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Cheap Sex is the “Inconvenient Truth” in the Retreat from Marriage

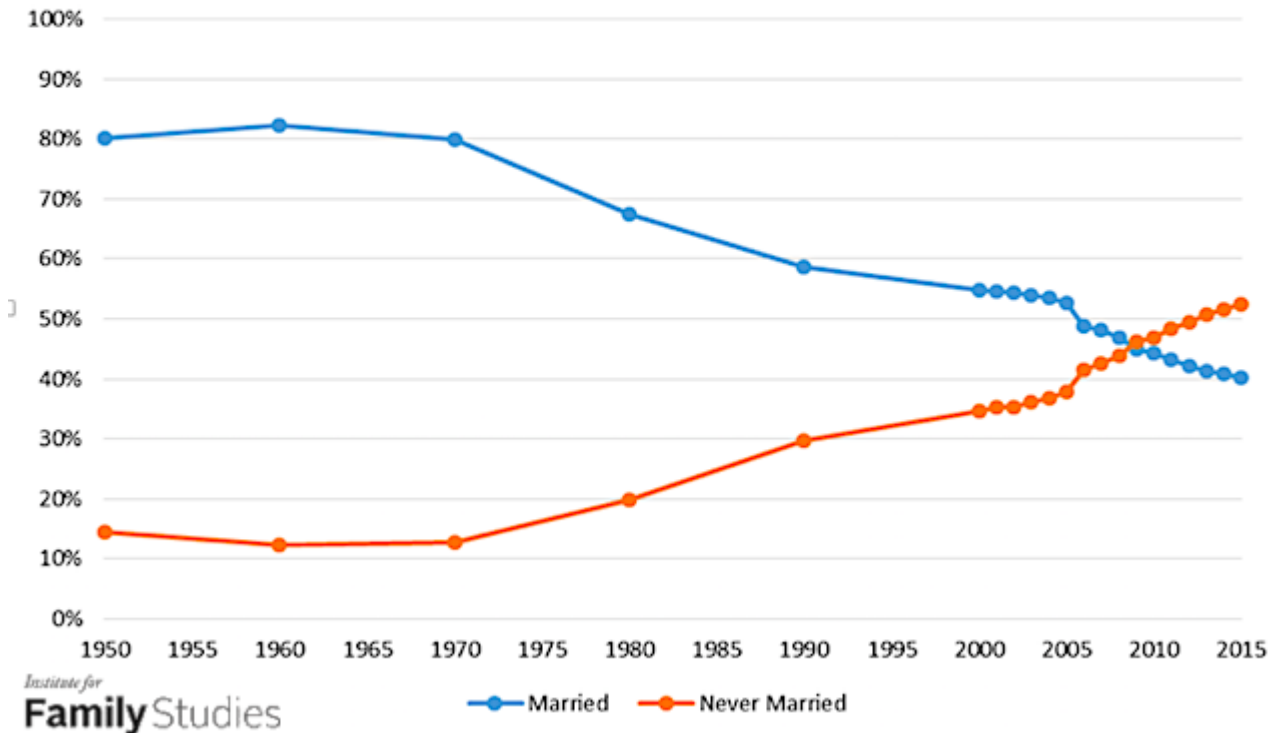
by Mark Regnerus

Highlights

- At best, porn will augment sex, and stall marriage. At worst, sexual technology could undermine coupled sex altogether.
 - Young adults can now avoid marriage without paying a sexual penalty.
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NYU Sociologist Paula England is right (<https://ifstudies.org/blog/is-the-retreat-from-marriage-due-to-cheap-sex-mens-waning-job-prospects-or-both>).¹ The retreat from marriage in America began in the late 1960s, took off in the 1970s, and continues to the present day (*see the figure below*). It concerns jobs—good ones—and their scarcity, especially for the less-educated men and women who have experienced the biggest declines in marriage.

Figure 1: Percent of Americans 25-34 Years of Age Who Are Married and Never Married, 1950-2015



But it's not all about jobs, as she concurs in her recent essay (<https://ifstudies.org/blog/is-the-retreat-from-marriage-due-to-cheap-sex-mens-waning-job-prospects-or-both>) on this blog. The advent and uptake of the pill was “the biggest game-changer” for relationships and marriage in the 1960s and 1970s, as England notes, and not just for women. That which enabled women to finish college, have careers, and delay childbearing—all the while navigating relationships—gave men more say over those relationships, especially over the timing of first sex within them, and now increasingly *before* them. That's one of the assertions of my book *Cheap Sex* (<https://www.amazon.com/Cheap-Sex-Transformation-Marriage-Monogamy/dp/0190673613/>). But we also agree that the pill “is clearly not the *whole* story of why age at marriage went up...” There's more to it—just like there's more to my book than the brief, adapted essay (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/cheap-sex-and-the-decline-of-marriage-1506690454>), “Cheap Sex and the Decline of Marriage,” that appeared recently in the *Wall Street Journal*. In this exchange, England and I debate the relative role that the wider “jobs” economy and the sexual economy have played in the post-1970s marriage slump. We agree on plenty, starting on page 11 of the book, where I make it clear that “men are languishing when compared with women,” in both higher education and in the labor force:

As recently as October 2016, the Bureau of Labor Statistics revealed that over 11 percent of men between the ages of 25 and 54—about seven million people—were neither employed nor seeking work. What are they doing, and why have they come to languish?

We agree that the most pronounced decline in marriage is among those without college degrees. As England notes, it is estimated that between 32-41% of Millennial men without such degrees will not have married by age 40. Why? That's the big question. I will presume from her argument (and logic) that women consider such men less marriageable—bad bets—because the prospect of future earnings still matters to women. Sociologist Ariella Kuperberg concurs, citing in the blog, *Scatterplot* (<https://scatter.wordpress.com/2017/10/09/guest-post-why-buy-the-cow-when-you-can-get-the-milk-for-free/>) her own study with Kristen Harknett (<https://academic.oup.com/sf/article-abstract/90/1/41/2235661?redirectedFrom=fulltext>), which concluded that “(i)f men had better job prospects, they were more likely to get married.” Granted. I am not disagreeing with the claim that the economic woes of men have contributed to their declining marriageability. Where I disagree is whether marriage rates will bounce back, should men's economic prospects brighten. I don't see it happening. (I would be happy to be wrong.) In other words, I do not think the retreat from marriage in America is driven solely by economic forces.

Young adults can now avoid marriage without paying a sexual penalty. This, I hold, matters particularly for men, who are—on average—slower to associate sex with emotional commitments and love.

Why am I skeptical? It's not just because the NBER study (<http://www.nber.org/papers/w23408>) I mentioned in the *WSJ* found no evidence of a fracking-driven increase in marriage rates. I'm skeptical because men seem to be suffering little “penalty” in terms of sexual access—an elemental desire that was, prior to the uptake of contraception, connected to fertility and marriage. I don't think our grandparents married “to be able to have sex,” as England puts it. I think they married earlier because many were already having sex and had learned what it could produce. The former was the case with my maternal grandparents, and I'm sure with many others. But sex that yields babies—and then marriage—is not *cheap* sex. Those days, however, are

long gone. Akerlof, Yellen, and Katz (https://www.jstor.org/stable/2946680?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) famously detail contraception’s role in curbing “shotgun” marriages.

In other words, regular sex meant eventual pregnancy, which enjoined men’s commitment and curbed women’s educational and career trajectory. No more. In the sexual exchange model—which is and will remain social reality—men now need to provide less to their partners to access sex (because it’s cheaper). And women require men’s resources less than before because the pill has enabled them to finish college and have careers. What’s happening is what we should expect when such a revolutionary technology is injected into the relationship economy. Hence, young adults can now avoid marriage without paying a sexual penalty. This, I hold, matters particularly for men, who are—on average—slower to associate sex with emotional commitments and love.

The Irony of Men’s Higher Education: Less Sex but Greater Marriageability

Ironically, what has emerged instead is that education and career—the twin achievements that make men marriageable—may exact their own penalties on sex for men. In the 2014 *Relationships in America* survey data—new analyses not reported in my book—23% of men ages 24-39 who have not completed high school report having had sex at least seven times in the past two weeks, well above the 5% of college-educated men and 4% of men with advanced degrees. What about high school graduates? Twenty-six percent of them report having had sex at least five times in the past two weeks, still above the 15% reported by college graduates. (More education is consistently *inversely* associated with recent sexual frequency among young men, even after obvious controls, including marital status.) On the other hand, only one-in-three high-school graduate men report pornography use in the past week, compared with 61% of college-educated men and 46% of those with graduate degrees. (This fits the “replacement” theory of sex and masturbation I’ve written about elsewhere (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10508-017-0975-8>).) Lest we presume these are uneducated braggarts overly subject to social desirability bias, they do not report far greater numbers of lifetime sex partners: only 11% of high-school graduate men report more than 15 partners.

More education may eventually be necessary for men to marry, but it is not required for sustained sexual access. In fact, it may be penalizing men sexually, with long hours and busy lives prompting their greater reliance on virtual sex than on real sex. This fits Jean Twenge’s recent

GSS-based study of declining sexual frequency

(<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10508-017-0953-1>) in America, even while the price of sexual access sinks. And it fits my observations

(<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/10/the-death-of-eros>) about the same; just because sexual access has eased and egalitarian relationships and joint careers have blossomed does not mean we should expect bedroom activities to similarly soar. In fact, the opposite appears to be occurring. Our sexual relationships have and will become more fragile. Remember, cheap sex doesn't just stall or prevent marriages; it's also good at ending them. In the *Relationships in America* data, nearly 30% of divorcees cited spousal infidelity for why they (themselves) wanted a divorce, and just under 12% of them listed their own extramarital relationship as a reason.

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None of this means that men universally seek to avoid real, sustained relationships. Enough of the exaggerations; the data show marriage in retreat, not utter collapse. But men remain more susceptible to ephemeral and virtual relationships—to what *Sex at Dawn* author Christopher Ryan referred to as “a kind of psychosexual obesity” (<https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/tinder-hook-up-culture-end-of-dating>). Such behavior does not foster the same relational benefits that accrue to disciplined self-giving like that expected in marriage. England's “fear about porn is that it normalizes sexual scripts sorely lacking in mutuality.” Yes, but I think that's just the beginning of the problems the industry now poses. At best, porn will augment—or compete with—sex, and stall marriage (<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/pal/eej/2016/00000042/00000003/art00001>). At worst, sexual technology threatens to undermine (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/28/style/virtual-reality-porn.html>) coupled sex altogether. Either way, more men and women lose out on the real relationships that are most likely to lead to their long-term flourishing.

Real relationships require socialization and social learning, and I fear that men are poorly trained—by technology, parents, friends, and the women they’re sleeping with—at how to cultivate and sustain them. This, too, is a downstream effect of cheap sex’s direct and indirect influence on their development. Can I prove it? No. Do I think the evidence suggests it? Absolutely. It’s why I wrote a book about it.

Why can’t I prove it? Because no one gets to “opt out” of a social world in which contraception is readily available and sex is cheap and no longer cognitively (closely) associated with fertility. It’s the air we breathe—the culture of the mating market—and there’s no variability in that unless you opt out altogether (which is very difficult). We have a historically new system that gave women control of their fertility at the cost of men’s having a greater say over (1) their ability to have sex in less committed relationships and (2) the pace at which those unions proceed. As marriage recedes culturally—that is, as few institutions reinforce it and respectable lives can be lived without it—I see no evidence to suggest marriage would notably and widely reemerge even if working-class men’s earnings rose. If the price of becoming marriageable in a world of cheap sex means more studying, more work, less free time, *and* less sex, the actions of men—especially working-class men—may be more rational than economists thought.

Mark Regnerus is associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and senior fellow at the Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture. He's the author of 40 articles and book chapters, as well as three books, the most recent of which was published in September. It is entitled Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/cheap-sex-9780190673611?cc=us&lang=en&>) (Oxford University Press).

1. I have found no more generous interlocutor and debater on matters of Americans’ relationship behavior than Paula England. Her intellectual curiosity is always on display, and she’s always willing to consider alternative perspectives. She is a treasure to our discipline.



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