

# Between Desire and Delay: Emerging Adult Views on Commitment and Marriage Postponement

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## Introduction

Since the 1970s, the median age at first marriage has been continually increasing and is now approximately 30 for men and 28 for women in the United States (Julian, 2022), creating a time of high romantic and sexual exploration (see Olmstead, 2020 for a review) before moving into adult roles (Arnett, 2024). Research by many family scholars indicates that marriage remains the gold standard and makes a significant difference for society and for the lives of children, providing individuals, couples, and families with the ability to cope more effectively with life's challenges (e.g., Wilcox, 2024). Although many emerging adults (18-29 years old) have experienced instability in their caregivers' relationships, there is substantial evidence that emerging adults continue to have a strong desire to marry, and that marriage remains an important life goal (e.g., Willoughby & James, 2017; Willoughby, 2021). However, instead of marriage acting as a cornerstone in the lives of emerging adults, some scholars believe that many are now treating marriage as a capstone (Hawkins et al., 2022). Complicating matters, however, is the recent surge of couples that are cohabitating which frequently does not lead to marriage (e.g., Sassler & Lichter, 2020). In fact, one researcher has often referred to this trend of cohabitation that does not lead to the marriage alter but is instead part of the dating process as "cohabitating" (Stanley, 2010). One of the main reasons that the uptick in cohabitation is concerning is that research has continually shown that cohabitation is much more connected to family instability compared marriage (e.g., Hymowitz et al., 2013). This is especially important to consider since family instability can have a detrimental impact on children and their healthy development and well-being (e.g., Manning, 2015).

## Method

### Present Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how emerging adults (18-29 years old) have personally constructed their definitions of commitment in romantic relationships and why emerging adults believe that many are postponing marriage

### Participants

Twenty (10 men, 10 women) unmarried emerging adults at a large Midwestern university participated and data was collected through intensive interviewing. Fifty-five percent of the participants were currently in a romantic relationship (10 with opposite-sex partners, 1 with a same sex partner). Eighty-five percent of the participants indicated that they had previously been in a romantic relationship.

The sample consisted of 18 Caucasian participants, one African American participant, and one Filipino American participant. Male participants' ages ranged from 19 to 23 years, with the average age being 20.5 years. Female participants' ages ranged from 18 to 22 years with the average age being 20 years old.

### Research Questions

- RQ1: How do unmarried emerging adults define commitment in romantic relationships and how have they developed those definitions?
- RQ2: What do unmarried emerging adults believe are the reasons that many 18-29-year-olds are postponing marriage?

## Analysis

Data was analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). This approach allowed the researchers to understand and document how this cohort of emerging adults developed their own beliefs about commitment within relationships. The researchers were trained in initial and focused coding techniques before coding (Charmaz, 2025). Coders then individually went line by line, carefully working through the data in relation to the research questions. After the initial coding was complete, the researchers worked together to sort and organize the data. Construction-focused codes were formed, leading to the development of themes for our research.

Themes were then organized into two distinct categories. The first category considered how emerging adults have constructed their understanding of commitment. The following themes were discovered: complete loyalty, investment in the relationship, and parental influence.

The second category focused on the postponement of marriage. We found the following themes: fear of making the wrong decision, uncertainty about the future, and the norm of cohabitation. These themes highlighted how these 20 emerging adults were able to process both the positive and negative examples of commitment they had observed from their families of origin.

## Results

### Complete Loyalty

“Two people who definitely love each other enough to stay with each other and not cheat, not be with anyone else, settle down, just do things for each other that you put their needs almost in front of your needs at some points, care for them, listen to them and understand them in a way that other people don't seem to understand them.”

### Investment in the Relationship

“Cheesy as it is, for better or for worse, rich or poor kind of thing. You're going to have your bad days. So is she, and vice versa. But when they're having their bad day it's your job to be there for them. Whether you're on your own, having your own bad day. It's just putting the other selflessly before you. Just doing anything for the other person.”

### Parental Influence

“Sometimes I do wonder how it came to be. How did I start believing in what I believe about commitment and what I think it takes to make a relationship work? But like I said many times, I think it's just through observing my parents in their relationship.”

### Fear of Making the Wrong Decision

“I'm really afraid of, A, failing. B, just say it does get to the point where we could get married and have kids and then have a divorce or whatever and scar these kids. It just, there's a lot that could go wrong. I'm just worried of making the wrong decision. I don't know what is the right decision.”

### Uncertainty about the Future

“I know for me, I want to be able to finish college and get a job before I start my life. I think a lot of people have that same outlook. They want to be able to finish schooling, and everything else, and being able to have the finances for a wedding or something like that.”

### The Norm of Cohabitation

“It seems to me that if you're looking at it from the outside, there doesn't seem to be a difference between a married couple living together than just a couple living together. It's tough to think that you need that kind of commitment when you trust the strength of your partner and you trust the strength of your relationship. So, it's just why tie yourself down to that when a million other things could come up.”



## Discussion

Accordingly, if the family of origin truly is where emerging adults first learn how to define commitment in couple relationships (e.g. Weigel, 2007), there is much to be said for the conversations that educators, clinicians, and other professionals should be having with emerging adults about the messages they received from their family regarding commitment.

Educators and practitioners should be more mindful about how emerging adults may have developed their definitions of commitment in couple relationships, and how they have made meaning from the examples they have observed.

Clinicians could also examine how their emerging adult clients have been able to make meaning from their past romantic relationship experiences. For instance, clinicians could explore with client's specific instances and past behavior in romantic relationships which demonstrated commitment to their partner.

These results extend our knowledge about how emerging adults develop their personal definitions of commitment in couple relationships and highlight some factors that may lead to the postponement of marriage..

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