

The Race to the Altar: Coupling Relationships at Christian Colleges

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Abstract

This article explores the dynamics that shape coupling relationships on Christian college campuses from a social exchange perspective. These relationships accelerate from friends to partners quickly, and it is assumed most relationships will end in marriage. Using marital paradigm theory as a framework, I argue that the pressure to pick a partner prior to graduation is much greater due to the Christian college context, the fabricated sense of urgency while in college, and the salience of marriage. This dynamic, laced with gendered expectations, impacts not only romantic relationships, but friendships as well. Some women find themselves in adversarial relationships with other women as they compete for male resources in an environment where the number of available men is scarce. The pressure is on, as young men and women set out to complete a degree, while also finding themselves in a race to the altar.

Keywords: Christianity, emerging adults, higher education, marriage, social exchange

When spring springs, flowers bloom, graduation excitement floods college campuses, and engagement rings appear on the fingers of young Christian women. At Christian colleges, the phrase “ring by spring” chimes a familiar tune as dozens of student couples engage in the traditions that tell the campus of their intention to wed. Whether it be the ringing of a bell, an announcement in chapel, or a ritual blessing in the private residences of the newly affianced, engaged couples certainly get a lot of attention from their peers toward the end of the academic year. And for good reason; engagement is a joyful time and a significant shift in one’s life course.

For those who are single, celebrating the stages of coupling can also be a very painful time, as students, particularly female students, may feel stress, disappointment, or even inadequacy in their single status. In some ways, the culture around “ring by spring” has become

a status quest that extends social benefits to those who reach this goal, without recognizing the impact it has on the students who remain single upon graduation. As the “ring by spring” couples win their peers’ attention, single students are left with a diminished sense worth, social recognition, and possibly even pastoral mentorship.

The term “ring by spring” reflects a concept prevalent in Christian communities that college students are expected, if not pressured, to find a spouse during their college years. This culture is particularly pervasive on Christian college campuses and is perpetuated by social forces including families, peers, churches, and often university representatives. In this article, I describe how the pressures of what I call *ring by spring culture* can impact traditional students on Christian college campuses both in the short term and the long term. This article uses the framework of social exchange theory to demonstrate the importance of institutional processes that contribute to cultural norms at the individual level. I offer observations based on ethnographic, qualitative, and basic quantitative data. Research from this article comes from four years of exploratory research on Christian college student relationships involving surveys, interviews, and focus groups with students and alumni. In the pages that follow, I incorporate quotes from Christian college alumni as much as possible to give voice to the experiences of those who live with the impact of ring by spring culture. In addition to exchange theory, the marital paradigm framework helps explain why the pressures associated with ring by spring culture are anything but trivial.

Research Overview

Data used in this study comes from five waves of research over four years. It began in the spring of 2014 with an electronic survey that was distributed via campus email on a Christian college campus with approximately 2,200 undergraduates. The survey was exploratory, and asked students to define “ring by spring,” share their experiences with the term, and provide basic demographic information. Data from the first wave of my research in 2014 found that nearly 60% of Christian college students felt pressure to marry while at school. Of that 60%, almost all of them (92%) were women (see Table 1 below). I have elsewhere analyzed in depth how this pressure has disproportionately impacted straight women, rather than students who identify as LGBTQ+ (George 2019). The identities of the participants are anonymized and pseudonyms are used, when necessary.

Table 1: Pressure to Marry by Gender

Gender	Do you feel pressured to be married?				
	Definitely	A little bit	Not really	Not at all	I am already married
Male	0	22%	44%	33%	0%
Female	14%	50%	17%	17%	2.6%
Other	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

The second wave of research was conducted in 2015 with an electronic survey on marital preparedness of already engaged or married college students. This too was distributed by email on the same campus where the student-wide survey was distributed. While the results from this wave of research are not particularly relevant to this article, it is worth mentioning that only 36% of already engaged students were fully confident of their preparedness for their upcoming marriage. On the other end, 18% of already engaged individuals reported that they were “probably not” prepared to marry. Sixty-four couples participated in the survey. All couples were male-female heterosexual couples.

The third wave of research was a short electronic survey in 2017 targeting alumni of Christian college students from CCCU schools. The survey was posted on social media and re-posted through snowball sampling. There were 88 respondents in total, representing 20 different schools in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities consortium. This survey asked about the impact of the ring by spring culture at their particular college, and asked for stories that stood out to them while they were on Christian college campuses. Most of the quotes incorporated in this article come from qualitative responses to that survey.

The fourth wave of research was also in 2017 and was similar to wave three, but elaborated by requesting more demographic and quantitative questions. This was sent to an alumni list from one particular Christian school, and there were nearly 2,000 responses to this survey in the two weeks it was available.

The fifth and final wave of research was in 2018. I conducted two focus groups (one with 8 students, and another with 9) with purposefully selected students that represented a variety

of racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and sexual identities. This included students identifying as in a relationship, not in a relationship, engaged, lesbian, gay, child of parents who were married during their college years, Christian, non-Christian, Latina, African-American, and from various academic disciplines.

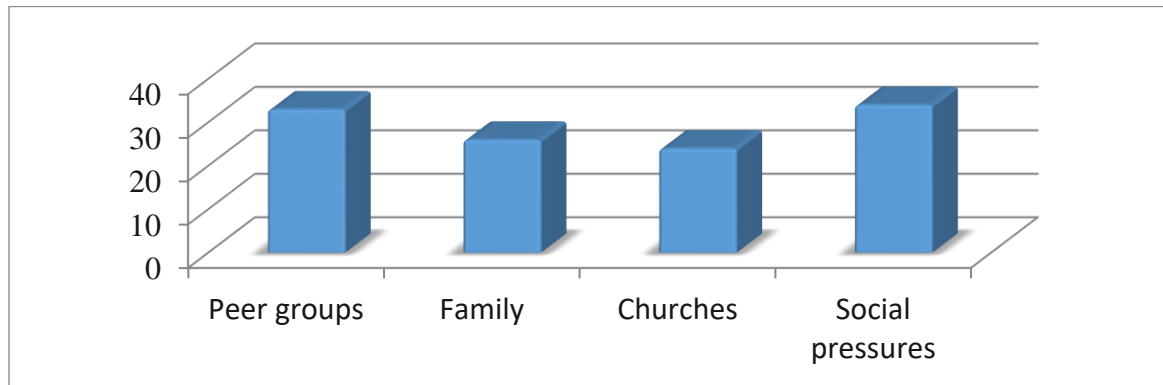
The results from this exploratory research were the foundation of a more theoretically driven research program. Given that the sample population was non-randomized, the results of this study are the foundation for grounded theoretical analysis rather than generalizable across all populations.

What is “Ring by Spring” Culture?

Ring by spring has been alluded to in many ways such as the “M-R-S Degree,” but the concept is about more than just engagement, more than romantic relationships; it is a social pressure that influences how students see their peers, their friends, and themselves (George 2019). In essence, we can identify the presence of the ring by spring culture when we see norms and traditions on Christian college campuses of students becoming engaged by spring semester of their senior year. Beyond dating and finding a mate, data from research in waves 3, 4, and 5 reveal that ring by spring may also be identified as an underlying cultural current that is a status symbol of social success (George 2019).

The source of ring by spring can be found in multiple places. While not all Christian colleges reinforce the expectation that students should be marriage-minded throughout college, recall that research from the first wave revealed that *most* Christian college students do experience pressure to find a spouse while at school. When asked in a survey from where students felt pressure to marry, students named their churches, families, and friends (see Table 2 below). Few students said the pressure came from the colleges themselves, though some schools incorporate explicit marriage-seeking language in their promotional materials. Rather, the peer pressure exists in the ethos of the college campus, and hence is a cultural product of the Christian college environment (Adams 2019).

Table 2: Sources of Pressure (n=121)



Most Christian colleges encourage students to ponder big life questions around careers and family during college. Indeed, some students may choose to attend a Christian college with the intention of finding a future spouse. While this is not an inherent problem, it becomes problematic when the expectation extends to all students, not just those who seek it. The impact is widespread. Even if students do not wish to be married, they are nonetheless immersed in an environment where relationships may be strained by the looming pressures associated with finding a spouse. When questioned about experiences related to the term “ring by spring,” less than 1% responded with positive comments. Repeatedly open-ended questions provided commentary on ambiguous loss, low self-esteem, or grief. For example, a typical response is reflected in this woman’s comment: “I felt an incredible pressure to find a spouse, and when I graduated single and most of my friends were in relationships, I felt terrible.”

Developmental psychologists have identified young adults aged 18-24 as “emerging adults,” the average ages of traditional undergraduate students. In this stage, people are still constructing their identities, they are in the exploratory process of decision-making, and thus, they may not yet be developmentally prepared to make important life decisions such as selecting a disciplinary major, much less a life-mate without a structured period of self-reflection, learning, and growth (Freedman 2013). Moreover, college students have, for the most part, not reached *identity achievement*, implying that an individual is still learning who they are, a necessary process until a sense of commitment to family, work, and religious values is established. Unless students have reached this stage, it may be difficult, if not developmentally improbable, for emerging adults to understand themselves entirely or make long term commitments.

Emerging adults have, for the most part, transitioned away from their “family of origin” stage, but have not yet entered their “family of procreation” stage where we might see long-

term relationships if not marriage be formed. Thus, emerging adulthood can generally be viewed “as a period not only of individual ambiguity between individual developmental transitions, but also as a unique state in the family life course, between leaving one’s own family and the formation of a new family” (Willoughby and Carroll 2016:283).

Psychologist Meg Jay (2012) argues that there are important developmental tasks that twenty-somethings must attend to during the period of emerging adulthood, including creating a family. She writes that we should encourage emerging adults to see the long-term consequences of their short-term decisions, including relationships, during emerging and early adulthood. Typically, several significant factors must align in order to prepare a person to commit to a partner, career, or location long-term. These include financial independence, completion of education or trainings, and self-efficacy. However, emerging adults may not have achieved each life task by the time they graduate college. This is not a personal shortcoming; it is basic psychology.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory provides a perspective that may be useful for explaining why students may get married during college. To begin, social exchange theory suggests that social behavior, including mate selection, is the result of an exchange process whereby any social exchange is meant to maximize benefits and minimize costs (Homans 1961). According to this theory, people weigh the potential benefits and risks or “costs” of relationships, seeking to find relationships that provide more of the former than the latter. For women, the rewards associated with engagement and marriage far outweigh the costs, including social status in society and among their peers, achievement of personal goals, religious affirmation, and compliance with university culture. For Christian women, however, the costs of singleness are too high, and the benefits or “rewards” of early marriage are so robust that it is rational for women to want to find their mate and become engaged prior to graduation.

According to social psychologists, relationships grow, develop, deteriorate, and dissolve as a consequence of social exchanges. When we interact with others, we are constantly negotiating costs and benefits of our relationships with others (Thibaut and Kelley 1959). That is, both men and women weigh the costs and benefits of participating in, and committing to, intimate relationships. If men do not see value in the social rewards that come from marriage (status, for example), then their interest in developing deep relationships with women may not be as high. As a result, women are not only more directly impacted by RxS, but their motive is greater, making an unequal balance in those seeking and not seeking engagement and marriage in college. This disequilibrium plays a considerable role in the added stress or pressure in the dating marketplace at Christian colleges.

Single women are exposed to greater social pressures to be married than are men, both in the Christian community and in society. The pressure intensifies when women reach emerging adulthood and are in the company of other Christians in an environment where marriage is perceived as the norm. For example, for a young woman who comes from a traditional background that instructs her to marry a Christian man, the expectation to marry while in early adulthood (college-age) is implicit, if not explicitly stated, given the traditional gender roles prescribed by conservative Christian backgrounds. These families may assume that there is no better place to find a Christian man than at a Christian college, where Christian men and women are studying, living, and worshiping together. It sounds like a perfect place to find and meet a spouse. And some do! When they do, their union is praised when those couples are confident in their mate selection process and feel adequately prepared for marriage. However, some students do not graduate with a spouse, which leads some women to think that they failed at their college experience, that they missed their opportunity to claim a husband from a large selection of young available Christian men.

In this sense, the best way to interpret the phenomenon that creates an unprecedented amount of pressure in students is found not only in person-to-person interaction, but in institutional cultures developing perceptions of costs and benefits.

Marital Paradigms and the Creation of Costs and Benefits.

Marital paradigm theory developed by Willoughby et al (2015) stipulates that one's belief about marriage is generated by the context in which they find themselves. Willoughby et al. postulate that marital *context*, *timing*, and *salience* are the three paradigms a person considers when developing beliefs on marriage. They write:

Such settings may include the obvious (dating encounters, wedding planning) but may also include less obvious connections. For example, although deciding on one's college major may seem unrelated to marriage, many emerging adults may make this decision partially due to the future earning potential of a career, which is often tied to a desire to provide for a future spouse and family. (2016:5)

Thus, marital paradigm theory provides the framework to investigate the way in which Christian college social structure may perpetuate cultural messages of what costs are worth what rewards, and what risks are too much to take. Yet, as psychologists learn more about development in the emerging adult stage, the more they question the capacity of a college-aged student to make long-lasting life decisions.¹ Thus, the ring by spring culture forces marital

belief development in emerging adulthood when emerging adults (i.e., traditional college students) may not be developmentally prepared to do so well.

Marital Context: Christian Colleges

Recently a colleague sent me a text message that read, “I’m in a college visit with our oldest this morning. The president opened by saying what a wonderful place it was and that you will likely meet your future spouse here and if not, at least your future bridesmaids.” Comments such as these have deeper significance than institutional members may recognize; these flippant messages do impact the audience and is the seed that grows into fear in the hearts and minds of Christian college students, particularly women, to whom this comment was clearly directed. The comments are meant as a tease, but the implications are intensely internalized.

“Context” according to marital paradigm theory, is a list of things a person may feel they need to be before feeling prepared to marry, including job stability, financial security, etc. The transition to marriage “is based on a self-defined group of criteria (Willoughby and Carroll 2016:283). However, most colleges and universities establish a culture of their own in which a particular set of rules, rituals, and behaviors become normalized, creating a unique context that often varies considerably from society at large. Thus, if a university culture (as indicated by rules, rituals, and behaviors) encourages marriage-seeking behaviors, it fabricates an unreal context for students which creates a false sense of preparedness.

Christian colleges have the potential to be a perfect place and time to meet a spouse; there are hundreds, if not thousands, of young Christian men and women present in similar stages of life with similar educational levels and religious upbringings. This does not account for other “hidden” identities (e.g., socioeconomic background, political beliefs, family makeup) and/or philosophical or personality differences that make each individual unique. However, Christian institutions may press the identity of “Christian” as the only significant variable when selecting a mate. Therefore, the benefits are incredibly rewarding if a spouse is identified on a Christian college campus.

The data indicate that nearly 90% of Christian college students graduate single, that is, not married or engaged, yet the impression is that engagement or marriage is the norm. This miscalculation may be due to the exaggerated response from the campus community when a couple does become affianced, making it seem like the number of betrothed students is greater than reality. To break down the perception of marriage as a norm, alumni from one Christian college were asked whether they recalled feeling pressure to marry when in college, and if so, from where the pressure came. Much of the data from the Christian college alumni survey (wave 4) offered radical messages about marriage shared with them during college which had

impacted them in the long term. Seventy-seven percent of students reported anxiety stemming from the university's relationship traditions: the rules and rituals practiced promoting heterosexual relationships or courtships.

One alumna, reflecting on her experience with ring by spring culture, commented in a survey,

There was a bell on campus that, rumor was, you could only ring when you got engaged. This bell was stationed in front of our Administration building. Honestly, I really wanted to ring that [darn] bell just because I was told I couldn't.

The bell ringing tradition became a cultural rite of passage, which comes with its own social benefits of social esteem and prestige.

Another Christian college graduate reflected on the traditions at this same school, commenting,

I lived in the (all women's) dorm nearest the gazebo that housed the large bell that traditionally you rung when you got engaged (supposedly it brought you bad luck if you wrung it while not engaged). We would hear it go off frequently and my roommate would always say "You're lying!" when it would go off in odd hours that seemed very unlikely for an engagement happening. If you took the number of bell rings seriously, students were almost always getting engaged, but I think the consensus was that there was a lot of bell ringing that was not engagement-related happening. However, I do know multiple couples that did go down and ceremonially ring the bell when they got engaged, sometimes taking pictures of themselves next to it.

My sister attended [a different Christian school] and interestingly they have a bell ringing engagement tradition too, only have to make an appointment get it unlocked for you to ring, which I imagine cuts down on the number of false rings. I think it's kind of interesting that the pleasure of ringing a bell/going up a cool old tower is regulated in this way. There was also a plaque on the sidewalk commemorating where the altar of the old chapel had been, but which specifically marked it as the place where numerous students had been joined in marriage "in the sight of God." In the winter the plaque was icy and slippery to step on and so my friends and I would sort of curse it/joke about it when we accidentally stepped on it on our way to the dining hall.

The above represents the satirical way in which students talk about how engagement or marriage is turned into a farce as a rebellion against that cultural force. Even though “ring by spring” is often a topic of discussion discussed on campus,² it is addressed casually, even humorously, and fails to address the depth of impact that the pressure to find a spouse has on students.

Traditions have an important role in fostering a campus community. They expose the student norms that exist outside of the formal academic curriculum or marketing materials that can help elucidate the ways in which the ring by spring culture is perpetuated on Christian college campuses. Traditions may teach students about the history of their institution, promote common values, and create a common connection for alumni and friends of the university. However, traditions can also produce negative results. “As certain rituals become ingrained in a university’s culture, it may become increasingly difficult to recognize the risks that some traditions pose to health and safety, requiring university officials to take appropriate action to correct them” (Van Jura 2010:107). Although Christian higher education is not the only propagator of ring by spring culture, it shapes the context of what is considered a cost or reward.

Marital Timing: The Four-Year Clock

College is stressful: new friends, roommates, possibly a new city, decisions on majors, internships, careers, and stepping toward financial independence. Students juggle classes, homework, jobs, social life, home life, all while being expected to perform well in their classes, create new social networks, and “find themselves” during college. College students across the United States report high levels of anxiety to succeed in college academically and professionally. According to the American College Health Association (ACHA) Fall 2018 National College Health Assessment, 63% of college students in the United States felt overwhelming anxiety in the past year, with 23% of those reported being diagnosed or treated by a mental health professional for anxiety in the past year (LeBlanc, 2019). The mounting pressure emerging adults feel can be attributed to identity issues (race, gender, sexual orientation), increased financial strain, or even peer expectation as prompted by social media outlets; social pressures are not uncommon to this population.

Additional sources of anxiety and stress may exist at Christian universities. The stakes (“costs”) are high. In addition to the anxiety levels listed by the ACHA, many Christian college students feel pressure to find their spouse in the four years they are on campus. The four-year

² Survey data reveal that 84% of student respondents report that they hear conversations about ring by spring at least occasionally, and 24% say the topic comes up often on campus.

clock to meet and marry someone while in college seems especially stressful. Students and alum commented on this dynamic as follows:

I feel like there was an expectation that I should have found the person I was going to marry in college. The fact that I didn't, has made dating harder after graduation. Like, what if I missed my opportunity?

They normalized the idea that it was good to get engaged by the end of college; put pressure on me to date in college, with the idea that if I didn't find a spouse in college, I wouldn't find one later in life.

I think many people hope to find their future spouse in college because you have many opportunities to socialize and meet with new people, and that people fear that they will suddenly lose access to the huge pool of opportunity upon graduation. However, when I graduated, I realized that this idea was a complete myth! I was not cut off from the pool of opportunity; in fact, I found it easier to devote more time to socialization when I no longer had mountains of homework hanging over my head at all times. It was liberating.

For the women in the study, many reported that the dating competition is high, and women seeking a partner feel pressured to have to stand out among their female peers. This makes the intensity of finding a spouse even more severe, compounded by a scarcity of time and of available men. The relationship environment can be so cutthroat and unhealthy, some choose to avoid not only dating, but cross-gender relationships in general. In the words of one alumna:

I think my lack of male friendships [in college] was a result of the competitive atmosphere... it made me continue to be shy and rather awkward with men, rather than getting over that and figuring out how to relate to men in a primarily non-romantic way. I am a fairly easily embarrassed person, so I feel the Christian dating culture in combination with that personality trait has rather hampered my relationships with men. By framing the relationships with men as primarily potential husbands, I think the culture made it very difficult for me to have deep male-female friendships or even act naturally with single young men—and these are things that I still struggle with. I think it also made me feel like a hopeless spinster in my early 20s because so many of my friends had already married/had kids, whereas in contrast my friends [outside of my Christian college] are just now (in their mid-30s) marrying. I haven't dated much at all, and I think that's been in part reaction to (rebellious against) the weird

gender dynamics I experienced and in part because of my awkwardness with men.

In a similar vein, another alumna reported:

It was quite difficult to make guy friends because the girls were very competitive about their male friends (usually harboring hopes that it would eventually become romantic) and you had to be quite aggressive/assertive in order to become friends with guys, since because of the gender imbalance they had as many female friends as they could wish... Since I wasn't willing to play that game, I had almost no male friends by the time I graduated university.

While societal pressure on women is undoubtedly a factor when considering the gendered nature of ring by spring, the messages students received from the Christian communities on how to actually find their spouse are nebulous. Students reported that often the process of finding a spouse (i.e., courtship or dating) came second to actually finding a spouse. In fact, in the first wave of research, 53% of students reported that dating was "a social process necessary to find a spouse."

Wanting to do right by their Christian faith, students are left to their own devices to decide what it means to date from a Christian perspective. As a result, the dating scene on college campuses can become puzzling, and ultimately stifling. If this becomes the norm during early adulthood, then the search for a partner later in life becomes even more complicated. One reflective alumna, while not representative of all alumni, wrote:

I have done a lot of thinking about marriage in the 14 years since I graduated. While I know that statistics are not determinate of individual outcomes, I also am quite glad that my experience has escaped some of the typical patterns [I saw at college]... I think that there was always some implied understanding that the ones who married right after college were somehow special, more whole, blessed, or happier; and those who weren't partnered off were somehow damaged or unfit.... I spent maybe four or five years trying to follow the Christian college dating-to-marriage trajectory before I realized that this was not what I wanted, nor was it helping me be a better person, friend, and companion. During this time, I lived and spent most of my time with a bunch of Christian girls, a few of whom went to [my Christian college], so the Christian college dating and marriage perspective was still being normalized even though I was outside the bubble. When I went to grad school, my perspective on dating and marriage changed rapidly and dramatically. I suddenly realized that I didn't have to think

of my boyfriend as a future husband, and it was also not a waste of time to date someone I would not necessarily marry down the road... I think I became a lot happier, more content, less anxious, and more grounded.

Timing is also significant for those young adults who choose chastity prior to marriage, but perhaps to a lesser degree than some would assume. The presumption is that Christians marry young because of the pressure to have sex and wanting to wait to be married before having sex (as is often encouraged in Christian communities). But assuming that the pressure to marry can be reduced to sexual pressures is inadequate. It dismisses the true sources of the pressure behind the ring by spring culture, and attributes it to sex when there are other factors that are also to blame. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that sex is not the only reason students rush to marry. The fact that some Christian college single women plan their weddings and read bridal magazines, as shared by some research participants, despite their single status indicates that there is more to the equation than just sexual desire. To deduce that the ring by spring dynamic is merely the result of young adult sexual urges not only delegitimizes the anxiety that this culture can produce, it has a more harmful impact on students. Sex is too easily blamed, instead of looking inward to the deeper culture of what is valued that is perpetuated by the university context.

Marital Salience: Marriage as the Best (and Only) Choice

The church's favor of traditional marriage and family has purportedly sent a message to Christians that a person has not reached his or her full potential until they have reached the sacrament of marriage. Yet, whether temporary or long-lasting, singleness provides opportunities unavailable to married people. Nevertheless, society is less likely to trust single people or rent homes to single people, and single people are less likely to be hired, given a promotion, granted a bank loan, or even liked by their neighbors (Byrne and Carr 2005). In traditional religious cultures, where women may be seen as "complementary" to men, women are expected to take on more traditional domestic and child-rearing duties in order to be seen as valuable contributors to their communities. From this perspective, it is clear that women benefit from a marital social status and would therefore be more inclined to pursue marriage.

Marital status has the capacity to stratify Christian students into hierarchical categories. On Christian college campuses, married or engaged students appear to carry a higher social status than their single classmates with the ring itself being representative of social success. Reflecting on this, one male student said, "Monks and nuns are up here [holds hand above head], then married Christians [hand at head], then single Christians [hand at waist]. There is a definite hierarchy. And who wants to be at the bottom?" A similar comment from a female

alumna: “Many of my friends got married the summer after we graduated. It definitely felt like the ‘superior’ option.”

Singleness simply does not appear to be a viable option. Instead, being single is often interpreted as a burden to bear. Kutter Callaway, author of *Breaking the Marriage Idol* (2018), addresses this issue, critiquing the normative model of marriage, and arguing for a more robust conversation about marriage and singleness in Christianity. He writes that singleness is a form of purgatory where it can be both At best, a time of sexual purification, or a time of celibacy” (Callaway 2018).

Adult singleness is not well understood in the Christian system. It is a role that is outcast, and not an acceptable function, unless it is discussed as a temporary state. Indeed, singleness carries a social stigma beyond Christian communities. Scholars have written about contemporary “pro-marriage ideologies” in the United States, arguing that this singleness stigma will persist until we, as a society, recognize the privileges of being married, acknowledge that marriage and family life are public, not private issues, and accept fluid aspects of how people interpret family and relationships (Byrne and Carr 2005).

Research has found that when emerging adults prioritize education and careers over marriage, their desire to marry declines (Blakemore et. al. 2005). But when the salience of marriage is culturally enforced through traditions, rhetoric, dating rituals, and social benefits, students may upend their educational or vocational endeavors. Moreover, their psychological development may be forced into a stage of adulthood where long-term marriage is the sole purpose of all romantic relationships. Overall, the way the costs and benefits of marriage are produced and reproduced at Christian colleges is very likely an unhealthy pattern of social exchange.

Calling off the Race

The marital culture perpetuated by Christian college systems may seem like a minor issue facing Christian higher education in 2023. In a post-pandemic world, the concern about college relationships probably falls below health concerns, race relations, student retention, budgets, and faith integration on the to-do lists of college administrators. However, marital paradigm theory provides a framework for us to recognize the potential long-term impact of forcing marital beliefs on emerging adults that may not be developmentally prepared.

Further research should investigate the impact of marital pressure from a student development perspective to generate alternatives for faculty and staff, and to serve students better by fostering an environment of self-growth. The institution must address the cultural messages about marriage and become open to conversations about healthy social exchanges.

Students do not have to wait a decade post-graduation to recognize the unusual, and potentially damaging relationship dynamics that happen at Christian colleges.

This argument is hardly a comprehensive summarization of all relationship dynamics on Christian campuses. Indeed, there are many more nuanced perspectives and experiences of how this culture deserves scholarly attention. Scholarship is needed to recognize the complexities of this culture, but the first step is to deconstruct the false narrative that ring by spring is nothing more than a tease. On the contrary, it has social psychological implications on students and graduates of Christian colleges, leaving students insecure about their relationships with both men and women. Even if students do not wish to marry before graduation, they are nonetheless subject to the culture that encompasses campus life. While some colleges may continue to embrace a pro-marriage ideology for their students, the fact remains that if students sense the pressure to marry, the feelings of unworthiness, fear, and doubt will persist.

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