantitative survey, this study finds that the majority of college students do want to get married in the future, but there are several personal and institutional influences which support delays in marriage among students. While this study is able to make this conclusion, the quantitative method is limited in offering more nuanced and rich information to more firmly describe *why* students possess the perceptions identified in the survey results. Therefore, a qualitative study may benefit future research on student perceptions of marriage in order to better understand why college students view marriage in the ways they do. If another quantitative study were to be performed, a comparison between data from a small, private college and data from a large, public university may also be beneficial. Through such a comparison, there would be a better understanding of how the conditions in which students live impact the ways in which they perceive marriage.

Overall, this study did gather valuable information to better understand the extent of the retreat from marriage on a college campus. While *delays* in marriage are more likely to exist than a complete *retreat*, there are still many overlapping influences impacting how students view marriage. Many of the students who wish to get married in the future believe they need to reach certain achievements first, and their perception of when and how to reach these achievements are influenced by the resources available to them for attending a private college. The school's Catholic identity is also significant in which students' personal experiences and the school's structural influences combine to

create varied marriage decisions. Elder (1994) argues the human life course to be impacted by both individual agency as well as broader social influences, and this study reflects that. Delays in marriage have been found due to the unique opportunities and resources available to college students as compared to those who do not pursue post-secondary education. Additionally, every student has a different history, which impacts how they view marriage in the first place, often resulting in students wanting to wait for certain milestones or values. Ultimately, this study has offered a new contribution to the literature and beneficial information in understanding the marriage perceptions and decisions of college students, but further research may remain necessary to generate more specific and generalizable conclusions about why students have certain marriage perceptions, as well as how those might vary across different post-secondary institutions. As a contribution to the retreat from marriage, though, this research has successfully found that delays in marriage may indeed be more common on college campuses than complete retreats.

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