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Majors and Marriage: Does Field of Study Influence the Timing of First Marriage?

Introduction

The current marital trend for American women suggests that educational attainment and economic independence encourage the likelihood of marriage. In their study of generational cohorts (1950-1954, 1955-1959 and 1960-1964), Goldstein and Kenney (2001) forecasted that 94 percent of the college graduates from the 1960-1964 cohort would marry, compared with about 89 percent of those without a college diploma. Sweeney (2002) also compared cohorts to examine the influence of educational attainment on marriage rates among women. She found that having 16 years of schooling, compared to 12 years of schooling, was associated with a 52% greater odds of marriage. In addition to education, the effect of women's earnings on marriage increased over time (Sweeney 2002).

Ono (2003) did a cross national study to explore and compare the effects that women's economic standing, which serves as a proxy for education, has on marriage in Japan, the United States and Sweden. She chose these countries to establish the context that egalitarian cultures have an influence on the choices that women make, particularly in terms of education and marriage. In egalitarian countries, gender norms relating to marriage and work are more agreeable to women's economic contributions, which causes fewer stresses (Sweeney 2002).

Japan is more rigidly gendered than the United States and Sweden. "Japanese are the most likely to assign labor market work to men and housework to women, Swedes are the least likely, and Americans are situated between the two"(Ono 276). She found that women's income is negatively associated with marriage in Japan but positively associated with marriage in both the United States and Sweden. Further, she concluded that controlling for education and local sex ratio, a Japanese woman's chance of first marriage in a year declined by 3% with every successive increase in income. In comparison, a similar income increase for women in the United States improved the chance of marriage by 2.1% and by 6.4% for Swedish women (Ono 2003).

Sweeney (2002) says changes in the labor market positions of both men and women in tandem with simultaneous shifts in gender roles attitudes and patterns of consumption have changed the nature of the marital bargain, rather than making marriage unnecessary or undesirable (Sweeney 2002: 133).

Objective

Based on the evidence that educational attainment is positively associated with marriage, we explore whether or not bachelor's field of study has an influence on the likelihood and timing of marriage for women. Is there a relationship between choice of discipline and marriage?

Data

The optimal method for measuring changes in educational and marital patterns is to observe changes over time, which is one reason why the Survey of Income and Program Participation is an ideal data set for this analysis. The SIPP is a multistage-stratified sample of the U.S. civilian noninstitutionalized population that is a continuous series of national panels, with sample size ranging from approximately 14,000 to 36,700 interviewed households. The duration of each panel ranges from 2 ½ years to 4 years (http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/overview.html).

We use data from the SIPP 2001 Wave 2 Education and Work Training History topical module and the Marital History module. The SIPP collects data specific to field of study, allowing us the opportunity to investigate at the discipline level if there is a relationship to marriage. We create a data set by combining variables from the two modules as well as data from the core.

Methods

First, we examine the likelihood of having ever been married (i.e., currently married, divorced, separated, or widowed) compared to never married based on bachelor's field of study. Field of study is divided into 18 categories: agriculture/forestry, art/architecture, business/management, communications, computer and information sciences, education, engineering, English/literature, foreign language, law, liberal arts/humanities, math/statistics, medicine/dentistry, natural sciences (biological and physical), nursing/pharmacy/public health, philosophy/religion/theology, psychology, social sciences/history, other. We collapse the 18 categories into five: Business (Communications), Computers/Engineering (Math, Statistics), Liberal Arts (Art, Architecture, English, Literature, Foreign Language, Humanities, Philosophy, Religion) Social Science/Law (Pre-Professional, Psychology), Natural Science/Medicine (Agriculture, Health Science), Education and Other. Our three levels of evaluation include bachelors, bachelors or higher, and advanced degree. Bachelors refers to women with only a bachelor's degree. Bachelor's or higher includes women with both a bachelor's and an advanced degree. Advanced degree is limited to women who have a masters degree, professional degree and a Ph.D. Our main variable of interest, marital status, is coded one if the respondent answered married with spouse present, married with spouse absent, widowed, divorced, or separated and zero if the respondent was not married.

Next we will look at the timing difference, if any, in years between obtaining a bachelors degree and getting married.

Lastly we will use age standardization to see if the marital rates differ when age is controlled. Age standardization takes into consideration the age differences among populations so that they may be compared. Direct age standardization applies weights to each age group. The weights are based on the population distribution of the standard population (women with a bachelors degree).

Results and Discussion

The majority of women studied education for their bachelor's degree, followed by business/management and the other category. Predictably, more education majors than other majors had ever been married, at 88.5% compared to the low of 74.9% among the social science/law majors. Interestingly, education and engineering/computer majors had the lowest median age at marriage, 23.25. Business majors had the highest median age at marriage, 24.33. Regardless, the median age of marriage fell between 23 and 24 for all majors.

Women in all age categories were more likely to marry after obtaining their bachelor's degree than before. Women in the 55-59 age cohort had the highest incidence of marriage in the same year they received their bachelor's degree, 15.4%.

Women in all field of study categories were more likely to marry one or more years after they received their bachelor's degree than before. Education majors had the highest incidence of marriage before receipt of their bachelors degree, 32%, the hightest in that category. Social science majors had the highest percentage of women never married, 25.1% compared to the low of 11.5% among Education majors. The field of study to have the most women marrying the same year they obtained their bachelor's degree was education, with 14%.

Standardizing age resulted in a different percentage of women married for all the categories, albeit a very small difference for women with bachelors in liberal arts and the other category. The biggest difference was in the social science/law category. When age was standardized, 3.3 percent more women were included in the ever married category. Another interesting difference was in the education field. Standardizing age actually reduced the number of women ever married from 88.5% to 85.4%. Despite the drop in percent of ever married, education remained the category with the largest percent of women ever married, 85.4%. This effect was even bigger among women with a bachelors degree or higher. The non-standardized number of ever married women who majored in education was 87.6% compared to 83.9% standardized, a difference of 3.7%.

The lack of a substantive difference between the standardized and non-standardized percents of ever married women who studied liberal arts and other, suggests that age doesn't influence the difference between ever and never married in these categories. Conversely, the difference in percentage points among the other field of study categories

suggests that age does have an influence on the difference between ever married and never married women, and in most cases increases the percent of women ever married.

In conclusion, women who study education are more likely to have ever been married than women studying other fields. Most women in our sample with a bachelor's degree had ever been married ranging from a low of 77.2% among Business majors to a high of 88.5% among education majors.

References

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