

SOCIAL CLASS, SOCIAL ROLES, PERCEIVED STRESS, AND MARITAL EXPECTATIONS AMONG COHABITING YOUNG ADULTS

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Background and Theoretical Focus

Wilcox, Cherlin, Uecker, and Messel (2011) have documented evidence of a marriage divide between young adults with a bachelor's degree and the "*moderately educated*: individuals with a high-school degree but not a 4-year college degree" (p.2) who comprise approximately 51% of the American population aged 25-34 (Wilcox and Cherlin 2011). They find that middle-to-upper class individuals with at least a four-year college degree are more likely to marry than those with lower levels of education. The moderately educated working class is currently at the forefront of a retreat from marriage (Wilcox et.al. 2011; Wilcox and Cherlin 2011), an institution associated with greater financial, physical, and mental health (Waite and Gallagher 2000).

The retreat from marriage among low-income individuals is well-documented. The retreat from marriage by the moderately educated is growing and is of great concern given their much larger numbers relative to the poor. The rapid rise in cohabitation has occurred across all social groups, but the recent increase is greatest among working class young adults, Americans with the lowest levels of education (Manning 2010). Many working class young adults value marriage (Cherlin 2011) yet cite financial prerequisites (Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005) that act as barriers to marriage. According to Sassler and Miller (2011), "Cohabitation appears to be evolving to serve different functions for working- and middle-class young adults" (p.176). They contend that cohabitation might be more of an alternative to singlehood for the working class based on their findings that working class cohabitators wait for longer periods of time before entering marriage and were unsure about their futures with their partners. In contrast, middle-to-upper class young adults tend to cohabit as a stepping stone to marriage and often have concrete marriage plans at the start of their unions. These findings support the notion of the growing marriage divide, where advantaged young adults set sail toward brighter futures through marriage, which offers spouses the benefits of good financial, physical, and mental health (Waite and Gallagher 2000), while the working class continue to cohabit and are left to drift in their wake.

The social roles that young adults typically accomplish in their twenties and early thirties add to the complexity of this marriage divide, particularly given the social conditions at the dawn of the 21st century which may alter the experience of these roles, create stress, and possibly interfere with marital expectations among the working class. Drawing upon life course theories (Elder 1975; Elder 1994; Elder 1996) of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000; Elder 1994; Elder 1996; Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, and Settersten 2004; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth 2005; Settersten et.al. 2004) and the Stress Process Model (Pearlin 1989) this research examines social role configurations and stress among cohabiting young adults according to social class and their relationship to marital expectations. Emerging adults experienced dramatic change due to the economic transformation and downturn that occurred at the beginning of the century during their "demographically dense" (Rindfuss 1991) years in their paths toward adulthood. As their job prospects are diminishing and an economic upswing has not yet occurred, it may be increasingly difficult for young adults to make the normative and relatively smooth life course transitions experienced by previous generations (who also tended to have greater institutional support for adult transitions due to programs such as the GI Bill).

The Stress Process Model (Pearlin 1989) and life course theory (Elder 1975; Elder 1994; Elder 1996) have elements that overlap. Both focus on the importance of transitions and history, but stress researchers posit that transitions may be stressful; transitions may put individuals on less-than-preferred life course trajectories that could lead to stress; and that younger individuals may experience stress as they enter into new adult roles (Pearlin 2010), often at once, as they are experiencing the most

demographically dense periods of their lives. Pearlin contends that for young adults on the transition to adulthood, a normal transition becomes more stressful when juggled with multiple transitions and roles, some of which may not be welcomed.

The inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and mental health was established long ago (Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend 1969). Carlson and England (2011) contend that social class differences are magnified in an era of growing inequality between the most advantaged and working class or disadvantaged young adults. As a result, working class and poor young adults may experience stress as they cope with transitions into social roles. Despite research on social roles among previous cohorts that indicate a positive association between social roles and well-being, the occupation of multiple roles for today's working class young adults may produce stress given today's economic reality, making it difficult for them to improve their social class positions and transition to marriage. However, Waite and Gallagher point out that although the accumulation of social roles may improve mental health, it is marriage that mattered more than roles for boosting mental health and giving one a sense of personal fulfillment (2000). Young adults from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to acquire normative social roles outside the context of marriage, where the roles may take on new meanings and produce stress.

This research is an examination of social role configurations in a modern context with contemporary young adults to understand how social class, social roles, and stress are related to marital expectations in young adulthood today.

Data and Method

This research is based on the fourth wave of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative longitudinal study of adolescents in grades 7-12 conducted during the 1994-1995 academic year. The fourth and most recent wave of data includes both male and female respondents aged 24-34 interviewed between 2008 and 2009. The present study draws on the initial full sample of 15,701 adult in-home interviews. The analytic sample is limited to heterosexual women and men who were cohabiting at the time of the wave 4 interview (N = 2,702).

Variables

The dependent variables are perceived stress and marital expectations. *Perceived Stress* (Cohen Perceived Stress Scale) variable from the Add Health Wave IV Codebook of Constructed Variables. The Perceived Stress (PSS) scale (Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein 1983) is "designed to measure the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful" (p. 385). This subjective measure of stress is measured using a sixteen-point scale. The scale is based on items are measured with the questions, "In the last 30 days, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?; In the last 30 days, how often have you felt confident in your ability to handle your personal problems?; In the last 30 days, how often have you felt that things were going your way?; and In the last 30 days, how often have you felt that difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?" The perceived stress scale is coded from 0 to 16, from never to very often. In the preliminary analyses the *marital expectations* variable was a five category variable measured by the item, "What is the chance that you and {initials} will marry each other? Analyses of the descriptive statistics indicate that 45% of respondents answered "an almost certain chance", 24% answered "a pretty good chance", 17% answered "a 50-50 chance", 8% answered "a little chance", and 6 % answered "no chance" Given the distribution in the analyses presented here, marital expectations has been dichotomized, combining "a pretty good chance" and "an almost certain chance" = 1 and "no chance", "a little chance", and "a 50-50 chance" combined to equal zero.

Independent Variables

The two focal independent variables are educational attainment and social roles. *Educational Attainment* (social class) is measured by the item, "What is the highest level of education that you have achieved to date?" Wilcox, Cherlin, Uecker, and Messel (2011) use educational attainment as a proxy for social class. *Social Roles* are measured as number of roles, role type (e.g. parent), and role combination (e.g. working-parent). I control for both social resource variables (parental financial support, number of

close friends, and religiosity) as well as sociodemographic indicators (age, gender, race/ethnicity, childhood family structure, previous unions, health, number of non-resident children, duration of current cohabitation, family of origin socioeconomic status, household income, and missing household income).

Summary of Key Findings

First, I expected that working class cohabitators would be less likely to report that they expect to marry their current partners than their middle to upper class peers but will be more likely to expect to marry their current partners than their lower class peers. Although there are no significant differences in marital expectations between lower and working class cohabitators, the first portion of the hypothesis is supported; middle to upper class cohabitators have significantly higher odds of expectations to marry their partners compared to working class cohabitators. The non-significant finding is important as well; although there is no difference between the lower and working classes, the finding suggests that it is not only the poor who might have the least favorable outcomes. This relationship between social class and marital expectations remains significant even after sociodemographic controls are added. Brown (2000) established over a decade ago that cohabitators who expect to marry are more likely to do so than cohabitators who do not expect to marry. Lower marital expectations among the working class may be contributing to their retreat from marriage.

Social roles are not significantly associated with marital expectations in the full models, although there are significant interactions. Contrary to my hypothesis, the number, type, and combination of social roles are actually associated with significantly lower levels of perceived stress among young adult cohabitators. This is consistent with prior research that suggests that the accumulation of roles has positive effects on mental health for individuals. This recent cohort of cohabiting young adults are no different.

I also expected that higher levels of perceived stress will be associated with decreased marital expectations. The findings in this study support this hypothesis. Cohabitators reporting higher levels of stress have lower odds of expectations to marry their partners. In a prior study, I found that middle to upper class cohabitators score lower on stress compared to working class cohabitators, but there are no significant differences in stress between working class and lower class cohabitators. When social class differences in the association between stress and marital expectations were examined, I found that the association between stress and marital expectations is weaker for lower class cohabitators compared to working class cohabitators. It appears that stress may be a relatively consistent presence in the lives of the lower and working classes. Lower class individuals, however, may be better equipped to cope with stress due to its pervasive nature in poor communities. Interestingly, despite the abundance of both lay and scholarly literature on coping with stress in relationships and stressful relationships in general, no scholarly research that I know of has examined the relationship between stress and marital expectations. These findings provide an important contribution to the body of work on stress and on marital expectations and contribute another clue to the retreat from marriage among the working class.

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