

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage.



A wedding isn't a marriage, it just starts one

By Peter Jon Mitchell, Senior Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

Wedding show season is in full swing. Brides-to-be are scouring trade show displays in convention centres across the country and flipping through wedding magazines as thick as an encyclopedia. They're hunting for bargains and searching for unique ideas that will make their big day special. And special doesn't come cheap. Last year the bridal magazine Wedding Bells reported from their annual reader survey that the average Canadian wedding was expected to cost \$23, 330. [1] That's up \$3200 from the previous year. There is no shortage of items and services to spend money on including cakes, dresses, invitations, photographers, flowers and of course the honeymoon vacation just to recover from all the stress. The increasing cost and the sheer grand scale of weddings today seems to be at odds with reports that marriage is in decline. [2] Why the wedding hysteria? Is this simply the Wedding Industrial Complex gone mad?

The answer could be rooted in the cultural shift in the understanding of marriage in North America over the last few decades. The average age of a bride has increased from 22.8 years old in 1973 to 28.5 years old in 2003. [3] More couples are living common-law before marriage if they choose to marry at all. Young adults deferring marriage until sometime in the future reveals a lot about how they view marriage. In the past, couples married first and then built a life together but Johns Hopkins University sociologist Andrew Cherlin suggests, "Whereas marriage used to be the foundation of adult family life, now it is often the capstone." [4] Young adults are choosing to finish their education, establish careers, purchase real estate and for some, have children all before getting married. For many young adults getting married is the final mark of achievement after the pursuit of other life goals.

University of Texas sociologist Mark Regnerus agrees that young adults tend to push the idea of marriage off to an undetermined time in the future, but his research also suggests that marriage remains a popular goal for many young adults. He labels the relational pattern displayed by emerging adults, 'serial monogamy' and notes its underlying values of flexibility and personal autonomy. Regnerus wonders how emerging adults who are following the flexible serial monogamy life script will someday achieve the permanent marriages they desire. [5]

The spirit of individualism that serial monogamy accommodates may be contributing to the increasing cost of weddings. Cherlin argues that the historical notion of weddings as a family and community affair has faded. Author Rebecca Mead who published a book on the growing wedding industry has pronounced weddings “an individualistic adventure rather than a community sacrament.” [6]

Weddings have become the ultimate event for public self-expression where personal success is put on display. Money is no object. Never has having the perfect dress and unique stationary been so important. Cherlin likens the modern wedding to being awarded a merit badge, except that it indicates achievement rather than the acquisition of skill – and that might be a problem. [7] Cherlin captures the blindside of the modern mega-event wedding suggesting, “An observer sometimes gets the sense that what matters to some young people is not so much being married as getting married – the exercise is more about status than survival.” [8]

Marriage is not simply a piece of paper signifying a change in status. Social science confirms the advantage of the stability that marriage brings to family life and the physical and financial health benefits marriage offers its participants. [9] But marriage is hard work. There are convention centres full of industry people who are eager to help plan the big event, but once the caterer has cleaned up and gone home, how are newlyweds to know how to make the rest of their life work? Regnerus surmises, “[I]t seems that there is little effort from any institutional source aimed at helping emerging adults consider how their present social, romantic, and sexual experiences shape or war against their vision of marriage – or even how marriage might fit in with their other life goals.” [10]

Over the years public policy has made getting out of marriage easier while simultaneously making common-law partnerships look more like marriage. Both have hurt marriage. Our social institutions do little to promote marriage even though society benefits from strong, healthy marriages. We might start by introducing students to the benefits of marriage so that they can inform themselves about the future married life they desire and begin thinking about how they will get there.

The increased consumerism around weddings is concerning; however no less concern should be shown for thinking through how young adults are to acquire the skills to make a marriage work when the traditional social institutions and supports for marriage are no longer at the forefront.

Endnotes

1. *Wedding Bells*. (2011). Wedding trends in Canada [website]. Retrieved from <http://www.weddingbells.ca/results/>
2. Statistics Canada. (2007). 2006 Census: Family portrait: continuity and change in Canadian families and households in 2006: National portrait: Census Families. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-553/p2-eng.cfm>
3. Statistics Canada. (2007, January 17). The Daily. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/070117/dq070117a-eng.htm>
4. Cherlin, A. J. (2009). *The Marriage-Go-Round*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf. P. 139.
5. Regnerus, M. and Uecker, J. (2011). *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying*. New York: Oxford University Press.
6. Rebecca Mead as quoted in Cherlin (2009), p. 141.
7. Cherlin (2009), p. 142.
8. *Ibid*.
9. For a short summary of the benefits of marriage see; Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. (2011, September 15) Benefits of marriage for adults [website]. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/default.aspx?go=article&aid=2088&tid=8>
10. Regnerus and Uecker (2011), p. 170.