

Romantic Relationship Formation Continuum: An Exploration of Steps and Stages Leading to a Committed Relationship

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Introduction

Emerging adulthood (18 to 29-year-olds) is a time of life characterized by romantic relationship decision-making and increased questioning towards finding a long-term partner (e.g., Arnett, 2024; Olmstead, 2020). Many emerging adults utilize this time for romantic and sexual exploration with ambitions and expectations for marriage (e.g., Willoughby & James 2017). Scholars have argued that the pathway to marriage has become increasingly ambiguous (e.g., Stanley et al., 2017) with fewer clear markers of relationship progression and commitment (Stanley et al., 2010).

Research has indicated that having these important conversations about clarifying the relationship has resulted in emerging adults remaining in long-term, committed relationships versus relationship ambiguity.

Unfortunately, current ambiguity in romantic relationship transitions may make it difficult for partners to agree on when the relationship began due to multiple types of soft beginnings during which commitment is not clarified. This ambiguity can be a result of the fear of being rejected by a partner or not wanting to be tied down to one individual. Accordingly, the traditional progression of courtship has diversified, giving rise to additional relationship types, such as hooking up (HUs; Wade, 2017) and friends with benefits (FWBs; Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Mongeau, Knight, Williams, Eden, & Shaw, 2013).

Methods

Present Study

The current study investigates emerging adulthood (ages 18-29) and the steps, stages, and readiness of entering a committed relationship with the potential end-goal of marriage. Recent research has indicated that the use of technology such as smartphones and dating apps has altered the way in which contemporary romantic relationships form.

Participants

The participants included 33 emerging adults (28 women, 5 men) who were broken up into in-person focus groups (two women's focus group and one men's focus groups) as well as over Zoom (2 women's focus groups). Participants also created a visual representation (drawing) of what they believed the steps and stages are to a committed relationship.

Research Questions

RQ1: What do emerging adults believe is the purpose of romantic relationships?

RQ2: What are the steps and stages in a romantic relationship and how do they progress to a committed relationship?

RQ3: How do emerging adults feel about marriage and their personal preparation for this committed relationship?

RQ4: How do the steps and stages that lead to a committed relationship differ compared to previous generations?

Analysis

Data was analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) of initial coding and focused coding. This approach enabled the researchers to more fully understand and document the pathway to a committed relationship. This approach fit well with our goals of understanding this potential aspect of emerging adult romantic relationship formation among the specific social cohort of emerging adults.

The researchers were trained in initial and focused coding techniques (Charmaz 2006; 2014) and worked together to code the data according to our specific research questions. After individual coders had performed initial coding, the researchers met together to verify initial codes and construct focused codes. Once the coders had reached consensus, they came together to discuss themes specific to their research questions and assemble a cohesive body of themes that represent the data.

Through the steps of qualitative analysis, seven unique themes were generated about committed relationships: sense of security and support, provides purpose and meaning (marriage), an investment in the future (marriage, the long haul, children, etc.), requires a foundation (friendship), requires clarification of commitment (cutting off other options), may be apprehension about committed relationships (fear of rejection, unclear intentions, focusing on self, etc.), personal growth, and marriage not being the end goal for all.

Results

Sense of Security and Support

- "It provides some security and it also provides some nice resources. It is also someone that you are probably intimate with and you share a lot of things with, so, it's a way of having this foundation."
- "It's a nice comfort to have someone there to be able to talk to and share things with."

Clarifying the Commitment

- "Defining the relationship is the biggest, like, pivotal point in a relationship just because if you're dating another person and they don't see the same things that you do, that could be a huge issue in the end goal."
- "Yeah, only talking to that one person, deleting Tinder, not actively searching for anyone else. Not, like, flirting with anyone else. If someone asks if they want to go on a date with you, you say no."

Investing in the Future

- "I do feel that you shouldn't rush into something as big as marriage because it is a commitment, like a *huge* commitment, and I don't think that is something that should just be, like, "Oh, let's just get married." I feel like you should really get to know the person and it takes a long time to get to know someone fully."
- "I would say that you want to grow with that person, as well. You want to grow together and change with them."
- "Maybe you'll start having or wanting kids, and you don't want kids with just *anybody*."

Building a Foundation

- "I feel, like, if you don't have that time to just kind of be by yourself and get to know yourself, then you'll just reflect other people who have influenced your life. You do what they've done because that's what you are used to."
- "I think to get to that point, for me, you have to be best friends before you start dating, that you know that person really well, and you don't find out that your personalities clash once you've been dating for a while, maybe."

Provides Purpose and Meaning

- "Okay, well I would say the purpose is to get married. In high school, a ton of my friends said they would date just as, like, practice for when they did meet the real one that they'd want to marry. That always just confused me because I thought you date to marry."

Apprehensive about Committed Relationships

- "Can I just say that even if they do that, they can still be cheating, and the family didn't know about it. I feel like posting about it still doesn't show your loyalty because they can still be going behind your back."
- "I think they're just scared of, like, being tied down to someone for the rest of their lives. They're just so used to dating other people and having different relationships with other people that, like, the thought of being with one person is kind of scary."
- "Maybe if that person has an extremely large amount of debt that I probably wouldn't be able to afford, I wouldn't marry that person because those debts are your debts now."

Personal Growth

- "I want to go to college, get my degree, and enjoy my life with someone before I get married to them, you know? Plus, I think I have more time on my hands and I want to make sure I am financially stable on my own before I marry someone."
- "Really know what you want and what you need; sometimes that is hard to figure out. You find what you need for your emotions and for yourself and be picky with that in your romantic partner."

Marriage is Not Always the End Goal

- "I don't think you need to get married, like, it's not something everybody has to do, but what kind of draws the line from, 'Oh, I'm going to be with this person forever, but I don't necessarily need to or want to get married.' Maybe it's just, like, the legal aspect of it and you don't need to have proof of it to know that you're committed to this person, and they know it, too."
- "It's just a lot different than what your parents or grandparents are used to, so there's kind of a standard there that you have to explain yourselves and your situations to older people in your family."



Conclusion

From the themes that have appeared throughout our data, we have found that apprehension about commitment has been a recurring theme for many emerging adults. Consistent with previous research studies, individuals expressed that fear of rejection and clarifying the commitment in a relationship can be a challenging process to overcome. Our results also show the ever-changing outlook on what the end-goal of committed relationships look like for emerging adults. Marriage may no longer be on the horizon for some, but other individuals still see marriage as an essential aspect of their committed relationship.

The data we have collected is also consistent with the theory of Sliding versus Deciding (Stanley et al., 2006). Emerging adults should be intentional and thoughtful in their decision making within romantic relationships, especially when it comes to just pre-dating behavior. This is important to keep in mind when conducting research with emerging adults due to the new steps and stages leading to committed relationships that continue to evolve within emerging adulthood.

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