

The Attitudes of Undergraduate Women Toward Marriage

Alice Sung

The purpose of this paper is to examine the attitudes of college dormitory women toward marriage. It deals with a narrow field of women living in both all-women's and coed dormitories of the U.C. Berkeley campus: Stern, Freeborn, Cheney, Davidson, Norton, and Spens-Black Halls. Although it is largely a descriptive account, an analysis of the influence of socio-economic, ethnic, religious, parental relationship, age, and other factors is attempted. Comparisons are drawn across two levels: coed versus women's dorms and contemporary versus traditional attitudes. In nearly all cases the choice of dorm type was made by the woman herself.

The project stems from my hypothesis that more college women today, particularly those who are strongly career-oriented, feel less motivation toward future marriage. However, it is the specific reasons why women wish to be married or not that may help clarify the present attitudes and future views of marriage and the family in our culture as far as women are concerned.

Only the most important findings of the study are presented here for publication. Many other factors, such as: women's majors, reasons for living arrangements, parents' occupations and income, and lesbianism, although part of the original data, are not elaborated upon. These, however, appeared to have little correlation with marriage attitudes, which in itself may be significant. Also, the scale of marriage attitudes, originally ranging from extremely positive to positive to impartial to negative to extremely negative, has been collapsed to include only positive to impartial to negative attitudes for convenience.

Although there are innumerable factors which influence marriage trends, this paper may indicate the effects of women's attitudes. These attitudes reflect the socio-cultural changes, the issues of the Women's Liberation Movement and general sex-role transcendence. Women, to some extent, are re-defining marriage, and discovering alternatives to an institution that was once altogether predestined.

Method

The general procedure in gathering data was centered on a four-page questionnaire and follow-up voluntary interview sessions. Of the 85 questionnaires distributed, 74% were returned; 56% from the women's dorms, primarily Stern Hall, and 44% from women in the coed dorms, mostly Norton Hall. As the

completion of the questionnaires was strictly voluntary, the Stern Hall group fortunately ranged sufficiently between most age groups and backgrounds, however, 64% of the coed returns were from first year students. The sampling from both groups came from varied ethnic backgrounds: Caucasian, Asian, Jewish, Afro-American, and mixed.

The questionnaire consisted of four basic parts: (1) socio-economic, religious, and ethnic background, (2) marriage attitude and definition, (3) parental relationship, sex-role transcendence, and other influences, and (4) behavioral factors. Most questions were open-ended and encouraged personal elaboration. The final comment left room for volunteers to donate approximately thirty minutes for an interview session regarding the topic.

I received four volunteers from the coed dorms, and twelve from the women's dorms; however, I was only able to complete two interviews from the coed dorms in full and five from the women's dorms. All interviewing took place informally either in their own dorm or mine. Most information was recorded by memory and through note-taking during and after the sessions. The general format for questioning followed the questionnaire in depth, with clarifications on the purpose of marriage, major influential factors such as religion, parental and other relationships. It was also important to determine whether the women held a traditional attitude toward marriage — a relation between a man and a woman recognized by law, involving certain rights and duties — or had defined their own contemporary attitudes. My own personal friendships with a few of the interviewees has helped me to gain an insight into the most significant factors which color their attitudes toward marriage. As these women have requested anonymity, all names used herein are fictitious.

In addition to the limitations inherent within a study relying largely upon questionnaires, the analysis of the statistics themselves may be misleading due to the low number of actual respondents; particularly disappointing is the narrowly-based data from the coed dorms. Due to the lack of an accurate method of projecting these statistics, their true meaningfulness, however suggestive they may be, is therefore subject to qualification.

General Analysis

Having tabulated the results of the questionnaires, I

found that 67% of all women respondents felt at least positive about marriage, 30% felt impartial and 3% felt negative. A significant difference appears when the question of marriage takes on a more personal viewpoint. For example, 73% said "yes" to future marriage, while 11% said "maybe," and 16% said "no." This reveals a general attitude among over 20% of the women who neither slight nor encourage marriage for others, necessarily, but feel free to choose personal alternatives to marriage.

More specifically, differences are revealed when comparing coed to all women's attitudes. Nine percent more coed than non-coed women felt positive about marriage; nine percent more of the women's than coed dorm members felt impartial towards marriage. It appeared from the interviews and questionnaires that more single-sex dorm women felt less motivated towards marriage due to the witnessing of poor relationships between parents and perceiving self-images which differed from their mothers.

Table A. "How do you feel about marriage in general?"

| general marriage attitude | positive | impartial | negative |
|---|----------|-----------|----------|
| Women's dorms (34-base; 0-no answer) | 63% | 34% | 3% |
| coed dorms (28-base; 0-no answer) | 71% | 25% | 4% |

Their responses to marriage for themselves in the future, when compared to coed responses, also reflect this skepticism about marriage. In answer to the question: "Would you like to be married in the future?" 20% of the women's dorm members replied "no," 14% "maybe," and 66% "yes." Of the coed dorm women, 11% said "no," and 7% "maybe," only half as many as those of the all women's dorms who had answered similarly. The 82% majority of the coed dorms replied "yes." Although there was no large variance in the overall positive attitude towards marriage between the two dorm types, a significant difference lies in the general interest level in getting married. On the whole, the women's dorm members expressed more independence and individuality than the coed, even though personal careers were stressed in both dorm types.

The specific responses as to why women wished to get married varied little between all women's and coed dorms on the surface. Security (or companionship) was listed or, in my opinion, generally expressed as the primary motive for marriage by 65% of the all women's dorms and 61% of the coed dorms. Either romantic love or the sharing of lives was specified as the chief motivation by 17% of the all-women's and 18% of the coed dorms. Finally, the desire to have (and legally, socially protect) children plus various reasons,

ranging from "why not?" to the "joy of union," were ranked first by 18% of the single-sex dorm women, and 21% of the coed dorm women.

The difficulty in ascertaining exact reasons for marriage must be noted; furthermore, many women listed combinations of motives, most commonly "raising a family and security." Although the results here are remarkably similar, my personal interpretations in grouping according to general responses necessarily played a large part in synthesizing the results. Yet, many women quoted "security" as a principal motive for marriage. This was expressed mainly as an emotional/psychological state of security, of "always having someone there," rather than that of purely sexual or purely economic security. Perhaps this reiterates the companionship facet of the traditional grounds for a woman's marriage; however, the once-common custom of marriage solely for economic support and sexual satisfaction appears now to be less frequent a foundation for marriage.

The women who felt either impartial or negative toward marriage listed the two primary motivations for a possible marriage as the desire to have children, who would then be legally and socially accepted, or family pressures in favor of marriage. Interestingly, security and romantic love were seemingly downplayed.

For all women, definitions of marriage were almost equivocal, mostly centered around a traditional definition: "a social institution . . . a relation of one (man) to one (woman) that is recognized by custom or law, and involves certain rights and duties . . ." (Westermarck, 1963: p. 3). But approximately one-fifth of each group relayed acceptance of new definitions ranging from "any two persons living together in a loving and stable relationship" to "a contract in which the state forces two people to remain together."

Table B. "How do you define marriage?"

| definition | A- legally licensed w/religious ceremony | B- as in A., but civil ceremony | C- male & female living together, stable relations | D- As in C, any two persons | E- other |
|--|--|--|--|---|-------------|
| women's dorms (35-base; 0-no answer) | 57% | 37% | 11% | 9% | 4% |
| coed dorms (28-base; 0-no answer) | 57% | 61% | 11% | 7% | 14%* |

*Percentages exceed 100% as many women indicated multiple definitions as acceptable.)

In the women's dorms, 21% more than in the coed dorms perceived alternatives to marriage such as living with another person or alone as more attractive.

Unfortunately, no previous statistics on earlier women's attitudes along these lines were readily available for comparison; however, it is likely that more than 40% of dormitory women in the 1950's and even 1960's would have seen no alternatives to marriage, while fewer than 34% would perceive alternatives as more attractive, if they perceived them at all. Among the women's dorm responses, the predominant alternative to marriage was "living with another person."

Table C. "Do you see alternatives to marriage as more attractive?"

| | yes | perhaps for others or as temporary situation | no |
|---|-----|---|-----|
| women's dorms (34-base; 1-no answer) | 35% | 24% | 41% |
| coed dorms (28-base; 0-no answer) | 14% | 43% | 43% |

As far as socioeconomic, ethnic and religious backgrounds are concerned, I found no definite correlations between these and positive or negative attitudes towards marriage with the exception of religion. Those women with a strong religious background, particularly Catholic or Christian, and who professed that it had a great influence upon their lives felt very positive about marriage. In these cases, rarely were alternatives to marriage more attractive, and most wanted children. When religion entered little or not at all into the woman's life, often the attitude was impartial or negative, linked with a preference for marriage alternatives. (See Tables D1, D2 below.)

Table D1. Comparison of religious background and marriage attitude for women's dorms
(35-base; 0-no answer)

| religion | catholic 23% | christian(prot.) 23% | jewish 17% | non-religious 37% |
|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------|----------------------|
| positive attitude | 63% | 88% | 100% | 31% |
| impartial attitude | 37% | 12% | 0% | 61% |
| negative attitude | 0% | 0% | 0% | 8% |

Table D2. Comparison of religious background and marriage attitude for coed dorms
(28-base; 0-no answer)

| religion | catholic 21% | christian (prot.) 39% | jewish 36% | mixed backgrd. 4% |
|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|---------------|----------------------|
| positive attitude | 67% | 82% | 60% | 100% |
| impartial attitude | 33% | 18% | 30% | 0% |
| negative attitude | 0% | 0% | 10% | 0% |

After religious influence, the most significant factors in determining marriage attitudes, according to my data, are parental relationships and personal witnessing of other marriages. In the cases where women questioned marriage, the women had often witnessed undesirable aspects of marriage. Such cases frequently involved families with the mother caught in a stereotyped mother-housewife sex role, seemingly passive to the husband even in cases where she worked outside the home. In two cases the mother had openly expressed her frustrations and feelings of unfulfillment to the family. In the most extremely negative case, one woman admitted that her own mother's marriage situation was the primary determinant of her negative attitude.

Table E. "Have your parents ever been divorced or separated?"

| | yes | no |
|---|-----|-----|
| women's dorms (33-base; 2-no answer) | 21% | 79% |
| coed dorms (27-base; 1-no answer) | 11% | 89% |

Table F. "Do you feel your parents have a good relationship?"

| | negative relations | positive relations |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|
| women's dorms (31-base; 4-no answer) | 81% | 19% |
| coed dorms (24-base; 4-no answer) | 75% | 25% |

Background information, such as individual majors and father-mother occupations, seemed to be evenly ranged among all women. An increase in positive attitudes towards marriage, however, tends to exist as age and year in college increase. For instance, all of the coed women who expressed impartiality or a negative attitude towards marriage were 18 or 19 years of age and freshmen. The majority of the women over and including 20 years of age felt positive about marriage. Thus, it is possible that age, too, affects marriage attitudes.

Table G. "What is your age?"

| age | (18) | (19) | (20) | (21) | (22+) |
|---|------|------|------|------|-------|
| women's dorms (35-base; 0-no answer) | 26% | 31% | 17% | 20% | 6% |
| coed dorms (28-base; 0-no answer) | 50% | 32% | 11% | 7% | 0% |

Other considerations such as children and careers seemed to relate to certain attitudes also. Those who wanted children felt marriage was likely in the future;

conversely, the majority of those who did not want children felt marriage unlikely. This is significant when compared to the text *Women, Wives, Mothers*, by J. Bernard (1975) which states:

Even in the ambiance of zero-population growth ideology, most girls are going to want to have babies, at least for the foreseeable future. In the past practically all have wanted to. With this central and built-in goal in mind . . . it has been almost impossible for . . . young women to invest themselves seriously in the pursuit of any other goal. (p. 31)

This suggests a basis for the continuation of marriage specifically for the purpose of bearing children.

Table H. "Would you like to have children in the future?"

| | Yes | Maybe | No |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| women's dorms (30-base; 5-no answer) | 66% | 17% | 17% |
| coed dorms (24-base; 4-no answer) | 67% | 12% | 21% |

The general reactions to a woman raising a child alone, pre-marital sex, and a woman maintaining a stable relationship with someone in addition to a career and/or raising children were very similar between the two dorm types. The mixed feelings toward a woman raising a child alone (not necessarily out of wedlock) combined with the desire to have children possibly suggests another ground for marriage.

Table I. "How do you feel about women raising children alone?"

| | positive | it's possible but difficult | negative |
|---|----------|--------------------------------|----------|
| women's dorms (32-base; 3-no answer) | 34% | 44% | 22% |
| coed dorms (28-base; 0-no answer) | 36% | 35% | 29% |

Table J. "Do you feel that one should be married to have sexual relations?"

| | Yes | No |
|---|-----|-----|
| women's dorms (33-base; 2-no answer) | 9% | 91% |
| coed dorms (27-base; 1-no answer) | 11% | 89% |

Table K. Can a woman have a stable relationship and/or raise children with a career of her own?

| | yes | yes but with difficulty |
|---|-----|----------------------------|
| women's dorms (35-base; 0-no answer) | 89% | 11% |
| coed dorms (28-base; 0-no answer) | 96% | 4% |

Women who "refused to let marriage hamper their careers" felt strongly in favor of most Women's Liberation Movement issues. Although the vast majority of women agreed with equal opportunity, equal pay and other career-oriented issues, a few expressed reservations, even negative attitudes, toward other issues. These women were from strong Christian or Catholic influences. What is significant here is not only the career-orientation of the women who question marriage, but the indications of their sex-role transcendence: being more "masculine" than men and more "feminine" than other women, strongly bearing marked traits of both sexes. (c.f. J. Bernard's study, 1975) No longer do they perceive their only alternative as marriage, "the man being the guardian of the family and the woman his helpmate and nurse of their children." (Westermarck, 1963: p. 5)

Table L. "What Women's Liberation issues, if any, do you agree with?"

| | Equal opportunity equal pay | some issues | most issues |
|---|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| women's dorms (35-base; 0-no answer) | 26% | 11% | 63% |
| coed dorms (24-base; 4-no answer) | 58% | 21% | 21% |

The basic behavior, past relationships with men and anticipated relationships of the women as a whole were almost equivocal. This tends to imply that the attitudinal changes occurring among women have little to do with previous relationships with men, but more important factors, such as, religion and parental relationships, as already mentioned. However, as the majority of the respondents were relatively young, as compared to an older group with perhaps more serious experiences with men and marriage plans, these behavioral factors could become more significant. (c.f. Table G., age factor).

Analysis of Attitudinal Types

After reviewing notes from the seven interviews conducted, I found an attitudinal range from extremely positive to extremely negative which revealed basic and typical differences between these two extremes. According to degree of positive or negative attitude, the interviewees may be arranged as follows: most positive — Julie; positive — Karen and Sue; impartial — Chris and Lynn; negative — Carol; and most negative — Lisa.

One of the most interesting discoveries of this study was the revealing of two prevalent "types," each a polar opposite of the other. Each was chosen from among the interviewees first as representative of the important influences and background associated with her own general attitude toward marriage. This contrast between Julie and Lisa presents the characteristic basis for the diverse attitudes towards marriage.

For example, Julie names Christianity as the strongest influence on her life decisions; although she was brought up with no particular religious background, her recent choice now governs her life. In contrast is Lisa, whose religious aspects of her Jewish background, she claims, are not important, however, “the traditional-cultural aspects are somewhat influential.” Their differences of opinion are revealed in their feelings about marriage in general:

Julie — I view marriage on a Biblical basis: it is a public commitment two adults make to each other, placing faith in each other and claims on each other in the eyes of society and God...

Lisa — The idea of marriage is extremely repugnant to me. It degenerates any relationship into the very basest of human endeavors.

Julie defines marriage in the traditional, religious sense: “Husband and wife living together legally licensed with Christian ceremony;” while Lisa defines marriage as: “Two miserable people legally living in entrapment.” For Julie, her Christian way of life allows for all decisions to be “under God’s will.” If marriage is “in her plan,” she will marry, if not, “that’s fine too.” She feels her parents’ relationship to be good:

They have always placed each other before themselves ultimately, and openly show and declare that they love each other. Yes, (this has influenced my attitude) in a small way, in that I can see that by finding the right person, a happy lasting relationship is possible and certainly desirable.

The poor relationship of Lisa’s parents has “definitely” influenced her attitude towards marriage:

Financial problems have definitely influenced my parents’ relationship, adding emotional stress to their already distressful marriage — because my mother is a housewife she has isolated herself from the rest of society. She is unfulfilled, bored and lonely. And since her children are no longer entirely dependent on her, she feels useless and without purpose. My father is not supportive and does not attempt to add meaning to her life.

The responses of the two women to the remaining influential factors are almost in exact opposition. Unlike Julie, Lisa has not held any positive, close relationships with men in the past, but intends “to hold many such relationships with men in the future.” In addition to her parents’ example of marriage, Lisa “observed the maleffects of marriage on other couples,” and felt feminist literature, such as the marriage essays by Emma Goldman, helped to influence her attitude.

Falling within the attitudinal spectrum between Julie and Lisa are five other informants, each woman having certain factors in common with either Julie or Lisa. For example, Karen’s religious feelings and her views on marriage are very similar to Julie’s. Christ is the major influence upon Karen’s life also, and she feels that marriage “is a beautiful union of a man and a woman the way God created it to be ... to be highly

respected.” Although Karen agrees that a woman can have a stable relationship with someone and/or raise children while maintaining a career,

(the woman) must take many things into account, possibly not maintaining a ‘full’ career so that she can be home with her children and have energy enough to keep up with her house and give love to her children and husband. What is life if you’re too tired to enjoy it?

I found Julie and Karen to be the most enthusiastic about marriage. It appears that the similar religious influence has had a vast effect upon their marriage attitudes. During the interviews, constant references to the Bible and the Christian viewpoints were made.

Another example of a typical positive response to marriage was given by Sue, who comes from a Catholic background which “plays a fairly large part now — but more so when I was younger....” Her feelings about marriage reflect the traditional acceptance of a woman’s future:

I guess I have always believed in the institution of marriage — but in recent years I have also looked at and examined the prospects of having a career while married.

Sue is presently engaged to be married and feels that her parents’ relationship has influenced her attitude; (she has) “always expected” that she “would get married after college.”

Wavering between a positive and negative attitude is an impartial response characterized by the views of Chris and Lynn. Chris expressed that marriage “would be interesting, but it is not necessary. I feel that living together is just as good. Marriage is something that makes the family happy — a legal ceremony — it’s just a piece of paper to me.” Chris is of no specific religious background, and sees living together with someone as possibly more attractive than actual marriage. Her parents were once divorced, and she remarked that her parents have influenced her attitude in that they reinforced what she had already thought.

Again, poor parental relationships may be strongly correlated with an impartial or negative attitude toward marriage. For instance, although Lynn feels “marriage is fine — but it’s not for me in the traditional sense,” she perceives her own parents’ relationship as intolerable. “It’s fine for them, but it would drive me crazy. My mom played the housewife role and my dad the provider — both were well entrenched.... (Their relationship) has influenced me in that it showed me how I wouldn’t want my marriage to be.” Lynn perceives living alone or living together outside of marriage as more attractive alternatives at different stages in her life. But she admits to possibly marrying for security and due to social pressure in the future.

Finally, Carol foresees a definite, personal alternative to marriage. Although her mother is of a Protestant background, she herself tends toward atheism.

She was one of the few respondents that I felt held a clearly formed attitude toward marriage, actively thought out and developed prior to answering the questionnaire. Carol expresses her feelings about marriage simply:

I don't like the idea of marriage. All it represents to me is a contract in which the state forces two people to remain together. I feel that the 'state' should have no control over my personal life. This does not mean that I don't expect to fall in love with some guy — it just means I won't marry him. That way, if we fall out of love we can just say goodbye and forget the legal aspects.

As an alternative she cites, "living with someone I love; that way, love is the only force which binds us together."

The formation of Carol's attitude stems largely from her occupational desires and the witnessing of the marriages of relatives and other people in general. Unlike Lisa's extreme feelings for her mother's situation and parents' marriage, Carol felt:

(her) parents had a good relationship because they treated each other equally. They shared the responsibilities of marriage and family raising. This has definitely influenced my attitude.... I have no desire to get married, become a 'housewife,' and devote the rest of my life to raising kids while my husband continues to develop as an individual.

Although her parents may have had a good relationship, she is unwilling to sacrifice her career in veterinary medicine for even a part-time housekeeper/child-raiser role. She realizes that her particular career interests are demanding enough alone for her, and that her feelings for any one person may readily change with time. Carol's attitude exemplifies the influence of role transcendence and a growing realization that, as Lynn remarked, "monogamy is not all it's cracked up to be."

Conclusion

Through both a quantitative and personal analysis, the present attitudes of some college dormitory women at the University of California, Berkeley, have been presented. The comparison of attitudinal extremes demonstrates the effects of sex-role re-evaluation and, particularly, parental relationships and religion upon the attitudes of women in today's culture. Although the traditional basis for marriage is far from being uprooted completely as witnessed by some 60% of the responses, new alternatives are definitely being discovered and actively supported by at least 20% of the women involved. Women are now re-examining their positions and questioning marriage.

Influential factors, such as religious beliefs, parental relationships, the decision to have children, age and career considerations, have revealed significant correlations with certain attitudes. For instance, those

women with strong religious (Catholic or Christian) feelings tended toward a positive attitude; conversely, those with little religious influence tended toward a negative attitude. Women who witnessed poor parental relationships and undesirable aspects of other marriages leaned toward the negative end of the scale. As age increased, the number of women with positive attitudes also grew. An expanding interest of women in maintaining careers of their own may also be linked to a negative or impartial attitude towards marriage. The total movement toward freedom from stereotyped women's roles has given greater impetus to the search for individual freedom and sex-role transcendence.

Although the implications of this study are certainly important, more thorough research is needed to further clarify the attitudes of women toward marriage and the impact of these attitudes upon future marriages and the traditional family unit.

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