

When to Marry, if at All? A Qualitative Exploration of How Sexual Minority Young Adults in the US Think About Marital Timing

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According to prior research, the average age at first marriage has steadily increased in the US due in large part to the significance that young adults place on marriage and their evolving conceptions of marital readiness. However, despite the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, there is a significant oversight of sexual minorities in this research. To address this, we draw upon qualitative data collected through an online survey to explore how our sample of unmarried sexual minority young adults ($N=256$) think about marital timing. The results of our thematic analysis show that those in our sample often think about marital timing in terms of “checkpoints,” circumstances or conditions such as financial security, college education, and/or personal maturity that they hope to achieve prior to getting married. Our survey respondents also reported considering their families and broader norms regarding age at marriage, and even those who indicated not wanting to marry reported that they might do so if their partner wants to marry, or they suddenly need the legal rights or benefits associated with marriage. These results suggest that sexual minority young adults think about marital timing and readiness in ways that are quite like heterosexual young adults.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, adolescents and young adults, marriage, marital timing, qualitative survey data, thematic analysis

Introduction

Researchers across multiple fields of inquiry have long been interested in not only whether people marry and what effects marriage has for them (Cherlin, 2004; Chiappori, 2020; Karney & Bradbury, 2020) but also “when” and “under what circumstances” they marry (Glenn et al., 2010; Manning et al., 2014). Researchers have paid significant attention to how young adults, typically defined as those between the ages of 18 and 35, think about marital timing. This research has been important in part because the timing of marriage has a significant influence on relational and individual well-being. For example, individuals who do not marry by their desired age have poorer mental health outcomes compared to those who either never marry or get married at their preferred age (Carlson, 2012; Lehrer, 2008; Sharp & Ganong, 2007; Uecker & Stokes, 2008). Furthermore, research on marital timing is also important because the median age at first marriage has increased so dramatically in the US that in recent years, historically unprecedented averages have been documented (Payne, 2021; Sassler & Lichter, 2020). Today, the average age at first marriage is approximately 28 for women and 30 for men (Payne, 2021). For these reasons, researchers have sought to understand how unmarried young adults, especially those who hope and expect to marry someday, think about the timing of marriage in the lives, highlighting not only specific ages at which young adults hope to marry – the ideal for most is approximately 25 (Carroll et al., 2009; Willoughby &

James, 2017) – but also their conceptions of marital readiness (Carroll et al., 2009; Edin et al., 2004; Edin & Reed, 2005; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Willoughby & James, 2017). Influenced in part by marital horizons and marital paradigms frameworks, researchers have documented that young adults see life accomplishments like completing a college education and/or achieving financial stability as well as personal qualities like maturity as symbolic indicators of marital readiness (Carroll et al., 2007; Willoughby et al., 2015; Willoughby, Carroll et al., 2012; Willoughby, Olson et al., 2012).

Importantly, though, research in this area has focused exclusively on heterosexual young adults, or those in different-sex relationships, if sexual orientation is even measured or reported. As such, researchers do not yet know how sexual minority young adults – that is, those who do not identify as heterosexual – think about marital timing. This is a significant oversight given the recent legalization of same-sex marriage in many parts of the world. In the US specifically, sexual minorities were granted equal access to legal marriage nationwide in 2015, with the Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Following this decision, sexual minorities across the US have exercised their newfound right to marry (Gates & Brown, 2015; Jones, 2021; Kamp Dush & Manning, 2022), and countless sexual minority young adults have begun to think about and plan for marriage within the context of their own lives (Hoy et al., 2021), something that would have been impossible only a few short years ago. Thus, to address the lack of scholarly research on the topic, in this article, we draw upon qualitative data collected from an online survey to analyze how sexual minority young adults ($N=256$) think about marital timing. The results of our thematic analysis illustrate how the unmarried sexual minorities in our sample, including those who want to marry and those who do not, think about when they will marry, if at all, and under what circumstances.

Background

Marital Timing

Scholarly research has long focused on marital timing in part because when couples marry matters for important relationship outcomes like divorce, with those who marry at earlier ages more likely to divorce compared to those who marry at later ages (Glenn et al., 2010; Lehrer, 2008; Uecker & Stokes, 2008). Furthermore, at the individual level, those who marry earlier or later than they had hoped or expected often experience social stigma and negative mental health outcomes as a result (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2020; Carlson, 2012; Sharp & Ganong, 2007). Thus, the timing of marriage is relevant for the long-term success and well-being of both the relationship itself and the individuals within it. Another reason for scholarly interest in marital timing is the fact that the average age at first marriage has increased dramatically in recent decades (Lesthaeghe, 2014; Manning et al., 2014). In the US specifically, the median age at first marriage has increased every decade since 1950 (Sassler & Lichter, 2020) and is now approximately 28 for women and 30 for men, both of which are historic highs (Payne, 2021). This trend has been driven by numerous macro-level developments, including the rise of premarital cohabitation, which has allowed many young couples to practice a “trial marriage” before getting legally married (Manning et al., 2014; Sassler & Lichter, 2020). In addition, as the cultural model of marriage as a “cornerstone” has been supplanted by one of marriage as a “capstone,” a greater number of young adults have chosen to prioritize completing a college education and/or achieving financial stability, leading more and more to delay the transition to marriage (Cherlin, 2004). Related, according to Cherlin (2004, 2020), the rising average age at first marriage and the declining marriage rate overall are both indicative of a larger process of “de-institutionalization” occurring within marriage, whereby getting married has become a less compulsory and more individualized experience.

The marital paradigms framework outlines multiple ways that adolescents and young adults might think about marriage, including both how they might think about the marital relationship itself and how they might think about the circumstances surrounding the transition to marriage (Willoughby et al., 2015). In terms of age, research suggests that young adults most often regard 25 as the ideal age at which to marry (Carroll et al., 2009; Willoughby & James, 2017). For example, in their survey of over 700 young adults, Willoughby and James (2017, p. 49) found that 38% pointed to 25 as the exact age at which they would like to marry. Interestingly, though, the average age at which respondents expected to marry was slightly above 26, with significant variation among those surveyed (Willoughby & James, 2017, p. 50). Thus, many young adults expect to marry at a later age than they would like.

More broadly, young adults appear to consider many factors when thinking about their readiness for marriage. Aside from the question of age, young adults often consider whether they possess personal qualities that they see as necessary for marriage, such as their interpersonal competence, their ability to comply with important social norms, and their relative independence as adults. Relying on data collected via the Criteria for Marriage Readiness Questionnaire (CMRQ), Carroll et al. (2009) show that young adults tend to consider factors such as whether they can “be respectful of others when dealing with differences,” whether they are “able to discuss personal problems with others,” and whether they can “use contraception if sexually active and not trying to conceive a child.” Closely related to their independence as adults, obtaining a college degree and/or achieving financial stability through gainful employment are essential components of marital readiness for most young adults (Carroll et al., 2009; Edin et al., 2004; Edin & Reed, 2005; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Willoughby & James, 2017). For example, in their study of unmarried, low-income parents, Gibson-Davis et al. (2005) found that financial concerns, including financial instability, irresponsible spending habits, and struggles to acquire assets like a home, all serve as the most common barrier to marriage among those who want to marry. Indeed, while those who are poor continue to delay or even forgo marriage (McLanahan, 2004; Smock & Schwartz, 2020), this partly reflects the fact that financial stability functions as an indicator of marital readiness for young adults across socioeconomic lines. According to Kefalas et al. (2011), young adults in rural areas tend to be “marriage naturalists” because the financial stability required for marriage comes relatively early in the life course due to the blue-collar labor markets and low cost of living found in rural areas. In contrast, young adults in urban areas tend to be “marriage planners” because establishing a career and accumulating resources often requires years in the more competitive labor markets and more costly housing markets found in urban areas (Kefalas et al., 2011).

Research suggests that young adults’ preferences and expectations regarding marital timing are influenced by numerous factors, including their past relationship experiences as well as their parents’ marital attitudes and behaviors (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2017; Crissey, 2005; Plotnick, 2007; Willoughby, Carroll et al., 2012; Willoughby & James, 2017). Furthermore, research has shown that gender, race, and socioeconomic status all shape how young adults think about marital timing (Carroll et al., 2007; Crissey, 2005; Edin et al., 2004; Edin & Reed, 2005; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Kefalas et al., 2011). However, researchers have thus far overlooked or ignored sexual orientation. Thus, it remains unclear whether heterosexual and sexual minority young adults differ in terms of how they think about marital timing. To date, research has not yet explored how sexual minority young adults think about when they will marry, which is a significant oversight given that sexual minority young adults across the US now have equal access to legal marriage.

Same-Sex Marriages

Following the legalization of same-sex marriage across the US in 2015, the number of married sexual minorities increased significantly (Gates & Brown, 2015; Kamp Dush & Manning, 2022). Today, approximately 5% of the US population identifies as a sexual minority, and approximately 21% of all sexual minorities are married, although over half are married to a different-sex spouse (Jones, 2021). According to data from the United States Census Bureaus (2019), there are approximately 543,000 US households currently headed by a married same-sex couple. In terms of timing, early evidence suggests that sexual minorities tend to marry for the first time at a later age than do heterosexuals. For example, Payne and Manning (2021) show that among women in same-sex marriages, the median age at first marriage is 31 compared to 28 for women in different-sex marriages. Likewise, among men in same-sex marriages, the median age at first marriage is 35 compared to 30 for men in different-sex marriages. Importantly, though, these averages for women and men in same-sex marriages are likely elevated to some extent by the fact that many same-sex couples were together for years or even decades prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage and were thus forced to delay getting married until changes in either state or federal law permitted doing so (Riggle et al., 2017; Rothblum et al., 2008). Although many long-term same-sex couples who are now married likely would have married sooner had they been able to, research has yet to explore how married same-sex couples thought about or planned for the timing of their marriages.

Furthermore, as we note above, research has not yet explored how unmarried sexual minority young adults think about when they will get married, if at all. Given that prior research has focused on unmarried young adults aged 18 to 35, including those who are single or cohabiting, in this article, we also focus on unmarried young adults in this age range but limit our focus to those who identify as sexual minorities. Although it is quite limited, some research does suggest that most in this population hope and expect to marry someday. For example, a 2001 survey by Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2001) found that approximately three-quarters of all sexual minority adults reported wanting to marry. More recently, Bailey (2022) found that being satisfied with one's relationship is associated with a stronger desire to marry among unmarried sexual minorities.

In this article, we draw upon qualitative data collected through an online survey to explore how our sample of unmarried sexual minority young adults ($N=256$) think about marital timing. Reflecting the themes of marital readiness in the research literature (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2020; Carroll et al., 2009; Edin et al., 2004; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005), we examine what our participants feel they will need, either in themselves or their broader life circumstances, before getting married, and we explore other additional factors that shape their thinking with respect to marital timing. Finally, because a subset of our participants who reported not wanting to marry offered their perspectives on marital timing, we also explore the circumstances under which they would consider getting married. Overall, our goal in this article is to diversify the research literature on marital timing within the current US context by offering a thematic analysis of the perspectives of unmarried sexual minority young adults. We believe this is important because, as sexual minorities ourselves, we are invested in conducting research that draws attention and visibility to the voices and experiences of the LGBTQ+ community.

Data and Methods

Data Collection

In this article, we draw upon qualitative data collected through an online survey administered via Qualtrics between February and April of 2021. Although the survey contained

several closed-ended questions about marital timing that enable a more quantitative analysis, we analyze qualitative data here because qualitative data and approaches are best suited to understanding individual perceptions and meanings (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Lamont & Swidler, 2014), and we aim to describe how a sample of sexual minority young adults in the US perceive marital timing and the meaning it might have in their lives. To be eligible to participate, individuals had to be (a) living in the United States, (b) between the ages of 18 and 35, and (c) identify as non-heterosexual (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual). We chose an online survey as the method of data collection for several reasons. First and foremost, given the affordability and efficiency of the method (Braun et al., 2021), an online survey enabled us to gather a larger and more diverse national sample than would have been possible had we used an alternative method such as in-depth interviews. This is especially meaningful given the racial, sexual, gender, and socioeconomic diversity of the LGBTQ+ community that is too often overlooked or ignored in research on the family lives of sexual minorities (Reczek, 2020). Furthermore, online surveys are an especially useful method of data collection for research on vulnerable populations as they allow for greater participant anonymity. For this reason, online surveys have been widely used in research on sexual minorities, including for qualitative analyses (Hoy et al., 2021; Jowett & Peel, 2009; Peel, 2010).

Still, there are limitations associated with online surveys, especially for qualitative analysis. Most obviously, unlike methods such as in-depth interviewing, surveys do not allow for follow-up questions for additional detail or clarity. As such, survey data, even collected via open-ended questions, often lacks the richness or depth more easily achieved through interviewing. For example, some of our respondents wrote brief comments in response to our open-ended questions, sometimes containing only a few words. Fortunately, though, many respondents wrote more lengthy comments and included vivid details, which is evidenced both by the many quotes provided below and the average completion time of just over 30 minutes. Although in-depth interviews may have been an ideal method of data collection for our study (Lamont & Swidler, 2014), we likely sacrificed some degree of richness and depth in our qualitative data for a larger and more diverse sample.

Upon receiving formal approval from the Minnesota State University, Mankato Institutional Review Board (IRB), we solicited participation for our study using a convenience sampling approach. Specifically, the second author, Sachita, designed two different flyers, each with key information about participation and a link to the survey, and distributed these using social media; specifically, we posted the flyer in multiple Facebook groups for young adults who belong to the LGBTQ+ community, and we distributed the flyer on Twitter (now X) using hashtags that are visible and relevant to sexual minorities (e.g., #LGBTQ). Individuals who were interested in participating could click or tap the link in either flyer or were then redirected to the survey page in Qualtrics, where they were first presented with information concerning informed consent. After reading this, individuals were asked to confirm their eligibility and consent to participate, at which point they were redirected to the survey itself. Upon completion of the survey, respondents were also given the option to enter their email address for a random drawing for 21 Amazon.com gift cards, each one worth \$50. In total, after removing those who were ineligible and those who were missing key data (i.e., whether they want to marry someday), 256 individuals were left in our final sample for this analysis.

Sample Description

The respondents in our sample range in age from 18 to 35, with a median age of 26, and they were all in the US at the time of the study. Our sample is relatively homogenous in terms of race, with 190 respondents identifying as White (74%). Twenty-one respondents identify as Hispanic or Latinx (8%), and 18 said that they are multi-racial (7%). In terms of

gender, women make up a little more than half of our sample (150, or 59%) while men make up slightly less than one-quarter (57, or 22%). Notably, 35 of our respondents indicated that they identify as non-binary (14%), and 48, or just under one-fifth of the sample (19%), identify as transgender. Although neither gender nor gender identity are focal points in our analysis, the gender diversity within our sample is worth highlighting given how little gender minorities have been included in families research (London, 2022; Reczek, 2020). Similarly, our sample is relatively diverse in terms of sexual orientation, with 113 respondents identifying as bisexual (44%) and 79 identifying as either gay or lesbian (31%). A full one-quarter of our respondents (64, or 25%) chose to self-describe their sexual identity, the vast majority of whom identify as queer. Given the over-representation of gay men and lesbians in LGBTQ+ families research (Reczek, 2020; Scherrer et al., 2015), the number of bisexual and queer-identified respondents in our sample is another strength worth highlighting.

Data Analysis

The survey was designed by the first author, Aaron, and it contained 94 questions in total, including seven open-ended questions. The data for this analysis was drawn from an open-ended question that asked about marital timing specifically, which read: “When would you like to get married, if at all? In other words, at what age or life stage would you prefer to get married? And why?” For this analysis, we extracted all written responses to this question into a separate data file, along with key attitudinal (e.g., whether they want to marry or have children) and sociodemographic (e.g., race, sexual orientation) information for each response. We then conducted a thematic analysis of this data file using an approach that mostly closely aligns with reflexive thematic analysis, which is inductive and sees themes as “shared meaning-based patterns” (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019; Morgan, 2022, p. 2081). We chose to conduct a thematic analysis because our goal was simply to describe how the respondents in our sample think about marital timing, and thematic analysis is a way of identifying themes, or patterns in the data (Morgan, 2022, p. 2080). As a professor-student research team, Aaron, the first author, participated in the analysis process while also coaching the second author, Sachita.

We began by carefully reading and re-reading the data file to become familiar with the data, writing informal memos throughout this process. During this stage, we recognized the need to separate responses from individuals who want to marry someday and those from individuals who do not want to marry. As such, we reorganized the data file by grouping the responses according to the respondent’s marital aspirations and then analyzed the data from these groups separately. Reflecting this, the results below are organized into two major sections: the first focuses on respondents who do want to marry, and the second focuses on those who do not want to marry. Then, we created initial codes using an open coding approach (Charmaz, 2006). Through additional memo-writing, we identified preliminary themes by categorizing our initial codes and then examining similarities and differences between these categories. For example, it was through this process that the distinction between “checkpoints” and non-checkpoints – what we describe below as “Additional Factors” – came into focus. We then re-coded the data using focused codes from our thematic categories, and from this, we revised and reconceptualized our themes and sub-themes, again through memo-writing. To enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of our results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we conducted each round of coding separately, and during focused coding, we discussed the few instances where data were coded differently to reconcile these interpretive differences.

In our results below, we first describe our respondents who do want to marry and how they think about marital timing. This section is divided up according to two major themes: what we call “checkpoints” and “additional factors,” both of which were developed through initial coding and categorization via memo-writing. Each of these themes is then divided up into sub-

themes, all of which were first identified during initial coding and were refined through focused coding; under "checkpoints," these include finances, education, and careers; maturity; and it feels "right"; under "additional factors," sub-themes include parenthood, family, and society. Then, toward the end of our results, we shift our focus to those respondents who do not want to marry. This section is much shorter and features less thematic complexity because, as we note below, most of the respondents in our sample do want to marry someday. Still, we highlight two key themes in how these respondents think about marital timing: partner preference and legal security. We also identified these themes through initial coding and then refined them through focused coding and memo-writing.

Results

Of the 256 sexual minority young adults in our sample, 155 indicated that they either strongly agree or agree with the statement, "I want to get married someday." Thus, more than half of our sample (60.5%) hope to marry at some point in the future. In the first two sections below, we describe how these respondents think about the question of marital timing. Many indicated that they would be ready and willing to marry only if they first met one or more "checkpoints," prerequisite conditions or circumstances that would give them confidence in themselves and/or the relationship long-term. In the first section below, with the help of respondents' direct quotes, we detail these various "checkpoints," including (a) financial security, a college education, and/or an established career, (b) personal maturity, and (c) marriage "feels right." Then, in the second section, we describe additional factors that many said influence their thinking about marital timing. Although these factors are not checkpoints *per se*, they each play a key role in how some sexual minority young adults think about when they will marry in the future. As we show, these factors include parenthood as well as expectations and pressure from family and society.

Still, not all our respondents want to marry. In fact, in our sample of 256, 59 (23%) said that they are unsure of whether they would like to marry, and another 42 (16.4%) said that they do not want to. As expected, those who indicated that they do not want to marry often responded to the survey question about marital timing with a brief sentence affirming their disinterest in marriage. For example, one respondent wrote, "I don't desire marriage nor make life goals around it" (29, Gay, Male, Cisgender). However, a few of these respondents did indicate that they might be willing to consider marriage under a narrow set of circumstances or conditions, including if their partner wants to marry or if they needed any of the many legal benefits attached to marriage. Thus, in the third section below, we briefly describe these respondents and when they might marry if they do at all.

"Checkpoints" Before Marriage

Finances, Education, and Careers

Among those respondents who described a "checkpoint" they would need to meet to marry, the most cited was financial security or stability. For these respondents, having sufficient and steady income and/or accumulated wealth is necessary to feel ready for marriage. As one respondent (28, Bisexual, Female, Cisgender) wrote enthusiastically, "Late thirties so I actually have money!" Like this respondent, many connected financial security to either a specific age or an age range by which they hope or assume they will be financially secure. For example, another wrote, "If I could get married, I would like to get married in my 30s, when we are more stable financially than we are now" (28, Gay, Male, Cisgender). These respondents

believe they will likely have achieved financial security or stability by a specific age or age range and thus would like to marry at or around that age.

In terms of their reasoning, one respondent did indicate that she is unclear as to why having her finances in order is important before marriage, writing, “I’d like to have more money saved up before I get married, but I’m not sure why exactly” (32, Bisexual, Female, Cisgender). However, most other respondents articulated a clearer reason as to why financial security or stability is important to them. A common reason cited by many, perhaps surprisingly, is the wedding itself. Given the significant costs associated with weddings, many respondents explained that they want to be financially secure before getting married so that they can afford the type of wedding they would prefer. For example, one respondent wrote, “I would like to get married around mid to late twenties, so I have money to spend on the wedding” (19, Bisexual, Female, Cisgender). Another wrote, “In about 3 or 4 years, when I’m finished with graduate school and have some type of career, with enough money to not go into debt for a wedding” (24, Queer, Female, Cisgender).

As this second quote illustrates, many respondents also tied their future financial stability to completing a college education and/or settling into a long-term career, which is to be expected given the significant number of full-time college students in our sample (121, or 47.2%). These respondents explained that securing a college degree and establishing themselves professionally would, in their view, give them the financial security they feel is needed before marriage. For example, one respondent wrote, “I’d prefer to get married after I finish school, am established in my career, and have the financial means to do so. I would prefer my partner be in a similar situation as well” (26, Gay, Male, Cisgender). Thus, for this respondent, along with a few others, a college education, and a career, plus the financial stability they assume this will provide, is necessary not only for themselves but for a potential spouse, too.

However, other respondents prioritize completing a college education and establishing a career without tying these “checkpoints” to financial security. These respondents emphasized that a college education and launching a career both take significant time and energy, which they worry would be difficult to balance alongside a new marriage. As one respondent wrote:

I’ll wait until I’m finished [with] my graduate degree, as I would rather enter marriage with the ability to engage fully with my partner right from the beginning to set the tone for the new stage of the relationship, to be able to immediately work on issues as they arise (without the extra distractions and stress of school & work & daily life). I am currently still in graduate school and am not actively dating due to just wanting to be finished and also not being in the right mindset to be in a relationship where I wouldn’t be able to invest enough time and energy that would be fair for me or a partner. (27, Queer, Female, Cisgender)

For this respondent and others, having their time divided between their education and/or career and a new marriage would likely be challenging and thus may result in stress and conflict. As such, delaying marriage until after they have completed an education and/or established a career would reduce demands on these respondents’ time and energy. Echoing the significance of weddings once again, one respondent expressed a similar idea but with respect to the wedding specifically:

I would like to get married in my early or mid-thirties when my career and finances are settled more and are on a smoother and more stable track. I can’t really see getting married before that [because] even if I was with the same

person for a long time, organizing a wedding and starting a marriage seems like it would be more stress than what you would gain with chaos or instability in your career/finances at the same time. (23, Lesbian, Female, Cisgender)

Whereas other respondents indicated that needing to balance an education and/or a career with a new marriage would negatively affect their marital dynamics and perhaps even the stability of the relationship, this respondent focused specifically on the wedding and how difficult it would be to plan a wedding ceremony while also completing a college degree and/or building a career.

Maturity

Another common “checkpoint” for the sexual minority young adults in our sample is maturity, which, like financial security, many connected to a specific age or age range. Many respondents believe that to be happy in marriage and for the marriage to last, they must first mature as adults. For some, this is simply because marriage itself is a major life decision and they want to be sure they are mature enough to make such a decision. For example, one respondent wrote, “I would like to get married in my late 20s or early 30s because at this age is when a person reaches the maturity to make big lifelong decisions and make a commitment to marry someone” (21, Bisexual, Male, Cisgender). Another reason for seeing maturity as a “checkpoint” is the need for respondents to feel set in who they are before making a lifelong commitment to another person. One respondent spoke to this in writing, “I want to establish myself before devoting my life to someone else. I think marriage takes work and commitment that can't be achieved as a young person who is still figuring themselves out” (20, Bisexual, Male, Transgender). For these respondents, being mature is necessary not so much to make the decision to marry but rather to be a good spouse who can fully participate in the marriage and work with their spouse to address issues in the relationship.

Closely related to this, several younger respondents said that they want to enjoy their time as individuals before settling down to build a life with another person. These respondents, all of whom do want to marry, nevertheless assume that being married will limit their individual autonomy or freedom and thus want to hold off marriage until they have had what they feel is adequate time to themselves. For example, a 21-year-old respondent wrote that she wants to get married in her “late 20s/early 30s. [That is] enough time to be individual people outside of the marriage but also then you get to spend most of your lives together” (Bisexual, Female, Cisgender). A few respondents also expressed wanting to wait to marry to learn from other people's marriages. As one respondent wrote, “I expect to get married after 35, because at that time there will be many people around me who will get married, and I will learn from their experience.” (30, Bisexual, Male, Transgender). For these respondents, marriage is a serious matter, one that they want to observe and understand before they get married themselves.

It Feels “Right”

A final “checkpoint” mentioned by many respondents was simply that marriage “feels right” to them. Setting aside many of the practical concerns that are central to other respondents' thoughts and plans for marriage, these respondents hope to marry whenever they get the feeling that doing so would be good and desirable. For example, some respondents emphasized their personal happiness. One said, “Whenever I feel purely happy about getting married and have no reservations, then I would get married. Age doesn't matter” (31, Bisexual, Female, Cisgender). In contrast, several respondents indicated that when they will marry depends entirely on when they meet the right person and/or when their relationship reaches a

stage at which marriage seems appropriate. For example, one respondent wrote, “I have no particular life stage that I think is best for marriage. It would depend on when I met a person I wanted to marry” (29, Bisexual, Questioning, Transgender). Another said, “I’d like to get married when I felt like my relationship was stable and could only get better from there. I don’t think that it is relative to an age or life stage but rather the stability and promise of the relationship.” (26, Queer, Female, Cisgender). Thus, whereas some respondents will look to themselves and how they feel as an individual to know when they will marry, others will look to the relationship and how it is going. A part of this latter group, a few participants explained that their openness to marrying whenever it seems right will strengthen their eventual marriage. Citing the potential harm of marrying to meet “expectations,” one respondent wrote, “I would like to get married when the both of us feel that that is the right moment. Rushing into it or giving in on social or the other partner’s expectations might impact negatively the marriage” (25, Bisexual, Male, Cisgender).

Importantly, as several of the foregoing quotes illustrate, those who said that getting married must “feel right” often emphasized that this could occur at any age or life stage. Thus, unlike respondents who prioritize achieving financial security, a college education, and/or an established career before marriage, and unlike those who prioritize growing into mature adults before marrying, those who said that marriage should “feel right” were less likely to mention a specific age or age range by which they would like to marry. In fact, many explicitly rejected the idea of an ideal age or life stage for getting married. As one respondent wrote, “I do not think there is a right age to get married. If I have to wait until I’m 78, I will” (26, Gay, Male, Cisgender). As this quote illustrates, many of these respondents said that they would be happy to wait until later life, long after normative ages for first marriage, if doing so would mean that getting married feels right to them.

Additional Factors

Parenthood

Some of our respondents answered the survey question about marital timing by thinking about their future as a parent. Among these respondents, some know that they want to be a parent in the future, while others want to leave the option open as they are currently considering whether to be a parent. In either case, parenthood is a significant influence on how they think about marital timing. For example, one respondent who knows that she wants to be a parent wrote, “I would like to get married by the time I’m 30. I don’t want to have children until I’m married, and I would like to have children by the time I’m 35” (20, Bisexual, Female, Cisgender). In contrast, a respondent who is not as sure he would like to be a parent wrote, “I would prefer to get married by the age of 35 or so, to potentially start a family” (21, Queer, Male, Transgender). Regardless of their certainty, most of these respondents want to marry at an age that would work well, in their view, if they were to become a parent a few years after that. However, one respondent thought in even longer terms, noting that he would like to become a parent young enough that he could eventually spend time with his children as adults: “I would like to be married in my early 30s because I would like to have children and want to have them be around when they are adults” (29, Gay, Male, Cisgender).

Notably, several respondents who mentioned becoming a parent highlighted the challenges sexual minorities often encounter in the process. For example, a lesbian respondent wrote:

I would like to get married in my late twenties or early thirties. I want to be able to enjoy a whole life with my partner and give us time to have kids since that's a complicated process for us. (25, Lesbian, Female, Cisgender)

For these respondents, because having children through adoption and/or with assisted reproductive technologies will likely be a long (and expensive) process, they feel they need to marry early enough to have children at a convenient age.

Family

On the same note of wanting time with family, several respondents explained that their views on marital timing are influenced by their families of origin. Some feel explicitly pressured by their families to get married. For example, one respondent wrote:

When compared to my parents, and by them always asking when me and my boyfriend are going to get married/have kids, I feel as if I am behind and that I should have already been married by now. I believe my parents were already married at my age, so that gives me some expectations for my life. (24, Polysexual, Female, Cisgender)

Thus, in this respondent's case, family pressure comes in multiple forms, including examples set by family members and their repeated questions about marriage. One respondent explained that she wants to marry in time to celebrate with family members; citing the passing of her mother, she wrote:

I would like to get married a couple years from now - maybe 2024, (young adult) so I can celebrate with my friends and family while they are still alive, I wish my mom could be here for that. Waiting too long may mean it's too late for these moments. (22, Bisexual, Female, Cisgender)

Interestingly, as the two prior quotes illustrate, respondents who mentioned their families also tended to want to marry relatively early. For example, both respondents quoted here – a 24-year-old cisgender woman who identifies as polysexual and a 22-year-old bisexual, cisgender woman – want to marry in their early-to-mid-twenties. In contrast, other respondents were more likely to say they would like to marry in their late-twenties or early-to-mid-thirties.

Society

An approximately equal number of respondents explained that they are not influenced by their families specifically but by society. These respondents noted the social norms that exist with respect to marital timing and said that they feel pressured by these to marry at or by a particular age. For example, one respondent wrote, "I would prefer to get married by the time I turn 30 just so I can fit in with societies expectations" (23, Bisexual, Female, Cisgender).

Building on this, another respondent, a 25-year-old cisgender woman who identifies as lesbian, noted that the social norms surrounding the timing of marriage are gendered; expressing frustration, she wrote:

I would like to be married by 30. I am very insecure about the idea of finding someone after that, because by that age so many people (at least to my perception) are already married. Also, as a woman I think I've gotten the

message from society that I have a kind of "expiration date," after which someone had better already be committed to me, or it won't happen. Despite being a lesbian, that message is certainly still with me. I'm 25 and already feel kind of insecure about the whole thing.

Research suggests that individuals who do not marry by a normative age often struggle to accept and make sense of the stigma that comes because of this (Eck, 2013; Sharp & Ganong, 2007). These respondents clearly perceive these norms and feel anxious about fulfilling them, leading most to want marriage by a relatively early age. One respondent, though, noted the social norms around marital timing, and how intensely they are applied to women, but explained that she rejects them anyway; she wrote:

I could marry at 70 and be ok. I know society places pressure, especially on women, to marry before they hit a certain age and the idea of women in their 40s being unmarried is sometimes sneered at (spinster, etc.), but I think these attitudes are slowly changing. (30, Bisexual, Female, Cisgender)

Those Who May Not/Do Not Want to Marry

Partner Preference

In both sections above, the respondents we describe all want to marry someday, as does most of our sample (60.5%). However, there were several respondents who reported feeling unsure of whether they want to marry (23%), and some said that they do not want to marry (16.4%). Still, among those who are either unsure of marriage or do not want to marry, a handful indicated in response to our open-ended survey question about marital timing that they may be willing to get married at some point. For most, this depends on whether getting married is something their partner wants or insists on. For example, one respondent wrote, "I don't hope to get married, though I do hope to find a long-term partner. I would be willing to get married if it was really important to my partner" (29, Bisexual, Female, Cisgender). Another, who is somewhat less sure of whether she wants to marry, commented, "Just depends on if I were to find the right person, and if they really wanted to. If I never got married, I'd be fine with that" (20, Asexual, Female, Cisgender). To these respondents, marriage is not a matter of "when" but a matter of "if," and what seems to matter most is whether their partner wants to marry and pushes them to do so.

Legal Security

Finally, a small group of respondents who are adamant that they do not want to marry suggested that they might be willing to nevertheless if it were a matter of legal security. Given the legal benefits associated with marriage, including those related to insurance, taxation, parenthood, and citizenship status, these respondents said that in the unforeseen event that one or more of these became necessary for either their partner or themselves, they would agree to marry. However, they stressed that they do not anticipate facing such circumstances. In response to the survey question about when respondents would like to marry, if at all, one wrote,

"Never. However, if it is required for legal reasons (adoption of a child, for instance, or residency rights, or citizenship, etc.) then I'll do it. But not happily at all" (30, Bisexual, Female, Cisgender). Another wrote, "I wouldn't. However, if I were going to it would be when I am older with an established partner and likely for legal reasons like medical visitation rights"

(27, Bisexual, Non-Binary, Transgender). Although legal security is often cited by married sexual minorities as one of several motivations for marriage (Kimport, 2014; Richman, 2014), these respondents appear distinct in that they would strongly prefer not to marry at all and will only do so in what they consider a legal emergency.

Discussion

The primary contribution of our results is that they reflect the voices and perspectives of sexual minority young adults, who have thus far been overlooked in the existing research on marital timing. In general, these results suggest that sexual minority young adults think about the timing of marriage within their own lives in ways that are quite like those found among heterosexual young adults. For instance, the “checkpoints” we describe above closely resemble key themes in the research on marital readiness among heterosexual young adults (Arocho & Kamp Dush, 2020; Carroll et al., 2009; Edin et al., 2004; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Many of the sexual minority young adults in our sample pointed to financial security as a “checkpoint” to meet before getting married, along with completing a college education and/or establishing a stable career, echoing the heterosexual young adults described in previous studies (Carroll et al., 2009; Edin et al., 2004; Edin & Reed, 2005; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Willoughby & James, 2017). In fact, many even explained their prioritizing financial security in similar ways. For example, many explained that being financially secure, and having already obtained a college degree, will reduce conflict, and promote the long-term happiness and stability of the marriage itself. As such, for these respondents, the emphasis on achieving financial security before marriage reflects an underlying desire for a strong and satisfying marital relationship, much as it does for many heterosexual young adults (Edin et al., 2004; Edin & Reed, 2005; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Kefalas et al., 2011; Willoughby & James, 2017). In addition, our respondents who pointed to the wedding ceremony, and the high costs associated with it, are quite like heterosexual young adults who say that they delay marriage because they want to have a “real” wedding rather than simply “going down to the courthouse” (Edin et al., 2004; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Aside from financial security, the sexual minority young adults in our sample also highlighted personal maturity as a “checkpoint” for marriage, again echoing many heterosexual young adults for whom becoming a mature often serves as a key indicator of marital readiness (Carroll et al., 2009; Willoughby & James, 2017).

Still, there are a few ways that, based on our results, sexual minority young adults might think about marital timing distinctly. First, among our survey respondents who indicated wanting to marry, “feeling right” is another key “checkpoint” for marriage. That is, for these respondents, getting married can only happen when they feel that doing so would be right, either because they personally feel ready, or they judge the relationship to be ready. Furthermore, these respondents do not expect such feelings to develop at any particular age or life stage, as most were emphatic that they would welcome “feeling right,” and thus getting married, relatively late in life. In essence, these respondents are unwilling to tie the timing of their hoped-for marriage to more concrete or specific milestones or achievements, constructing instead looser, more flexible checkpoints that allow them to rely on instinct.

Beyond the framework of marital readiness altogether, many in our sample spoke to additional factors that influence their thinking with respect to marital timing. These factors, including family and societal norms or expectations, are not circumstances or conditions that must be met for our respondents to feel ready to marry, but even so, they compel them to marry at earlier ages. For example, some respondents want to marry soon so that their family members can attend the wedding and see and validate the relationship. Research has not yet documented similar considerations among heterosexual young adults, and this may reflect the fact that same-sex relationships are only now legitimized through marriage in a way that different-sex

couples have long taken for granted (Kimport, 2014; Ocobock, 2013). Other respondents want to marry early to conform with societal norms that pressure women to marry at a certain age or life stage. Although individuals who have not yet married by a normative age often report feeling stigmatized (Eck, 2013; Sharp & Ganong, 2007), research has yet to suggest that such norms are a significant consideration in heterosexual young adults' thinking with respect to marital timing. This may be because sexual minority young adults are especially sensitive to the social regulation and control of intimate relationships, including marriage, given how recently they were excluded from the institution and how recently they were granted equal access to the rights and benefits associated with marriage.

To be sure, our study has significant limitations that are worth noting. First and foremost, the fact that we rely on qualitative survey data is itself a limitation given the relative lack of richness and depth in our data. Indeed, as we note above, some of the written responses we analyze here were brief and lacked much detail or explanation, although many were quite detailed and clearly reflected careful thought and time on the part of our respondents. In addition, although our sample is relatively large and diverse, especially for a qualitative analysis, our sample is also biased in ways that may have influenced our results. Specifically, those who are White and well-educated are both overrepresented in our sample, which is a chronic problem for research on sexual minority populations (Reczek, 2020). Given how marital aspirations are patterned by both race and socioeconomic status, at least among the general population of young adults (Crissey, 2005; Edin et al., 2004; Edin & Reed, 2005; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Kefalas et al., 2011), it is possible that the race and socioeconomic composition of our sample shaped our results in ways we have not accounted for. Still, the size of our sample, and more importantly, the diversity of sexual and gender identities represented within it, are strengths of our study worth highlighting, as well.

Going forward, to build on these results, researchers should continue to examine how sexual minority young adults think about marital timing, but we recommend that they do so using in-depth interviews. This would allow researchers to follow-up on the themes and sub-themes identified here, which we could not do given our use of online survey methods. This could uncover, for example, other "checkpoints," or more nuanced explanations for them. More broadly, though, research on marital aspirations and expectations, which generally focuses on young adults, should strive to include sexual minorities more often, and should recognize them as sexual minorities. In this article, we have focused on marital timing specifically, but little is otherwise known about how sexual minority young adults think about and plan for marriage, or not, in the post-*Obergefell* era of marriage equality. Indeed, despite decades of research on heterosexual young adults' marital aspirations and expectations (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), research has yet to address such basic questions as how many sexual minority young adults want or expect to marry, what marriage means to them, and what they hope or expect to gain from marriage. The marital paradigms perspective (Willoughby et al., 2015) raises additional questions about sexual minority young adults' thoughts and perspectives on the processes and dynamics of marital relationships, the permanence of marriage, and the centrality of marital roles within their lives. Given this plethora of important questions that remain open, research on sexual minority young adults' marital aspirations and expectations is poised to develop considerably.

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