

Young adults' attitudes towards marriage

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Couple relationship formation has changed dramatically in Australia in recent decades. Marriage rates have declined from a crude marriage rate of 7.1 (marriages per 1,000 in the population) in 1988 to a rate of 5.5 in 2007. In contrast, the age at which people marry for the first time has increased, from 27.8 years for men and 25.4 years for women in 1988 to 29.6 and 27.6 years respectively in 2007. A high proportion (77% in 2007) of those who do marry have cohabited with their spouse prior to the marriage (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008).

Of interest is whether the changing patterns of couple formation reflect changes in attitudes towards marriage. This issue was briefly addressed in a recent *Family Relationships Quarterly* article (Qu & Weston, 2007). Their analyses of data from the Housing, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA)¹ survey in 2005 showed that Australian men's and women's attitudes towards marriage and cohabitation were generally positive.² The notion of marriage as an outdated institution was largely rejected even by younger respondents (aged 15–29 years), with more than two-thirds disagreeing (73%) or strongly disagreeing (65%) with the statement. Cohabitation by those who do not intend to marry was also perceived as acceptable by the majority of respondents, although those in older age groups were more likely than the younger groups to disapprove of this arrangement. Men's and women's responses to both items were similar.

While the HILDA survey provided some interesting insights into the attitudes of Australians to marriage and cohabitation, only two items relating to these issues were included in this survey. A more in-depth examination of young adults' attitudes towards marriage (and cohabitation) can be obtained by looking at responses to the 2006 Australian Temperament Project (ATP) survey.

In this article, we report the responses to these questions of the young men and women who participated in this survey.

The Australian Temperament Project

The Australian Temperament Project is a longitudinal study that has followed the psychosocial development of a representative sample of 2,443 Australian children born in Victoria between September 1982 and January 1983, from infancy onwards. Approximately two-thirds of children are still participating, and are now 26 years old. The project examines the contribution of a range of personal, family and environmental factors to development and wellbeing. Data have been collected from the child's parents, Maternal and Child Health nurses, primary school teachers and, since the age of 11 years, the children themselves, via mail surveys. The information gathered covers the child's temperament, behavioural and school adjustment, substance use, antisocial behaviour, depression, health, social competence, civic-mindedness and engagement, peer relationships, family functioning, parenting style and family environment.³ During the 2006 survey (when participants were aged 23–24 years), a number of aspects of the participants' relationships were explored, including whether they intended to marry and their

Box 1: Attitude towards marriage items (ATP survey, 2006)

- A major advantage of marriage is that it gives financial security.
- There are more advantages to being single than being married.
- It is better for a couple to get married than to just live together.
- It is better for children if their parents are married.
- Living together is just the same as being married.
- It is better to have a bad marriage than no marriage at all.
- The main purpose of marriage is to have children.
- People my age don't take marriage seriously enough.
- Homosexual couples should have the right to marry.
- Married people are generally happier than people in other types of relationships.

- 1 HILDA is funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. It is managed by a consortium that is led by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne. The other members of the consortium are the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Australian Council for Educational Research. For a description of HILDA, go to <www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/>
- 2 Participants were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the statements "Marriage is an outdated institution" and "It is alright for an unmarried couple to live together even if they have no intention of marrying".
- 3 The ATP is a partnership between researchers from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Royal Children's Hospital, the University of Melbourne, and Deakin University. The project is led and managed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and is also supported by a grant from the Australian Research Council. Further information about the ATP is available at <www.aifs.gov.au/atp>

attitudes towards marriage (see Box 1 for the list of items relating to attitudes towards marriage). This article reports on responses to those questions from 1,001 young adults (61% female) who participated in the most recent survey in 2006.

Relationship status of ATP participants

Table 1 shows the relationship status of the ATP respondents. Just over half of the male participants indicated they were in a committed relationship, with 25% stating that they were in a cohabiting relationship, and 30% indicating that they did not live with their partner.

The largest group of males was those not in a relationship of any kind (38%). Only 6% were seeing someone casually. Two-thirds of the female participants were in some form of committed relationship, although compared to the males they were more likely to be living with their partner (39%) than not (27%). Fewer females than males reported not being in a relationship (26%), but a similar proportion were in a casual relationship (7%).

Table 1. Proportion of ATP respondents in relationship types, by gender

Relationship type	Males (%) <i>n</i> = 385	Females (%) <i>n</i> = 606
Not seeing/dating anyone	38	26
Dating casually	6	7
Committed, not living together	30	27
Living with a partner**	25	39
Other	1	2

The overall pattern shows that about half of the male and two-thirds of the female participants thought it likely that they would marry in the short-to-medium term.

** 74 participants were married at time of data collection (7.5%)

Source: ATP, 2008

Marriage plans

Unmarried participants were asked how likely it was that they would eventually marry, and if so, how far in the future they thought it would happen. Table 2 below shows that more than 80% of both male and female respondents expect to marry some day. In Table 3, it can be seen that the majority of responses for young men are clustered around the 3–4 and 5–6 years categories, whereas young women's responses are spread across the 1–2, 3–4, and 5–6 years. The overall pattern shows that about half (51%) of the male and two-thirds (68%) of the female participants thought it likely that they would marry in the short-to-medium (up to 4 years) term. Although the percentages are not high, compared to females, male respondents were more likely than females to view marriage as something that would occur in five to nine years. In contrast, females were more likely than males to see marriage in their more immediate future, within the next year or two.

Table 2. Likelihood of marrying, by gender

How likely is it that you will marry someday?	Males (%)	Females (%)
Definitely will	37	41
Probably will	44	41
50–50 chance	13	14
Probably won't	6	4
Definitely won't	1	1

Source: ATP, 2008

Table 3. How far into the future marriage likely to occur, by gender

When would you like to marry?	Males (%)	Females (%)
Within next year	6	8
1–2 years time	13	24
3–4 years time	32	36
5–6 years time	30	21
In 7–9 years time	14	6
In 10+ years time	6	4

Source: ATP, 2008

ATP participants also responded to a series of statements regarding marriage. Table 4 below shows the patterns of their responses. We look first at the pattern of responses of the sample overall, then examine the similarities and differences in the attitudes of the male and female participants.

Overall findings

Overall, participants tended to endorse the view that it is better for children if their parents are married, and that same-sex couples should have the right to marry. There was clear disagreement that:

- financial security is an advantage of being married;
- there are more advantages to being single than being married;
- a bad marriage is better than no marriage at all;
- married people are generally happier;
- that it is better for a couple to marry rather than just live together (only females clearly disagreed with this);
- that living together is just the same as being married; and
- the main purpose of marriage is to have children.

Their views about the desirability of a bad marriage over none at all were especially strong, with 92% of males and 98% of females disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement. Disagreement was almost as common with respect to the role of children in marriage—86% of males and 91% of females disagreed or strongly disagreed with this view.

For two items, views were evenly split.⁴ Thirty-six percent of female respondents agreed or strongly agreed that young people “don’t take marriage seriously enough” but an almost identical proportion (35%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Similarly, 30% of males agreed or strongly agreed that it is better for couples to marry than just live together and 35% had a negative view.

Strength of response

Only four items elicited “strongly agree” or “strongly disagree” responses by 30% or more participants. Just over one-third (34%) of female respondents strongly agreed with same-sex couples’ right to marry, and 30% of male participants agreed strongly that it is better for children if their parents are married. Both males (61%) and females (76%) strongly disagreed that a bad marriage is better than no marriage at all, and that the main purpose of marriage is to have children (31% and 41% respectively).

It is interesting to note the proportions of “don’t know” responses. Thirty per cent or more of the responses to items pertaining to “marriage having advantages over being single”, “married people being happier”, “it is better to marry than just live together” (males only), and “young people don’t take marriage seriously enough” fell into this category. In each case more males than females chose this response. In some cases as many, and sometimes more, respondents chose the “don’t know” category as the “agree” or “disagree” categories.

Sex differences in attitudes

Similar proportions of males and females tended to either agree (26% and 25% respectively) or disagree (35% and 40% respectively) with the statement “a major advantage of marriage is that it gives financial security”. Their patterns of responses were also similar for the item “living together is just the same as being married”. For some items, however, male and female responses differed significantly. To some extent these differences were driven by the “don’t know” responses. As noted above, males were more likely to choose this option than females.

Females were more likely than males to disagree or strongly disagree that:

- there are more advantages to being single than married;
- it is better for a couple to marry than just live together;
- married people are happier;
- it is better for children if their parents are married;
- the main purpose of marriage is to have children; and
- young people don’t take marriage seriously enough.

In addition, females were also more likely than males to indicate agreement with the right of same-sex couples to marry, but males were more likely than females to strongly agree that it is better for children if their parents are married.

Summary

This article examined attitudes to marriage among a large sample of young Australians participating in an ongoing longitudinal study. The findings from this research appear to suggest that young Australians see marriage as a part of their future. The majority of them expect to marry, however it seems to be a short to medium term goal for many young women and a longer term goal for many young men. At the time of this survey ATP participants were

⁴ There was a difference of 5% or less between the proportion of respondents who who agreed/strongly agreed and those who disagreed/strongly disagreed.

Table 4. Attitudes towards marriage responses, by gender

Item	Male (%)					Female (%)				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
A major advantage of marriage is that it gives financial security	5	26	25	35	10	5	25	20	40	10
There are more advantages to being single than to being married	1	10	41	39	8	1	8	33	49	9
It is better for a couple to get married than to just live together	9	21	34	29	6	8	19	21	42	11
It is better for children if their parents are married	30	37	17	13	3	22	33	16	23	6
Living together is just the same as being married	5	20	19	45	11	4	23	19	47	7
It is better to have a bad marriage than no marriage at all	1	1	6	31	61	1	0	2	22	76
The main purpose of marriage is to have children	1	6	9	53	31	0	5	5	50	41
People my age don't take marriage seriously enough	7	30	37	23	3	7	29	30	29	6
Homosexual couples should have the right to marry	18	28	26	10	17	34	39	15	5	7
Married people are generally happier than people in other types of relationships	2	11	48	31	9	2	7	32	42	18

Source: ATP, 2008

24 years old, thus females reported being likely to marry by the time they reached 27–28 years old and males around by the age of 29 to 34 years. This timing is in line with the average age at first marriage in Australia in 2007, which was 27.6 years for females and 29.6 years for males (ABS, 2008).

Overall, these young people did not associate happiness and financial security with marriage, nor did they think that it is better for a couple to marry than to just live together or that there are more advantages to being single than to being married. Marriage was not seen as the being the same as cohabitation, and there was little support for the view that its main purpose is having children.

Young women appear to have somewhat stronger views of marriage, although these views were generally less positive. Where there was a significant difference in responses between male and female participants, females tended to be more likely to have disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Their views were also somewhat better formed (or less equivocal), in the sense that they were less likely than the males to choose the “don't know” category.

As Qu and Weston (2007) noted, support for marriage—at least in theory—among young people bodes well for marriage as an institution. However the findings reported here indicate that young people, in particular young women, may be wary or unsure of what marriage can offer them. Cohabitation was not given equal status to marriage, but it was not necessarily seen as a lesser option. These views, coupled with the almost-normative pattern of cohabitation before marriage in Australia (Qu & Weston, 2008), probably reflect the belief that cohabitation is seen as a pathway to marriage rather than an alternative. Notwithstanding these results, the tendency, especially for male participants, to select the “don't know” category might suggest that many young people have not given the issue a great deal of thought or that they are still weighing the pros and cons of taking the step into marriage—perhaps understandable given that, for young men in particular, marriage is not part of their aspirations for the immediate future.

References

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