

JULY 10, 2013

For young adults, the ideal marriage meets reality

BY WENDY WANG | 7 COMMENTS



Credit: istockphoto

Americans' attitudes toward an ideal marriage have changed dramatically over the past several decades. The share of the public that favors a marriage in which husband and wife both work and take care of the house and children is up from 48% in 1977 to 62% in 2010 (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/11/18/the-decline-of-marriage-and-rise-of-new-families/>). During the same period, the share that prefers the model of the breadwinner husband and homemaker wife is down from 43% to 30%.

Young adults are often at the forefront of changing social norms. Adults younger than 30 are most likely to favor a dual-income marriage model (72%), over the breadwinner husband-homemaker wife model (22%). This is even more true for young women, who are more likely than young men to prefer dual-income marriage (78% vs. 67%). Young adults are also more positive (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/29/breadwinner-moms/>) about the impact on families of increasing numbers of women entering the workforce.

Given young adults' strong preference for a dual-income marriage model and their positive attitudes about working women, we might expect that they would be more likely to embrace the dual-income model when they themselves are married.

However, it's not the case. When we took a closer look at the most recent American Community Survey data, we found that 57% of young married couples (where the wife is younger than 30) are in a dual-income marriage, compared with 62% of couples in their 30s and 40s. These young couples also are more likely than older ones to

include a breadwinner husband and homemaker wife (32% do).

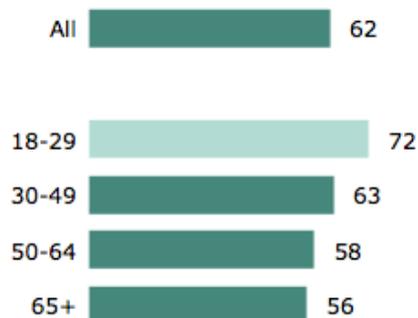
Why is that? The answer appears to be related to the age of their children. More than half of young couples (57%) have children ages 5 or younger at home, compared with 30% of couples in their 30s and 40s.

Younger children create greater time demands on their parents. According to our analysis of 2011 time diary data, overall, parents with children younger than 18 spend an average of 11 hours per week on childcare, but 15 hours per week when they have children younger than 6.

Even though many of today's young couples don't yet have the kind of egalitarian marriage they say they want, they're closer to that ideal than their same-aged counterparts were a generation ago (in 1980). Back then, 51% of married couples under the age of 30 had dual incomes, compared with 57% now.

Young Adults Favor Dual-Income Marriage

% who prefer a marriage in which husband and wife both have jobs/ take care of the house and children



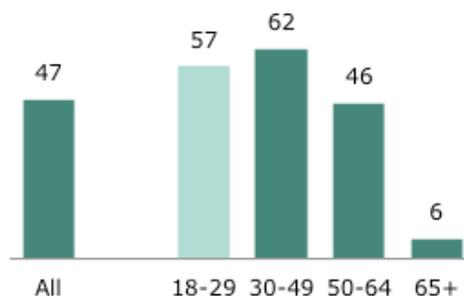
Source: Pew Research Center survey, conducted Oct 1-21, 2010, N=2,691.

Q wording: What kind of marriage do you think is the more satisfying way of life? One where the husband provides for the family and the wife takes care of the house and children, or one where the husband and wife both have jobs and both take care of the house and children.

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Dual-Income Marriages, by Age of Wife

% of married couples



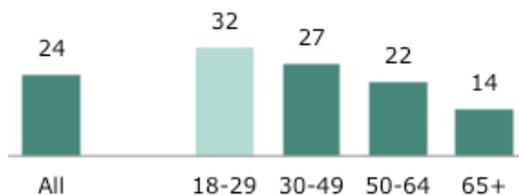
Note: Based on employment status of couples. Employment status is measured as of previous week.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2011 American Community Survey data, IPUMS.

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Breadwinner Husband-Homemaker Wife Marriages, by Age of Wife

% of married couples



Note: Based on employment status of couples. Employment status is measured as of previous week.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2011 American Community Survey data, IPUMS.

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7 Comments



Tibby Wroten • 3 weeks ago

I second what devadee said. The cost of good quality childcare was more than my salary (despite having a master’s degree!) so my husband and I opted for the breadwinner husband-homemaker wife marriage. The time impact of a young child never even occurred to us when making that decision.

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Wendy Wang • 3 weeks ago

Childcare cost is an important part in the picture, a reality that couples with young children face. I wish we had data on this. I guess another question to ask is that why the cost of childcare is so high?

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devadee • 3 weeks ago

A very important factor not considered: the cost of childcare. At the start of careers when people are making near the base of their salary arc, it can actually cost a family with young children money for both parents to work. This is less true once a couple is in their 30s and nearer the middle of a salary arc, or, finally working after multiple years of post-graduate schooling. It’s not only that young kids take more time to care for, it’s that paying for a non-parent to care for them is often impractical, especially if you have more than one child.

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bluebeard • 3 weeks ago

So then you should compare the different generation by their dual-income status during child-bearing age (stratified by whether they actually had a child or not).

[Reply](#)



Wendy Wang • 3 weeks ago

Good point. The fact is that the share of young couples with children under age 6 hasn't changed much from 1980 to 2011(58% in 1980 and 57% in 2011), what changes is the presence of young children among mid-aged couples (23% in 1980 and 30% in 2011). This is a reflection of delayed childbearing among couples.

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bluebeard • 3 weeks ago

Interesting. So does the prevalence of dual-income earners change by generation, during the time of their young couplehood (rather than the current day snapshot as displayed)?

[Reply](#)



Wendy Wang • 3 weeks ago

Overall we see more dual-income marriages now than a generation ago. Among young couples, the share goes up from 51% in 1980 to 57% in 2011. Among couples in their 30s and 40s, it goes up from 52% to 62%.

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