

Marriage in industrial societies



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Compare and contrast two theories of the change in the age of marriage in industrial societies.

There are several theories which attempt to explain the causes behind the changing ages of marriage in industrial societies. While no theory should be seen as all-encompassing or as universally applicable, many have made valuable contributions to the overall debate. The theories presented by Valeria Oppenheimer (1988, 1994, 1997) and David S. Loughran (2002) are two such examples of incisive works that have influenced the direction and scholarly thought on this topic.

Before delving into the particulars of these two scholars, it is important to point out some of the problems inherent in attempting to account for such a diverse and important phenomenon. Indeed, the concept of marriage is one that is often culturally contingent and one that can vary among demographic and religious groups. Also, it is important to examine the question of how modern values have contributed to contemporary patterns of marriage. As such, not all industrial societies can be understood as uniformly similar and that the change in age of marriage should also be thought of in terms of time, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnic group.

Oppenheimer's 'A Theory of Marriage Timing' is deeply concerned with challenging the then popular and prevailing notion that women's economic independence was the major factor in the "decline in gains to marriage... (and the) rise in delayed marriage" (1988). This notion, to Oppenheimer, is particularly problematic because it tends to "push people into one of two polar positions:" the growing independence of women could be seen as too high of a price to pay because of its negative impact on society or as an "

unavoidable price for women's liberation" (1988). Instead Oppenheimer, through a modified search-theoretic framework, argues that even if the gains to marriage are reduced through economic independence, the result can have minimal effect on marriage gains in general. The greater independence that women experience creates an environment where they neither are forced to settle or remain in an undesirable situation (1988, p. 587).

Oppenheimer further discredits the "independence hypothesis" in 'Women's Employment and the Gain to Marriage: the Specialization and Trading Model' through a detailed analysis of the literature supporting this notion (1997). Assumptions made by theorists, particularly those held by Gary Becker, are critically examined by Oppenheimer. An important criticism the author makes deals with questioning the starting point of the "high correlation of the various time series trends" employed by supporters of the independence hypothesis (1997). If one pushes these time-series backwards (and does not have them dated in the 1950's and 1960's) it becomes clear that divorce rates were on the rise well before women's employment started to grow (1997). Further, Oppenheimer attempts to clarify the difference (which she believes is often misunderstood) between the delay of marriage and nonmarriage. She cites important factors why individuals may want to delay marriage, such as economic factors or educational attainment (among others) without actually delaying the relative worth or desirability of marriage (1997).

In 'Women's Rising Employment and the Future of the Family in Industrial Societies' Oppenheimer explains the change in marriage through the declining position of men in the labor market. Supported by strong evidence <https://assignbuster.com/marriage-in-industrial-societies/>

linking the connection between early marriage and strong labor markets, Oppenheimer illustrates how men who lack a stable career or career path become less desirable, thus prolonging the search for potential mates.

Becker's theory of marriage, which Oppenheimer connects with ideas presented by two of sociologists most notable figures (Parsons and Durkheim), maintains that "the major gain to marriage lies in the mutual dependence of spouses, arising out of their specialized functions—the woman in domestic production (and reproduction), the man in market work" (Oppenheimer 1997). As the economy grows and wages rise, women's market work in turn also rises. For Becker, this means that the work women engage in becomes less specialized and more economically independent "leading, in turn, to a decline in the desirability of marrying or of staying married" (Oppenheimer 1997). Of particular concern to Oppenheimer is Becker's argument that a 'major gain' to marriage is lost through women's economic independence. Oppenheimer, however, calls into question several facets of Becker's theory by arguing that families are adaptable and have placed both women and children in the workforce when it was demanded by particular economic conditions.

Oppenheimer stresses, through the employment of micro and macro level analyses, how the decline in male economic opportunity in the 1970s and 1980s served as an integral factor in reducing the supply of marriageable men. This parallels both Loughran's and Easterlin's (Birth and Fortune, 1987) arguments that individuals (both men and women) are more likely to be married in the areas in which higher proportions of men are 'marriageable' (for Loughran this notion hinges on wage inequality and for Easterlin it rests

on the particulars of the birth cohort). Oppenheimer further deviates from many of her predecessors by stressing the relative importance uncertainty in career entry and path plays in the delay of marriage. Couples would thus spend a greater amount of time (the concept of delaying marriage as opposed to nonmarriage is again stressed) when searching for suitable (as defined by men and women with an established career path) partners.

Loughran, in “ The Effect of Male Wage Inequality on Female Age at First Marriage” argues that “ rising male wage inequality is responsible for a proportion of the decline in the age-specific propensity to marry between 1970 and 1990” (2002). The author, who also uses a search-theoretic framework, discusses how his hypothesis fits naturally into a model of female marital search (2002) and how it “ reveals a negative correlation between male wage inequality and female propensity to marry.” That is, “ if women search among a pool of men characterized by their wages, theory predicts growing male wage inequality will increase the duration of female marital search and, hence, age at first marriage” (2002). As similarly noted by Oppenheimer, Loughran agrees that modeling marriage behavior in this way shows that it is less of a ‘ decline’ in marriage as it is of a ‘ delay’. Loughran, in a similar vein as Oppenheimer, dispels alternative hypotheses such as rising female wages and employment and concludes that the rising male wage inequality increases the return to marital search, which in turn lengthens “ search duration and decreas(es) age-specific propensities to marry” (2002).

When comparing the theories of Oppenheimer and Loughran, one can see that the latter's economic analysis supports the former's on several key

points. One of Loughrans hypotheses deals with describing how wage inequality (beginning in the early 1970s) meant greater variability in the economic suitability and stability of potential husbands thereby leading to greater rewards for women who extended and prolonged their marriage search. This notion supports Oppenheimers emphasis on taking the stress away from womens independence as the critical factor in changing age of marriage and instead placing it on the declining role of males in the marketplace.

Criticisms of these theories are bound to occur, as they fail to account for all of the intricacies associated with marriage trends. It is interesting to note the relative absence in the discussions presented by these authors of the importance of religion and its particular influence on marriage trends. When one considers the very nature of marriage, and the values and ideals it is naturally associated with, the idea of its close relationship with religious belief becomes easily noticeable. As such, it may be interesting in the future to examine these theories with respect to groups that have different levels of religiosity.

When considering both of these theories, it becomes clear that the economic opportunity of both men and women should be studied together if one is interested in discovering the reasons behind change in marriage age. While neither the growing wage inequality among young men nor the independence among young women is wholly responsible for the delay in marriage, they are both seen to be important contributors to the phenomena and overall debate. Oppenheimer, in particular, has proven to be influential

in influencing the direction of the discourse by calling into question some of the key prevailing notions which have persisted throughout the past century.

References:

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