

## CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF POSTPONING THE DECISION TO MARRY IN THE OPINION OF YOUNG ADULTS

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The aim of this article is to analyse why young adults in the postmodern world postpone the decision to marry. The authors want to present the reasons for this situation on the basis of surveys conducted with young adults aged 18-35 years old, taking into consideration both psychosocial and economic-cultural factors.

**Methods.** In the research procedure, the authors used the survey method and the questionnaire interview technique. The unsupervised survey questionnaire was distributed to the respondents online. The research sample consisted of 28 persons in the age group of young adults. All the respondents were in informal partnerships.

**Results.** Among young adults aged 18-35 years old, reasons for postponing marriage may be divided into psychosocial, related to the pressure of society to carry out developmental tasks and social roles; as well as economic and cultural, focusing on cultural changes and economic standards of young people.

**Conclusion.** Young adults see the consequences of postponing the decision to marry, but it seems like changing cultural and social circumstances of the postmodern world allow them to make a conscious decision regarding their future. They have a neutral or positive attitude towards postponed marriage.

**Keywords:** family, marriage, informal relationship, cohabitation, postmodern society, young adults



## A WORD OF INTRODUCTION ABOUT GETTING MARRIED

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in almost all OECD countries, marriage rates have declined over the past few decades. Numbers differ by state, but Poland is one of the countries in which this indicator declined. It is rather not a rapid, but steady trend. To illustrate, at the turn of 1980 and 1990, there were 250 000 new marriages in Poland concluded each year. In 2013, there were 70 000 marriages less (Główny Urząd Statystyczny [GUS], 2016; Rosswen, 2018; OECD, n.d.). There are many reasons explaining why marriage rates in Poland decline. The authors of this article want to establish why people in Poland, specifically young adults aged 18-35 years old, postpone their decision to marry, which is a part of the above-mentioned phenomena of marriage decline.

It is impossible to consider the changes in the institution of marriage and family without taking into account the dynamics of postmodern society. Recent social changes, fragmentation, and diversity have made the institution of family more a matter of personal choice and, as a result, it became more unstable and diverse. New theories about social change should be the framework for describing the issues marriage and family face these days (Thompson, 2015). These theories describe transformations in society in the following fields: technological-information, economic, cultural, and social. They present dynamic changes which took place in society since the end of the industrial era in the 1960s. In terms of economy, professional activation of previously excluded groups, scientific progress, new social movements, sexual and feminist revolution or new values and ideologies in general (Slany, 2022). Globalisation, consumerist lifestyle, as well as questioning of common practices have changed the traditional model of a family and undermined the institution of marriage (Ritzer, 1997). Traditional arrangements of life were replaced by criteria for individual improvements (Cheal, 1996). In more and more cases, it is not only physical, but also emotional survival that dominates while making important life choices (Wiersma, 1983). In academic research, a family is no longer a monolithic institution. The needs of individuals (especially women's) are taken into consideration more. Family is no longer looked at only in terms of institutions and state's interest, but especially in terms of individuals' needs and emotions, their autonomy outside of a family. In postmodern theories about marriage and family, one may notice the importance of communication and increase in the importance of women in a relationship (Baker, 2001). Traditional, industrial-era norms have been weakened; sexual life separated from procreation. Legal union or heterosexual marriage are no longer a must. Giving birth and raising a child may be done outside of marriage, voluntary childlessness is becoming more and more popular. Since the 1960s, the institution of family has been undermined, and questions have been raised – what can be offered instead of it? (Bauman, 1994).

According to matrimonial law in Poland, the term “marriage” refers to a marriage as a permanent, egalitarian union of a man and a woman formed by their will in a formalised way. It is defined as a kind of bilateral legal act—a contract. Marriage in Poland can be concluded in the presence of the head of the registry office (civil marriage) or a clergyman (commonly referred to as “church marriage”). The Family and Guardianship Code sets the minimum age for both spouses at 18 years, however, for important reasons, the guardianship court may allow a woman who has reached the age of 16 to marry. According to Article 23 of the Family and Guardianship Code, spouses in marriage have equal rights and obligations. By entering into marriage, they commit themselves to live together, assist each other, and cooperate for the common good of the family. Both spouses may or may not have community property (joint ownership of assets accumulated during marriage) (*Ustawa z dnia 25 lutego 1964 r. - Kodeks rodzinny i opiekuńczy*, 1964). A civil partnership or marriage between persons of the same sex is not legal in Poland. Thus, same-sex couples will not be taken into consideration as a type of a relationship in this article.

Apart from matrimonial law, there are different informal types of marriages. Their differentiation by researchers depends on what is being studied and may vary from research to research. For example, Tomasz Szlendak (2011) differentiates the so-called “LAT” - “living apart together” or “visiting marriage, in which partners are in a formal relationship, but do not leave together, visiting each other from time to time, usually on the weekends. In opposition to that, one can find a traditional marriage, in which both partners share the same household. There are marriages focused on building their life together, but also egalitarian marriages, in which both partners are focused on their separate lives and careers and use compromise to combine other spheres of life together. There are also marriages with or without children. Depending on a field of research, types of marriages can be also defined according to the number of partners or the way of choosing a mate. Divisions may be historical, sociological, or psychological, thus it will not be explored further. The authors want to indicate that besides the formal definition of marriage, this union may be perceived differently depending on culture and society and may have various facets.

## DELIVERING THE TASKS OF EARLY ADULTHOOD?

Tadeusz Tomaszewski (1975) notes that the period of early adulthood often turns out to be extremely difficult and stressful for young people because it accumulates a number of different tasks which are complex, variable, and conflicting. In the literature, this period is sometimes described as the most dramatic stage of development. It involves decisions which may affect the course of one’s future life, e.g., moving out of a family home, determining one’s “place in the world,” choosing a profession and a future

partner, as well as starting a family (Levinson, 1986). Negative emotions can also be conditioned by greater autonomy in life, which in turn brings the need to take responsibility for one's decisions (Schwarz, 2013).

When periodising this period, it is difficult to find an unambiguous time frame. Zbigniew Pietrasiński (1990) mentions the age range of 18-35 years, and Ewa Gurba (2011) indicates a wider period falling on 20-23 and 35-40 years of age. The division used by the author may seem unclear, but she accepts the importance of the personal influence of individuals on the course of their own intrapsychic and interpersonal development. The beginning of early adulthood should be considered as the physical and emotional separation of a young person from his or her parents, which occurs when leaving the "family nest" (Bee, 1998). Gurba (2011) associates this moment with a psychological sense of readiness to fulfil adult tasks and social roles. However, it is more difficult to determine the upper age limit, because this condition results from a subjective sense of adulthood. Alicja Malina (2014) associates this state with the ability to take responsibility for oneself and others, mental readiness to start a family, as well as independence.

A review of the available literature shows that many young adults postpone decisions about carrying out the tasks of early adulthood, such as moving out of a family home (e.g., Krzaklewska, 2017), entering into marriages (e.g., Juroszek, 2012; Muraco & Curran, 2012; Ładyżyński, 2009), procreation (e.g., Imbierowicz, 2011; Mynarska, 2011; Sikorska, 2012; Szukalski, 2012; Wylęgły, 2019, and many others).

Andrzej Ładyżyński (2009) considers the following to be the basic determinants of postponing the decision to marry:

- migration of young people (moving to larger cities and abroad for work and personal development with an attempt to gain autonomy; moving out of a family home and, as a result, reducing the feeling of pressure from a generational family towards establishing a procreative family; living on one's own and away from one's family which may foster autonomous decisions, including not getting married);
- "instant culture"; life based on the triad: fast food, fast sex, fast car (Melosik, 2002), according to which everything is available "now"; a relationship requires preparation, commitment, and acceptance of responsibility, and is therefore contrary to the instant culture;
- the "single as a lifestyle" approach; self-sufficiency; being single by choice;
- trying to achieve success, especially in material aspects; the value of education is increasing, so young people often study several subjects which extends the time to achieve financial independence;
- easier ending of informal relationships; cohabitation seen as easier and more comfortable than marriage;
- the deliberate postponement of marriage, which may be due to a specific plan for individuals' life together and the built relationship;

- seeing marriage only as a “formality,” which diminishes the value of marriage; in the view of many young people, marriage changes nothing, has little meaning;
- fear of marital routine; there is a belief that as long as the relationship is not formalised, partners care and try harder for each other; it is conditioned by the existence of the myth of marriage “killing romance” in a relationship;
- abnormal role models, failed parental relationships, and others.

These examples are confirmation that the phenomenon is popular and complicated. It is interesting that Ładyżynski (2009) made this analysis more than a decade ago. Nevertheless, the problem is still relevant, and perhaps it is even becoming more intensified. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask young adults about the determinants of the decision to postpone marriage and its consequences in the current socio-cultural situation. Thus, this article will be focused on describing experiences of people in informal relationships, without differentiation into couples living together and living apart or having or not having children. The main common trait of couples taken into consideration in this study is their age between 18 and 35 years of age as well as the fact that they live in an informal relationship for a longer period of time (more than one year).

## METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

### **Purpose of Research**

The aim of the research was to verify the motives for postponing the decision to marry by young adults and to get to know the opinions of respondents on the discussed phenomenon. For the purpose of the work, the following research problems (global and detailed) were constructed:

*Q. 1. Why do young adults postpone the decision to get married?*

Q. 1.1. What are the psychosocial reasons for postponing the decision to marry?

Q. 1.2. What are the economic and cultural reasons for postponing the decision to marry?

*Q. 2. How do young adults evaluate the decision to postpone marriage?*

Q. 2.1. What is the attitude of young adults to the decision of postponing marriage?

Q. 2.2. In the opinion of young adults, what are the consequences of postponing the decision to marry?

To clarify the issues discussed, the authors divided the reasons for postponing marriage into psychosocial, related to society’s pressure to fulfil developmental tasks and the resulting social roles; and economic-cultural, oscillating around cultural changes and the associated economic standards of young people.

### Research Procedure

In the course of the conducted research procedure, the technique of a surveyed interview was used. It was prepared in the form of a questionnaire with open questions. Władysław Skarbek (2013) defines this method as a variation of the interview technique (diagnostic survey), which can take place in writing, without or in the presence of a researcher. This form of opinion polling can be carried out for the purpose of survey research (Gostkowski, 1976; Skarbek, 2013). The research tool took the form of an unsupervised, self-returnable survey (in Skarbek, 2013), disseminated among online respondents. Open questions which make up the questionnaire may be classified as introductory questions, opinion questions, motive questions, and supplementary questions (Skarbek, 2013). The survey consisted of the following parts: information about the purpose and course of the study, conscious consent of the authors to participate in the study, 9 open questions—including 2 regarding personal details (age and gender), acknowledgement for completing the survey, requests to disseminate the survey to other people who are in long-term informal relationships. The tool has been prepared in two language versions, Polish and English.

In the study, there were 28 participants—15 women and 13 men. Respondents were recruited using the snowball method. The first stage of the study was to familiarise with the purpose and conduct of the study, as well as the respondents' rights to discontinue participation at any time. Then, respondents had to confirm that they were knowingly and voluntarily taking part in the survey. Furthermore, participants could give consent for their statements to be used in the form of anonymised quotes. The next step was to answer a few questions about their situation and beliefs on the issue. The final stage was the interpretation of the results. For this purpose, the authors used qualitative content analysis with analytical codes (Szklarczyk, 2016).

## RESULTS

### Background Data

The study involved people in informal partnerships. The length of respondents' relationships ranges from 1 to 12 years; the average value is 4.2 years. Most of the respondents confessed that in the future they would like to formalise their relationship (four answers indicated a wedding date of up to 1 year, eight respondents indicated 2-4 years, five persons entered 5 or more years; the remaining persons did not answer this question or claimed that they do not have any specific date), several participants gave answers like "maybe," "we are not sure yet," "rather yes"; three persons definitively denied; one participant (male, 26) wrote "I have no need [to marry], apart from the legal status it does not change anything." It can the-



refore be concluded that the majority of the surveyed people do not exclude the decision to marry, but postpone it for various reasons.

The respondents were also asked about their attitude towards postponing the decision to marry. Most young adults who took part in the survey expressed their neutral attitude (20 persons). They had no opinion on the issue and argued that it is an individual decision each couple should make for themselves. Participants responded that they “do not care” and that it should be an individual decision of couples. One person even mentioned (male, 24) that if people do not want to get married in a church, it is even better, as it proves the secularisation of the society. Only eight people expressed their positive attitude regarding postponed marriage. They claimed it is a wise choice they fully support and understand.

### **Analysis of Psychosocial Factors**

Following the results obtained, several psychosocial motives for postponing the decision to marry were identified. The use of this criterion is related to a lack of emotional readiness and personality maturity (see: Dakowicz, 2014), which can be a response to social pressures.

The most common reason may be regarded as postponed adulthood, intensified and/or conditioned by the lack of readiness to fulfil developmental tasks of early adulthood. This, in turn, may result from a fear of fulfilling “adult” roles. The statements of respondents often include “I don’t feel the need to do so,” “I don’t care,” “The time will come,” and “I feel too young,” which may indicate a lack of readiness to take full responsibility for the partner and future family, convenience, uncertainty of one’s feelings, or reluctance to commit and define one’s expectations regarding the relationship.

“(…) I think the time will come” (male, 25);

“No feeling of wanting to get married right now, lack of certainty” (female, 24);

“Too much responsibility” (male, 27);

“(…) the feeling that they can immediately find someone better” (female, 24);

“(…) deferring ‘adult decisions’ and convenience (young people are taught to be exaggeratedly self-interested and self-oriented, and marriage is about focusing on the other person. This way of life and upbringing can compound emotional immaturity, making it difficult to take responsibility for another person)” (female, 27);

“They [author’s note: young adults] feel too young and that maybe there will be something else better waiting for them in life. Marriage is too definite” (male, 28);

“I feel too young to do it at this moment. I still have things to do as an individual before sharing my life with someone” (female, 25).

The last statement quoted suggests a very interesting factor, which is the realisation of one’s personal goals before pursuing shared goals, in a partnership relationship. It is important to reflect here on the evolution of

the partnership relationship – do partners pursue their goals individually or do they share, support, and help each other?

Attention was also drawn to the fear of change – “They don’t like or fear change” (female 25) – which can also be related to a sense of comfort, a lack of readiness to develop in their own maturity, fear of pursuing activities commonly referred to as “adult.”

Another reason mentioned may be the fear of replicating inappropriate marriage patterns, and failed parental relationships: “(...) It is also often the case that failed marriages and stuck parents of young people are an effective anti-advertisement of marriage” (female, 25). Research actually shows that a happy parental marriage allows children to fulfil their elementary needs (including psychological needs) and also enables them to build fulfilling marital relationships. Frequent conflicts in the family home can condition negative attitudes towards marriage (Dakowicz, 2014; Riggio & Weiser, 2008; Stępniaak-Łuczywek, 2004).

One respondent related the decision to postpone marriage “(...) to a high awareness of the fact that it involves constantly working on one relationship. The prospect of being tied to one person for the rest of your life can be overwhelming...” (female, 25). This factor can be analysed in two ways: as a lack of readiness to “settle down,” but also as a high awareness among young people related to responsibility for their decisions and the well-being of their partner, which in turn may indicate a high emotional maturity.

### **Analysis of Economic and Cultural Factors**

When it comes to economic reasons for postponing the decision to marry, most of the respondents enumerated the following: lack of funds, especially to buy a flat/home or to organise a wedding reception, inflation, uncertain economic and political situation in the country:

“Financial reasons (wedding is a huge expense, I do not earn enough to save money both for the wedding and wedding reception)” (female, 27);

“Inflation. All our savings were allocated into buying and renovating a flat” (female, 31);

“I don’t have the resources to start living together” (female, 26).

For some of the young adults, renovation/purchase of a flat was more important than marriage, so they allocated all of their savings for this purpose. Thus, now they do not have any funds to organise a wedding reception, which still seems to be an important part of marriage for young Poles. Young adults associate marriage with living together, being separated from parents. As most of them suggested in the study, they cannot afford it because of the difficult financial situation. Lack of possibility of buying a flat stops them from taking a step further in their relationship. Inflation caused loan rates to go higher, so mortgage is no longer an option for them, either. On the other hand, one of the respondents (male, 26) stated that one



of the consequences of not getting married is more difficult access to taking a loan. It seems that people are not getting married partially because of the fact that they cannot afford it, but if they do not marry, it is even harder to achieve the economic condition.

Analysing the answers of respondents, one may also notice important cultural factors related to their decision of postponing marriage. First and foremost, many of them do not see any consequences at all in their decision. They do not feel the need or the pressure to get married, and they do not think that they should explain it somehow. This attitude shows that not getting married is something natural for most of the respondents and they do not feel bad or worse because of it. What is more, some of the respondents see no benefits of getting married at all and no consequences of not getting married. Such attitudes show certain change that took place in our society over the years:

“Getting married is not compulsory, if someone is not sure to make such a decision then he/she should think through this topic calmly” (male, 27);  
 “[The attitude towards postponing the decision to marry is] ambivalent. It’s an individual matter. If someone needs it to be happy, he/she decides to do it, it’s their decision. It does not affect the perception of such a person” (male, 26);  
 “I don’t care if we talk about civil weddings. If we talk about church weddings, then I’m happy as it shows the secularisation of the society” (male, 24).

However, it should also be acknowledged that one of the respondents (female, 23) mentioned that being judged and rejected by the society, especially elderly persons, is still one of the consequences of cohabitation without marriage.

As may be noticed analysing respondents’ answers in the survey, young adults in Poland not only do not feel the pressure related to getting married, but they also do not have time to do so. Fast pace of life, focusing on a career and personal development became priorities for young people. For example, one of the surveyed women (27) states that she does not want to marry because of the following factors:

“Out of convenience (planning a wedding is a lot of work, I don’t want to think about it in my free time); - because of the professional situation (my development is a priority for me now); - I do not think that marriage is a determinant of love, we live well as it is, we do not feel social pressure associated with the formalisation of the relationship (...)”

### **Consequences of Postponing the Decision to Marry**

As mentioned in the previous section, participants were asked about the consequences of postponing the decision to marry. Many answers were given such as “I have no opinion” or “there is none; I don’t see any consequences.” The remaining answers may be divided into formal, emotional, and social consequences.

### *Formal Consequences*

These include all legal, organisational, and family situations related to raising a child or regulating financial and property issues:

"I can only see formal consequences concerning for example assets or matters related to hospitalisation. Of course, many matters may be solved without marriage" (female, 31);

"I have the impression that the only consequences are separate tax settlement, problems when it comes to any decision regarding partner in the event of, for example, an accident (...)" (female, 23);

"Only by a legal nature, difficult access to a loan or aspects related to the division of property or inheritance" (male, 26);

"It may have consequences in the case of long-term relationships without marriage, in which a partner is not financially secured in the event of, for example, sudden death. Such a turn of events can bring many problems (...)" (female, 25).

### *Social Consequences*

In this category, one may find factors related to public opinion, as well as the performance of social roles. Participants of the study drew attention to criticism of the older generation or late parenthood and its consequences, for example social stigmatisation of a child.

"(...) Above all, however, one can meet with complaints and sometimes even rejection of the couple by their families, in particular, the elderly" (female, 23);

"Late motherhood" (female, 27);

"Postponing marriage can have consequences, especially when a child appears, which can be stigmatised that her/his parents are not married. Postponing marriage can also delay parenting planning, which can lead to greater age differences in the parent-child relationship and make communication difficult for this reason" (male, 27).

### *Emotional Consequences*

Many responses suggest consequences on a relational and emotional level. To a larger extent, attention was drawn to the lack of dynamics in a relationship, which is limited only to the attachment to another person (without passions) as well as the lack of willingness to deepen a relationship and engage emotionally. This concern can be substantiated by analyses that confirm that husbands who live with their partners before marriage manifested lower levels of commitment to the interpersonal relationship (Thomson & Colella, 1992). Moreover, people living in cohabitation may manifest lower trust in the institution of marriage (Rhoades et al., 2006).

"Maybe the lack of commitment and deepening of a relationship" (female, 24);

"Parting" (male, 33);

"Lack of trust, no commitment to another person" (male, 27);

"Being 'bored' with each other. Every relationship has some dynamics, there must be some stages, changes. If we are stuck in such a 'stagnation' for too long, we do not care about the evolution of our relationship, we can get bored,

burn out. In addition, (...) getting married out of a 'common sense,' e.g., the belief that 'we are together for so long that we have to either marry or part ways because there are no longer any emotions between us'" (female, 27).

It is worth mentioning that when talking about emotional consequences, respondents also distinguished positive consequences of building a stable relationship: "(...) getting to know yourself, your needs, your expectations better. A sense of security and stability of a relationship" (female, 27).

## CONCLUSION

Some scientists (Coombs, 1991; Joung et al., 1995; Waite, 1995 in: Bee, 1998; Kravdal, 2001) see a **number of advantages of being in a formal relationship**. Studies show that married men are healthier and live longer than their non-married counterparts. This can be explained by: self-selection (healthier and happier people are more likely to enter into civil partnerships); acquiring better eating habits, less frequent consumption of stimulants; building social support which results from attachment to a partner. Married people who describe their relationship as happy are less likely to show symptoms of depression and more likely to declare life satisfaction.

Despite the above, many young people—both men and women—postpone the decision to marry. The reasons for this phenomenon can be divided into psychosocial, economic, and cultural. On the basis of the research conducted, it was found that the most popular motives were: fear of fulfilling tasks commonly regarded as "adult," reluctance to get involved, convenience, but also financial reasons, related to the lack of funds to buy one's own apartment and become independent, move out from parents' house or organise a wedding reception. Many young people do not feel the need to get married because society does not require them to do so. This situation shows that in recent years, society and culture have undergone changes which have impacted the approach of young adults to marriage.

A particular cognitive value of the work may be in gathering young adults' opinions on the consequences of postponing the decision to marry. They may be divided into formal (e.g., difficulties with inheritance, mortgage, access to medical records), social (criticism from society, stigmatisation of children), and emotional ones (being bored with oneself in the relationship, not wanting to deepen the relationship and engage emotionally).

To conclude, it seems that in spite of many consequences that survey participants enumerated, it is not likely they will change their mind regarding the decision to postpone marriage, unless their life situation changes. It is also worth noticing that respondents have either neutral or positive attitude towards postponed marriage. Young adults who took part in the study seem to be self-aware and not prone to social pressure. They realise it is present, but shifting social and cultural circumstances of the postmodern world change the patterns young people follow.

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