

Marriage fades, but not for lack of couples

by [Kathleen O'Brien](#)

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(RNS) The headline's a shocker: Nearly four in 10 Americans believe marriage is obsolete. As in: Over and done with, hold the rice. Holy matrimony has gone the way of the rotary phone, the butter churner, and the eight-track tape.

The Pew Research Center's latest survey, released Thursday (Nov. 18), detected a growing perception of marriage's obsolescence. It neglected, however, to ask people what they felt about it.

It turns out Americans love marriage. They hope to marry, and most eventually will. Those who called marriage obsolete may be voicing a fear, not expressing a wish, says David Popenoe, a former Rutgers University sociology professor and co-director of the National Marriage Project.

After all, any society whose television menu includes "Say Yes to the Dress," "Four Weddings," and the entire Wedding Channel is hardly disinterested in the institution.

Popenoe has his theories as to why a fair number of people approve of marriage yet don't actually get married.

"Everybody knows marriage is a weak institution, so they have to be

a little more careful in choosing a mate," he said. "Marriage has become so fragile it's a sense of, 'Let's not go through a divorce if we don't have to.'"

The Pew study is titled, "The Decline of Marriage and Rise of New Families," but Popenoe would change that to "Family Decline."

"There's nothing particularly good about it, in my view," he said. "Strong families are important to a strong society."

The survey chronicles a slow sea change in attitudes toward new and different relationships:

-- When it comes to gay marriage and families, the landscape is rapidly shifting. Acceptance of gay couples raising children has jumped in just the past three years, so that now a slight majority says it's either a good thing or makes no difference.

-- For the first time in 15 years of polling on the issue, less than half of respondents oppose same-sex marriage. Disapproval is waning abruptly, with declines visible year-to-year.

-- Disapproval remains hardened in one area: Nearly seven in 10 (69 percent) say it's bad for society when single women have children. At the same time, 29 percent also say it's a bad thing for a woman to never have a child, so if you're single, there's simply no pleasing them.

There continue to be sharp differences among racial and ethnic groups on the percentage of children being raised by a single (usually never married) parent, with African-American rates continuing to be

strikingly higher than those of other groups.

However, African-Americans themselves are even more disapproving of the trend, with 74 percent viewing it as a bad thing. Popenoe attributes this disapproval to the group's higher level of religiosity, and to the fact its members see the daily effect this family arrangement has on children.

But having parents who are married isn't nearly as important to Americans as simply having that second parent in the home -- regardless of the parent's gender or sexual orientation. They voice the identical level of comfort with unmarried couples raising children (53 percent seeing it as either a good thing or making no difference) as they do with gay/lesbian couples children raising children.

The United States has the highest marriage rates of the Western industrial countries. Americans embrace marriage because the nation is more religious than its European counterparts, said Popenoe.

And in America's highly individualistic and mobile society, marriage may be an important way to forge a connection that transcends community. Yet young Americans are waiting ever longer to get hitched.

Sociologists earlier noticed a trend in modern America for college-educated, economically successful people to marry at higher rates than their poorer, less-educated parents. Poorer people "are just as eager to marry," the study said, but they hesitate to get married until they perceive they can afford it.

All this gloom and doom about marriage doesn't mean people are going through life all by themselves, Popenoe said.

"Most people still couple up -- they're not alone," he said.

"They're just not married."