

The Meaning of Marriage Matters, Part 1: Capstones vs. Cornerstones: Diverging Blueprints for Modern Marriage¹

For many, marriage is changing from a cornerstone to a capstone of young adult life. Rather than building an adult life on a foundation of marital commitment, many young adults postpone marriage until they have accomplished a set of tasks and achieved certain personal marks of success.

A recent national survey of Millennials (ages 18–33) found widespread acceptance of a capstone approach to marriage.² Between 70%–80% agreed that later marriage means that both people are more mature, more likely to be good spouses, allows people to achieve personal goals so that they will have no regrets after getting married, and provides more time to get personal finances in order.

Is the capstone approach to marriage a new model best suited to a new time, a sensible evolution of the way we do relationships and family now to fit a new century? Or is it a revolution in the meaning of marriage, one that impacts its capacity to benefit bless individuals and society? While a capstone model of marriage may work for some, we also see worrisome cracks in this new cement. Specifically, we see three significant engineering flaws in a capstone model of marriage:

- (a) It can lead to ineffective, even paradoxical preparation for marriage that may actually diminish eventual marital happiness;
- (b) It elevates the risk of re-sequencing family formation, putting parenting before marriage, thus placing children's well-being at greater risk; and

- (c) It potentially places marriage beyond the perceived reach of many young people.

Ready or Not?

A capstone model of marriage is supposed to lead to establishing a stronger foundation on which to build a marital relationship. But we see several potential relationship engineering problems in how the capstone model may lead to ineffective preparation for marriage:

- (a) Difficulties switching from an individualistic focus to a couple focus;
- (b) Casting marriage as a transition of loss; and
- (c) Creating complex romantic relationship histories that teach the wrong lessons.

First, the capstone model, with its hallmark of delayed marriage, creates a longer period of individualistic focus in young adulthood that may be challenging to flip to a relationship-centered, couple focus at marriage. If marriage requires more of a “we-identity” than an “I-identity,” how straightforward is the transition to marriage and how easy is it to blend two different lifestyles together?

Finding the compatible partner to match one's strong lifestyle preferences can be a challenge, like fitting complex jigsaw puzzle pieces together. Megan McArdle writes in *Newsweek*, “when you've spent decades building a life, it can be hard to find someone who fits with all the choices you've already made about where to live, what hobbies and interests you will pursue,

what sort of hours you will work, and so forth.”³ And maybe those more-settled selves are averse to the personal remodeling that seems to be an inevitable part of building a functional marriage.

Of course, one argument for giving young people more time to focus on themselves is that they will get the typical young adult angst and adventure out of their system, so that they are ready for the responsibilities of marriage. Yet this logic has some rough edges to it, too. For one thing, it can make marriage look as much like a transition of loss as a transition of gain; marriage is the end of youthful fun rather than the beginning of a grand adult adventure. Viewing marriage as a net loss might make divorce seem more like a net gain when couples experience hard times. Moreover, some research suggests that extensive premarital sexual experience, instead of satiating desire for post-marital sexual adventure, is a risk factor for future infidelity.

A third potential problem with a capstone approach to marital preparation comes from the relationship history that accumulates over a prolonged period of single young adult years. Not surprisingly, a longer period of time before marriage often comes with an eventful history of romantic and sexual relationships.⁴ On the one hand, this would seem to present a valuable love lab in which to learn and practice needed intimate relationship skills. But what may seem like a process for gaining valuable relationship experience may be more akin to painting a room than remodeling a home. What is being learned in the series of romantic relationships common to the young adult years that precede marriage is usually not enough to help couples create a strong marriage. Despite its outward similarities of sharing a bed and possibly a residence, full

commitment to the future transforms a relationship. A non–full-commitment relationship is not much like a full-commitment marriage, especially for men.⁵ To date, no study has found premarital cohabitation to reduce the risk of divorce. Research has yet to confirm that pre-engagement cohabitation without a full commitment to a future together is an effective marriage-preparation strategy. In fact, it appears to be a risk factor for future marital problems.⁶

We know there is a broad belief in our society that marrying young puts you at high risk for divorce. This isn’t one of those obtuse social science statistics that never goes beyond the pages of stuffy academic journals. It has sunk deeply into our cultural knowledge and practice. This belief has fed a widespread reluctance to consider marrying before the late 20s.

But this risk comes primarily from those who marry before the age of 21, not from marriage among 21–25 year olds. Moreover, this correlation—observed in the past—may be disappearing with contemporary couples.⁷ We suspect that the couples who choose to marry at younger ages these days are very different from those 30–40 years ago who married at young ages. In the past, many early marriages were so-called “shotgun weddings.” Today, shotgun marriages have been replaced with shotgun cohabitations or single parenting. Today, those who marry at earlier ages probably do so not because they have to but because they want to, and they probably bring strong views about the importance and value of marriage to their union.

Also, researchers now are finding an interesting association between age of marriage and marital happiness. A number of studies now are finding that the sweet

spot for maximizing marital quality may be marriage in the early-to-mid-20s. Marriages that occur between 22–25 are a little happier, on average, compared to late-20s marriages.⁸ Why? Perhaps it is easier to mold two lives together at earlier ages. Or maybe those who marry earlier put more priority on marriage in ways that make it more satisfying. Whatever the reason for this happiness bonus, the popular bias against earlier marriage may be misplaced.

Re-sequencing, Not Delaying

Another reason for a concern about the structural engineering of the capstone model of marriage comes from the real-life experiences of most people in our society who delay marriage. A capstone marriage is often talked about as simply a delayed cornerstone marriage, a longer, scenic path to get to the same destination. However, delaying marriage in our culture today is rarely about just pushing back the wedding date. This is because, while the typical age of first marriage keeps getting pushed later and later, few are pushing back sexual coupling. Keep the sex and companionship; delay the commitment and the sacrifice.

But sex is not the only thing fragmented from marriage in this new arrangement. For many, the delay of marriage means a fundamental re-sequencing of family formation. As a great deal of research is showing, marriage, if it comes, comes out of place in an optimal sequence for forming stable, healthy families in which to rear children.⁹ And this re-sequencing of family formation is becoming our new normal. More than 40% of U.S. children are born to unwed parents.¹⁰ And more than 50% of first births are now to unwed parents. The majority of young adults are not able to follow effectively the capstone model's blueprint for marriage success. When the

bricks that build these families are placed awkwardly, the structure is rickety and a capstone, if it comes at all, is likely to fall off.

Marriage Missed

The capstone model of marriage emphasizes achieving certain milestones and getting your life together before making the big commitment to a life-long union. But what about those who struggle to get it all together? Among the educated and well off, marriage rates are high and divorce rates are low. But this is not the case among the disadvantaged.¹¹ Nearly 25% of U.S. men and 20% of U.S. women ages 40–44 have never married. Thirty percent of men and nearly 25% of women with just a high school diploma have never married by the time they reach their 40s. And more than a third of Black men and women have never married by age 44.¹² One research organization projects that 25% of today's young adults will never marry by about age 50.¹³

For many young adults today, marriage seems to be more of a dream than a feasible possibility. When marriage is closer to fantasy than reality, it means something much different. It is hardly a foundation, or as one scholar calls it, a life script for how to construct and live an adult life.¹⁴

The problem is that the capstone model for building a marriage may be becoming dominant in our society at a time when far too many can't or don't follow the capstone blueprint for success. This does not mean that the capstone model should be demolished and hauled off to the social history dump; it does work for some. Instead, an additional workable model is needed.

A 21st-Century Cornerstone Model of Marriage

How would making marriage a cornerstone and guiding life script of early adult life work for more young adults?

First, a contemporary cornerstone model does not dismiss the need for a certain maturing before marriage. A great deal of maturing and personal growth occurs from 18–21.

Next, a key element of the contemporary cornerstone model would be careful mate selection and intentional preparation for marriage. This would involve spending time and socializing in more productive places when searching for a potential partner and then investing in a good marriage preparation education program.

In addition, young married couples will probably need to accept a longer period of financial austerity in the early years of marriage. Exotic and elaborate weddings will need to be shelved in favor of more modest plans. Some continued parental support of married children in the early years of marriage would help too.

When couples marry in their 30s or later, the biological clock can lead to pressure to have children right away. Marrying earlier can ease the pressure to bear children in the early years of marriage, allowing both spouses to pursue educational or early work goals, reduce financial debts, and further strengthen the foundations of their relationship before children come along.

Another important element of a functional 21st-century cornerstone model of marriage is a greater emphasis on mutual growing together beginning in the more formative, soft-clay years. A cornerstone model of

marriage emphasizes molding a “we-identity” rather than connecting “I-identities.” In mathematical terms, a cornerstone model of marriage is closer to $2 \div 2 = 1$ than $1 + 1 = 2$.

A cornerstone model of marriage is not without its potential weaknesses (discussed more in the accompanying [longer essay](#)). Still, those problems are not so daunting that they prevent all young adults from making the commitment to marriage in their early years. In fact, a substantial minority of young adults marry in their early and mid-20s, embracing a counter-cultural pattern of building a life on a foundation of marriage rather than crowning a successful young adult life with a matrimonial capstone. At age 25, more than 30% of young adults have married (and another 25% desire to be married).¹⁵ The capstone model is not completely hegemonic; there is room for those who see young adult life differently, who want to make marriage the adventure of their young lives rather than a settling down from youthful adventures.

Opening up more cultural space, social permission, and support for young adults to marry at different (and younger) ages makes sense. Why would we think that one set of blueprints for building a successful marriage should work for all? Many are willing and able for the commitment to marriage before their late 20s. Telling them they should wait until they have checked off a uniform list of individual accomplishments and 20-something adventures is strangely conformist. Marriage doesn’t have to be a crowning capstone that signals a status of successful young adult achievement, a status that many will find difficult to attain. For some, it can be the foundation on which to build together all the walls and windows and rooms of a successful and happy life.

Endnotes

¹ Scholars who contributed to writing this essay include: Alan J. Hawkins, Brian J. Willoughby, Jason S. Carroll, and Dean M. Busby.

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³ McArdle, M. (2013, May 30). The many cases for getting married young. *Newsweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/2013/05/29/many-cases-getting-married-young-237436.html>

³ Shaw, J. (2013, April 1). Marry young: I got married at 23. What are the rest of you waiting for? *Slate*. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/04/i_married_young_what_are_the_rest_of_you_waiting_for.html

⁴ Sessler, S., Addo, F. R., & Lichter, D. T. (2012). The tempo of sexual activity and later relationship quality. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74, 708–725.

⁵ Stanley, S. M., Whitton, S. W., Sadberry, S. L., Clements, M. L., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sacrifice as a predictor of marital outcomes. *Family Process*, 45, 289–303.

⁶ Jose, A., O’Leary, D. K., & Moyer, A. (2010). Does premarital cohabitation predict subsequent marital stability and marital quality? A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 105–116; Teachman, J. (2003). Premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and the risk of subsequent marital dissolution among women. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65, 444–455.

⁷ We examined the association between age at marriage and risk of divorce in the American Community Survey and found no strong relationship between age of marriage and risk of divorce.

⁸ Hymowitz, K., Carroll, J. S., Wilcox, W. B., & Kaye, K. (2013). Knot yet: The benefits and costs of delayed marriage in America. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, The Relate Institute, and The National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. Retrieved from

<http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/KnotYet-FinalForWeb.pdf>

⁹ Sawhill credits Marlene Pearson and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead with inventing the term “success sequence.” See Whitehead, B. D., & Pearson, M. (2006). *Making a love connection: Teen relationships, pregnancy, and marriage*. Washington D.C.: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen

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¹⁰ Manning, W. D., Brown, S. L., & Stykes, B. (n.d.). *Trends in births to single and cohabiting mothers, 1980–2013*. Family Profile FP-15-03. National Center for Families and Marriage Research, Bowling Green State University. Retrieved from <http://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles.html>; see also Sawhill, I. V. (2014).

Generation unbound: Drifting into sex and parenthood without marriage. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, especially ch. 4; Wilcox, W. B. (2010). When marriage disappears: The retreat from marriage in middle America. In W. B. Wilcox & E. Marquardt (Eds.), *The state of our unions: Marriage in America 2010* (pp. 13–60).

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¹¹ Wilcox, W. B. (2010). When marriage disappears: The retreat from marriage in middle America. In W. B. Wilcox & E. Marquardt (Eds.), *The state of our unions: Marriage in America 2010* (pp. 13–60). Charlottesville, VA, & New York: National Marriage Project & Institute for American Values. Retrieved from <http://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/national-marriage-project-state-of-our-u-75207/>

¹² Analyses based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2013 *American Community Survey*.

¹³ Wang, W., & Parker, K. (2014, September). *Record share of Americans have never married: As values, economics and gender patterns change*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends project. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/09/24/record-share-of-americans-have-never-married/>

¹⁴ Hymowitz, K. S. (2006). *Marriage and caste in America: Separate and unequal families in a post-marital age*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.

¹⁵ Hymowitz, K., Carroll, J. S., Wilcox, W. B., & Kaye, K. (2013). Knot yet: The benefits and costs of delayed marriage in America. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, The Relate Institute, and The National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. Retrieved from

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