

Does a longer sexual resume affect marriage rates? ☆

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Abstract

Sociologists have proposed numerous theories for declining marriage rates in the United States, often highlighting demographic, economic, and cultural factors. One controversial theory contends that having multiple non-marital sex partners reduces traditional incentives for men to get married and simultaneously undermines their prospects in the marriage market. For women, multiple partners purportedly reduces their desirability as spouses by evoking a gendered double-standard about promiscuity. Though previous studies have shown that having multiple premarital sex partners is negatively associated with marital quality and stability, to date no research has examined whether having multiple non-marital sex partners affects marriage rates. Data from four waves of the National Survey of Family Growth reveal that American women who report more sex partners are less likely to get married by the time of the survey (though so too were virgins). Yet this finding is potentially misleading given the retrospective and cross-sectional nature of the data. Seventeen waves of prospective data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth's 1997 mixed-gender cohort that extend through 2015 show the association between non-marital sex partners and marriage rates is temporary: recent sex partners predict lower odds of marriage, but not lifetime non-marital sex partners. Seemingly unrelated bivariate probit models suggest the short-term association likely reflects a causal effect. Our findings ultimately cast doubt on recent scholarship that has implicated the ready availability of casual sex in the retreat from marriage. Rather, the effect of multiple sex partners on marriage rates is “seasonal” for most Americans.

Introduction

As more Americans choose to delay marriage or forego it altogether (Bloome and Ang, 2020), sociologists have offered a number of explanations. These have included the falling economic prospects of men and the stronger economic prospects of women, which weakened the latter's incentives; rising expectations of consumption for the middle class; the growing cultural value of achieving economic stability before marriage; and creeping disenchantment with the idea of life-long commitment (Carr and Utz, 2020; Cherlin, 2020; Edin and Kefalas, 2011; England, 2018; Kuperberg, 2019; Schneider et al., 2018; Smock

et al., 2005). A more controversial theory for declining marriage rates is the idea that the broad acceptance and availability of non-marital sexual activity (and, to a lesser extent, masturbatory pornography use) has made marriage less necessary or even desirable (Caldwell, 2020; Regnerus, 2017; Regnerus and Uecker, 2011; for critiques, see Bridges et al., 2018; Perry, 2020; Risman, 2019).¹

To be sure, scholars who support the latter theory acknowledge that the vast majority of people who marry do so for non-sexual reasons, since most couples have sex before marriage. Nonetheless, in a world where one can have casual sex with little to no commitment, the argument goes that some men and women will simply have one less traditional incentive to get married, as well as less incentive to become the kind of person who is “marriage material” (as evidenced either by superior economic prospects or chaste reputation) (Baumeister and Vohs, 2012; Buss and Schmitt, 2011; Caldwell, 2020; Huang et al., 2011; Malcolm and Naufal, 2016; Regnerus, 2017, 2019; Regnerus and Uecker, 2011).

Though this theory rests upon debatable premises (e.g., gendered assumptions about desire for sexual activity, the extent to which people exchange long-term commitments for sexual activity or vice versa, the consistent coupling of sex and marriage), the broad empirical claim itself has yet to be definitively examined. Specifically, is there evidence that never-married persons with multiple sex partners (indicating they not only can, but *do* more readily access sexual activity with less long-term commitment) are less likely to get married? Despite decades of references to this idea, no study has tried to test it using representative data. This neglect is especially curious given that the theory is consistent with pervasive cultural tropes arguing why young women in particular need to withhold sex: frequent sex partners purportedly render women less desirable, and, if men could get sex without commitment, they might be less motivated to marry and less motivated to develop their prospects to establish their eligibility for marriage—in other words, the “why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free” theory (Baumeister and Vohs, 2012; Huang et al., 2011; Regnerus, 2017; Regnerus and Uecker, 2011).

Addressing this gap in the literature, we draw on data from both the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97) to assess how the number of Americans’ non-marital sex partners predicts their likelihood of marrying. Using cross-sectional data from the NSFG, our preliminary findings suggest that never-married women who recount more sex partners (as well as those with no sex partners) are less likely to get married by the time of the survey. The NSFG is limited in several ways—repeated cross-sectional data, sexual history only available for women, retrospective measure of the number of sex partners—so we turn to the NLSY97 and its 17 waves of prospective data extending from 1997 to 2015. We find that the recent number of sex partners is associated with a reduction in the odds of marriage, but lifetime sex partners is not, indicating the link between more sex partners and likelihood of marriage is temporary. Seeking to disentangle self-selection versus “treatment” effects, seemingly unrelated bivariate probit models suggest that the short-term effect is likely causal. We propose that the effect of multiple sex partners on the likelihood of marriage is

seasonal, reflecting a period where the persons are enjoying sexual activity with less commitment. Yet having multiple sex partners does not seem to discernibly influence their odds of marriage in the long run.

Our findings extend sociologists' understanding of the link between non-marital sexual activity and marriage in several ways. First and foremost, our findings cast doubt on the controversial notion that more readily available sexual activity with numerous partners will reduce men's and women's desire or desirability, and ultimately, likelihood of marrying. Though the "seasonal" effect of having multiple sex partners may contribute to delayed marriage, declining rates of marriage cannot be broadly explained by access to "cheap sex," especially in light of the fact that sex frequency and the number of sex partners is declining among young people (Lei and South, 2021; Twenge et al., 2017). Our study also shows that the sexual activity of single women does not appear to make them "undesirable" as marriage partners. Although heterosexual women have historically been stigmatized for having casual sex (Allison and Risman, 2014; Armstrong et al., 2012; England and Bearak, 2014), our analyses suggest that this does not manifest itself in long-term singleness. Women with multiple sex partners are just as likely to get married as are virgins, if somewhat later. Our findings ultimately underscore the continued decoupling of sexual history from marriage rates per se (D'Emilio and Freedman, 2012), instead highlighting how seasons of sexual exploration with different partners may simply contribute to postponing a relationship most Americans still anticipate and, ultimately, form (Newport and Wilke 2013; Parker and Stepler, 2017).

Section snippets

Premarital sex and marriage outcomes

There has been surprisingly little research on premarital sex and marriage. Almost 30 years ago, Miller and Heaton (1991) showed that white women who lost their virginity early (before age 15) had high rates of teenage marriage. So too did white women who abstained from sex before marriage. Both these findings potentially reflect a more traditionalist pathway to early marriage (shotgun weddings and Christian fundamentalist marriages). Uecker and Stokes (2008) documented that persons who had

WHY NON-MARITAL sex and sex partners might affect marriage rates

Pervasive cultural tropes have long suggested that when heterosexual sexual activity is readily available, there will be negative consequences for long-term commitment (see Perry, 2020). This is based on normative patriarchal expectations and stereotypes about women using their sex as a form of "erotic capital" (Hakim, 2010, 2011) to leverage commitment from men, who are purportedly reluctant to commit if they have other sexual outlets. Whether or not sexual relationships work this way, Huang

Data: NSFG

We examine the relationship between non-marital sexual activity and marriage timing using two different national data sets. First, we analyze four waves of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a repeated cross-sectional survey, administered in 2002, 2006–2010, 2011–2013, and 2013–2015. The NSFG offers large samples of respondents between the ages of fifteen and 44, and retrospective data on sexual partners and marriage.⁵

Marriage entry

Fig. 1 reveals a strong relationship between the reported number of non-marital sex partners and the odds of a first marriage by age 40 (Past that point the marriage rate is low, although it's still higher than the chances of being killed by terrorists [Cherlin, 1990; Garber, 2016]). Ninety-five percent of women reporting one non-marital sex partner are married by age 40. For most, that one partner is presumably the man they married. The rate dips to 89% for women with two partners. Somewhat

Discussion and conclusion

This study sought to determine whether having a higher number of non-marital sex partners lowered the likelihood that people would eventually get married. Our analyses demonstrate that having more numerous sex partners is indeed associated with lower odds of marriage, but only in the short term. Longitudinal data from 17 waves of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997) cohort indicate that multiple partners decreases the immediate likelihood of marriage. But there is scant indication

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