



Later first marriage and marital success[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The research reported here used measures of marital success based on both marital survival and marital quality to assess how well first marriages entered at relatively late ages fare in comparison with those entered younger. Analysis of data from five American data sets indicated that the later marriages fare very well in survival but rather poorly in quality. The greatest indicated likelihood of being in an intact marriage of the highest quality is among those who married at ages 22–25, net of the estimated effects of time since first marriage and several variables that might commonly affect age at marriage and marital outcomes. The negative relationship beyond the early to mid-twenties between age at marriage and marital success is likely to be at least partially spurious, and thus it would be premature to conclude that the optimal time for first marriage for most persons is ages 22–25. However, the findings *do* suggest that most persons have little or nothing to gain in the way of marital success by deliberately postponing marriage beyond the mid-twenties.

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1. Introduction

The extensive literature on age at marriage and marital success focuses largely on differences between teen and early to middle twenties marriages and devotes little attention to marriages that begin at older ages. The main reason for this emphasis is a huge difference in survival rates between teen marriages and all others, which is only moderately reduced by controls for education, socioeconomic background, race, and so forth (Becker et al., 1977; Bennett et al., 1988; Bumpuss and Sweet, 1972; Bumpuss et al., 1991; Greenstein, 1990; Heaton, 1990; Lehrer, 2008; Menken et al., 1981; Morgan and Rindfuss, 1985; Schoen, 1975; South, 1995; Teachman, 2002; Thornton and Rodgers, 1987; Waite and Lillard, 1991). In contrast, the relationship of age at marriage to marital outcomes beyond the mid- to late-twenties has been found to be relatively weak, with most studies showing a leveling off of survival or a slight increment or decrement at the older ages. Apparently the only major study that found more than a slight decrement is that reported in Becker et al. (1977). Some inconsistency in results is to be expected given that until recently the number of respondents who married after their mid- to late-twenties was quite small in most survey samples used for the study of marital outcomes, which of course also has discouraged researchers from focusing on those who married at the older ages.

Another characteristic of most research on age at marriage and marital success is its use of marital survival, or divorce–non-divorce, as the only measure of marital success. The limitations of marital survival as the sole measure of marital success are well known, and thus we need discuss them only briefly here. Many unsatisfactory marriages (from the standpoint of the spouses) endure for various reasons, including a lack of perceived good alternatives to the current marriage, moral and religious objections to divorce, concern about the effects of divorce on children, economic dependency, and the economic costs

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of divorce. Arguably, when young persons marry and then quickly divorce (especially before children are born), that is a better outcome than a stable but stale, unsatisfying, or destructive marriage. If the latter outcomes are more common among persons who marry at relatively late ages, their lesser tendency to divorce is not necessarily a favorable marital outcome.

The few studies that have related age at marriage to global measures of marital quality have generally found either virtually no relationship or a weak positive one (Bahr et al., 1983; Glenn and Weaver, 1978; Lee, 1977). These findings do little to clarify the relationship between age at marriage and marital success, because the quality of intact marriages, by itself, is arguably even a poorer measure of marital success than divorce–non-divorce (Glenn, 1990, 1998; Rockwell, 1978). In the population of persons in intact marriages, many of the persons who have had the least successful marriages are not present because they have divorced—a kind of sample selection bias that can produce observed relationships between variables that are smaller than, or even opposite in sign from, the causal relationships they are supposed to reflect.

Research that has not used global assessments such as happiness and satisfaction as measures of marital quality has found a positive monotonic relationship between age at first marriage and some dimensions of marital quality. For instance, Amato et al. (2007) found a monotonic decline with age at marriage of “divorce proneness,” or “thinking about divorce,” with a particularly large decrease from ages 30–34 to age 35 and older (p. 79). Although divorce proneness is a better measure of marital success than divorce itself, it suffers from the same limitations, because divorce may not be a realistic possibility for many persons in less than emotionally high quality marriages and may simply be unthinkable for others. Amato et al. (2007) report that the findings are similar for “marital interaction,” which increased with age at marriage, and “problems,” which decreased, but they do not report specific data. These findings, combined with the flat pattern of marital happiness and satisfaction with age at first marriage, suggest that many marriages of those who marry late are “good enough” ones characterized by low emotional intensity.

So far as we have been able to determine, there are no reports in the academic literature of research on the effects of age at marriage that has tried to simultaneously take into account marital stability and quality. However, two non-academic publications report the results of such attempts, and both, using different data sets, found that marital success as measured (being in a high-quality intact first marriage versus all other marital outcomes) showed a rise in success with age at marriage until the early- to mid-twenties and a decline thereafter (Glenn, 2005; Glenn and Marquardt, 2001). An alternative way to deal with both marital stability and quality would be to use marital quality as the dependent variable and apply a correction for selection bias resulting from divorce (Heckman, 1979). However, such corrections work best when they use an instrumental variable that affects the selection but not the dependent variable, and it is hard to imagine an available variable that predicts marital survival but not marital quality. To our knowledge no one has used selection models in studying age at marriage and marital outcomes.

The steep increase in the typical age at first marriage in the United States over the past three decades (by more than 5 years) has increased both the feasibility and importance of studying differences in marital outcomes for persons who marry at different ages above the early twenties. In recent years about half of all first marriages of females, and well over half of all first marriages of males, have been at age 25 or older, the estimated median age at first marriage in 2009 being 28.1 for men and 25.9 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009)—a condition that makes normative and typical what used to be considered late marriage. It also makes assessing the outcomes of later marriage, and understanding the reasons for those outcomes, important for practical reasons, as persons decide whether or not to participate in the trend to later marriage, and as third parties, such as parents and counselors, decide on the wisdom of encouraging later marriage. Understanding the reasons for the marital outcomes for persons who marry relatively late is also important for a general understanding of the bases for marital success.

We believe, therefore, that the time has come to focus research specifically on persons who first marry at a relatively late age and to do so in a way that takes into account both marital stability and quality. In the research reported here, we first estimated the effects of age at marriage on outcome variables designed to reflect both marital stability and quality, controlling several variables that clearly might affect both the independent and dependent variables. Then we conducted explanatory analyses designed to cast light on the reasons for the findings and to help decide, among others things, whether the estimated “effects” are causal or spurious.

2. Theoretical perspectives

The literature provides no systematic theory to predict or explain the pattern of marital outcomes by age at first marriage, but it does provide several relevant theoretical perspectives or what perhaps might better be called theoretical fragments or lines of theoretical reasoning. We call each one a thesis.

The most commonly discussed of these seems to be the *maturation thesis*, or the view that marriages are more likely to succeed if the spouses have reached a high level of psychological maturity at the time of marriage, if they have had time to develop good relationship skills, and if their standards for a spouse and what they have to offer on the marriage market have stabilized (Glenn, 2002b; Lehrer, 2008; Oppenheimer, 1988). This view has often been used to explain why teen marriages are highly unstable, but since psychological maturation tends to continue through young adulthood and since some aspects of marital desirability, such as long-term earning ability, often remain unclear through the twenties, this thesis predicts increments, though decreasing ones, in marital success with age at marriage through the twenties and into the thirties. If, as many observers believe, psychological maturation now occurs more slowly through adolescence and young adulthood

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