

**“Ring by Spring”: An Examination of the Actuality and Perception of Young
Marriage and Engagements at St. Olaf College**

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Executive Summary: “Ring by Spring”: An Examination of the Actuality and Perception of Young Marriage and Engagements at St. Olaf College

Abstract:

Although there is a large body of work specializing on the concepts of intimacy and perceptions of marriage among college students, there have been relatively few research projects that attempt to study a cross-section of college students and their opinions on engagements during college and marriage after graduation. Our study attempts to build off previous research regarding these marital and engagement trends, as well as allowing students who are engaged to share their experiences and expectations. First, we explore students' (engaged and non-engaged) perceptions of college-age engagements and marriage after graduation. Second, we examine trends in students' answers for potential unifying factors, such as presence of fully committed relationship, duration of current relationship, etc. We found that marriage is largely misunderstood among college students at St. Olaf and that there is often a stigma associated with college students becoming engaged at a young age and the larger Ring by Spring culture.

Summary of Findings:

- Family reactions to young engagements are varied: some couples reported tremendous support from their families, while others acknowledged hostility from their families towards their engagement.
- Engaged students have observed varied reactions from their friends: at face value, their friends say only positive encouraging things about their engagement; however in social events, their friends have stated criticism of

early engagement only to retract their statements in front of said engaged couple. This behavior, inferred to be passive-aggressive in nature, may be a way for friends to express disapproval with their engagement.

- Most couples have articulated well-developed plans for the future. No couples planned on children immediately after graduation, and have realized that children are not affordable or feasible at this point in their lives.
- Public interest is very high at St. Olaf, especially regarding engagements. Several couples have reported that complete strangers have congratulated them on their engagements: this may be because of Facebook as well as St. Olaf's small, well-connected student body.
- All engaged couples discussed engagements before the actual proposal occurred. Such conversations also included very practical matters such as housing arrangements, finances, familial concerns, and personal needs and wants post-graduation from college.
- None of the proposals happened at St. Olaf College, and many couples were interested in choosing environments separate from St. Olaf as well as their friends and family. There was also concern and anxiety regarding making their engagement public.
- All of the engaged couples acknowledged the stigma of Ring by Spring couples. All spoke of their dislike of the label, and some attributed the negative aspects of this label to other students being jealous of their decision.
- Engaged students had more concrete plans after graduation than non-engaged students. It was common, for example, to hear of engaged students

who already had graduate schools or jobs after graduation while non-engaged students had less developed plans.

- Prior relationships were common among engaged students, and these relationships ranged from a few months to a few years.
- Engaged students were more likely to be sexually active.
- Feelings towards cohabitation were mixed: some engaged couples had already cohabited and intended on doing so prior to the wedding, whereas others had not but intended to before the wedding. Others were completely opposed.
- Non-engaged students had discernibly different reactions towards Ring by Spring; however, non-engaged students also acknowledged negative perceptions regarding "Ring by Spring." They also attached a stigma to Ring by Spring because they felt it limited personal agency.
- Regarding religion and its effect on perceptions of young engagements, there was little difference between non-engaged and engaged students. Students who were more religious had more traditional beliefs about marriage and young engagement, and were also more supportive of early engagements at St. Olaf. Students who self-identified as agnostic or atheist were more uncomfortable with early engagements.
- Just as religion correlated with perceptions of early engagements, it also had an effect on views regarding cohabitation. Most were open to cohabiting after graduation, even in situations when families expressed disapproval.

Abstract

Although there is a large body of work specializing on the concepts of intimacy and perceptions of marriage among college students, there have been relatively few research projects that attempt to study a cross-section of college students and their opinions on engagements during college and marriage after graduation. Our study attempts to build off previous research regarding these marital and engagement trends, as well as allowing students who are engaged to share their experiences and expectations. First, we explore students' (engaged and non-engaged) perceptions of college-age engagements and marriage after graduation. Second, we examine trends in students' answers for potential unifying factors, such as presence of fully committed relationship, duration of current relationship, etc. We found that marriage is largely misunderstood among college students at St. Olaf and that there is often a stigma associated with college students becoming engaged at a young age and the larger Ring by Spring culture.

Introduction

There's something about it—whether it's Malt-O-Meal, community living, or the clarity of a Minnesota winter night, St. Olaf campus is often celebrated for the college's aesthetic beauty and romantic atmosphere. At St. Olaf there also exists a mindset among alumni and friends of the college of a propensity for Oles marrying Oles, especially during their senior year. This phenomenon begins around the fall, when the leaves start changing color, and it ends at springtime, when the world is in bloom. It's prevalent enough that St. Olaf has a name for it: the "Ring by Spring."

The name, one would assume, means an engagement ring by springtime. It means that students, mostly seniors, are pairing off. Ring by Spring is so pervasive on campus even students who aren't seniors, or engaged to other St. Olaf students are well aware of this institution. We are interested in researching Ring by Spring because we wanted to know the reasons why St. Olaf students get engaged while still students, and why so many St. Olaf students perceive Ring by Spring to be a common campus institution.

Literature Review

There is a wealth of literature regarding marriage, especially among young adults who may be current college students. These studies cover many topics and range in variety from marital expectations, markers of adulthood, perceptions and knowledge of the reality of marriage, as well as investigations on college students' toward marriage. We were especially interested in literature that focused on college students, specifically whether or not their views toward marriage were accurate.

Elizabeth A. Sharp and Lawrence H. Ganong (2000), for instance, explore the idea that college students have unrealistic expectations for marriage and what measures can be taken to adjust these views. These views include the thought that disagreements are harmful to a relationship, the idea of a soul mate, that mind-reading is possible, and that sexual perfection can be achieved. They conducted their study by comparing two groups of students in marriage and family courses, with one group taught in an integrative way. Both sets of students report lowered levels of romantic expectations, with students in the integrative classes reporting significantly lower levels.

Other studies that addressed markers of adulthood were relevant to our investigation. Jeffrey Arnett (1997) explores conceptions of the transition to adulthood. While many previous studies have focused on graduating from college, getting married, and having children, Arnett takes a different approach in surveying young people, asking what they consider to be the indication that they have transitioned to adulthood. Surprisingly, respondents focused on individual activities, such as being financially independent from their parents instead of marriage. One possible explanation for this is the increasingly higher median age of marriage in the U.S. or younger generation's narcissistic tendencies.

We were also wanted to understand what role early marriages played in individuals' larger lives. Carroll, Willoughby, etc. (2007) discuss marital horizon theory, or how the expected age of marriage affects risky behavior in young adults. Respondents who expected to marry in their early 20's reported less risky behavior than those who expected to marry at a later age. While many posit that an early marriage is more likely to end in divorce, the study argues that engaging in these behaviors may lead to an increased risk of divorce in later marriages, with the likelihood that these behaviors would not cease with marriage.

Some studies utilized social role theory to study how normative social roles play a role in college students' views regarding relationships and marriage. Barnett et al. (2002) demonstrated how college seniors' childhood context, namely whether or not their mothers stayed at home, plays a role in navigating career-marriage conflict later in life. They found that college seniors whose mothers worked outside

the home struggled less with career-marriage conflict in romantic relationships following their graduation.

Young women with traditional views may marry, according to Barber and Axim (1998), at a later age if they expect to achieve higher levels of education. Of the individuals interviewed, marriage rates were highest among young women with traditional views that did not expect to achieve higher education. Women who experience tensions between their academic goals and their gender roles attitudes are thus more likely to have lower rates of early marriage in comparison to women who do not have this dissonance.

Given a discrepancy between perception and the reality of marriage culture at St. Olaf, we also sought to better understand the role that misinformation can have on decision to marry young. Studying college students' results to a quiz on marriage and family dynamics, Jeffery Larson (1988) discovered that college students have fairly limited and misinformed ideas regarding the reality of family and marriage dynamics. Specifically, students were unaware of the impact of having children, cohabitation, self-disclosure, and romantic love on marriage satisfaction. Additionally, Larson found that women scored higher than did men on the marriage quiz.

Setting

The setting for our research is St. Olaf College, a small private liberal arts college located in Northfield, Minnesota. The city is located in Rice County in South-eastern Minnesota and has approximately 19,633 residents according to a 2008 survey. Northfield is home to two colleges: Carleton College, and St. Olaf College,

where our research will take place. St. Olaf College is located near the western edge of Northfield and the campus has approximately 300 acres of land, with an additional 700 acres located nearby.

Norwegian Lutheran immigrants founded St. Olaf College in 1874. The school prides itself on its rigorous academics and its involvement in international and domestic study abroad programs. Currently the college is ranked among the top 20 small colleges and universities and has approximately 70% of its student body per class year participating in a domestic or international off-campus program. St. Olaf is also affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Students are required to take courses in religious study and conversations regarding religion are considered to be an integral aspect of the St. Olaf experience. Approximately 96% of the student body lives in on-campus residential housing for all four years of their time at St. Olaf. Because of the relative proximity of buildings, dormitories, and athletic facilities, St. Olaf has a rather close-knit community that is very active in on-campus events.

Currently, there are 3,099 students enrolled at St. Olaf College, 55% of who are female and 45% of who are male. The student body represents all fifty states and thirty other countries. The largest minority racial group represented at St. Olaf's campus is Asian (142 people, 5%), followed by Non-resident International students (75, 2%). The majority of the campus' racial demographic is White, not Hispanic, at 2,628 people, or 85%.

We are studying a cross-section of the St. Olaf community: in addition to engaged students, we are also researching the opinions regarding engagements and

young marriage from an assortment of St Olaf College students from first-years to seniors. These students have a variety of "relationship" experiences: some are not dating, others are dating seriously, and others are dating "just for fun." For our study, there are four engaged couples that fit the classic "Ring by Spring" definition.

Methodology

We conducted our study as an ethnography, which we accomplished through the use of participant observation and interviews. As students on campus, we have had the privilege to observe this phenomenon for the past 3 1/2 years first-hand. We have witnessed the excitement surrounding engagement season and have heard speeches given by the administration about how many Oles will marry other Oles before we graduate. Additionally, we conducted this study as a qualitative follow-up to a quantitative study conducted by a group of St. Olaf students in the fall of 2008. They administered a survey to conduct their research. We were able to use some of their findings and suggestions to create the framework for our study.

We each conducted a series of interviews of St. Olaf students who were engaged, nonengaged dating couples and single. We interviewed students from every year and strived to obtain a representative sample of the student population. Prior to the interviews we prepared a questionnaire as a rough outline of what we would ask participants in our interviews. These questions also varied depending on if we were interviewing an engaged or a non-engaged participant.

When interviewing engaged students we began by asking about participants' parents and their marital status. We also inquired if their parents were Alumni of St. Olaf themselves and if they met at St. Olaf. We then asked if their partner was a

St. Olaf student in some interviews, but only if we were not also interviewing their partner. Next we inquired as to when the couple was planning on getting married or if they had set a date. After this, we inquired if they had talked about getting engaged prior to the actual proposal. Then we discussed how long their relationship was prior to engagement, how long they had known each other total, and how many previous relationships they had been in. Subsequently, we asked questions of sexual history and religiosity. Following this, we posed questions of what career goals and immediate future plans. Thereafter, we raised questions of reactions to news of their engagement and how they couple copes with these reactions. Lastly, we submitted questions of future family plans. We varied in conducting when it came to the engaged couples: some were interviewed together and others as individuals. This was decided by the preference of the interviewer and of the interviewees.

For the non-engaged students, many of the questions were the same, although there were some specifically focused on non-engaged students. We inquired specifically about non-engaged students' parents and their marital status as well as their sexual history and religiosity. We asked if they were aware of the Ring by Spring phenomenon and their views of it. We discussed their future plans and if they ever intended on getting married. We also asked if they thought of marriage when looking for a partner.

Problem

We initially sought to study the Ring by Spring phenomenon because of our interest in a prevalent and well-known campus phenomenon. Added that several of our friends have become engaged during our senior year on campus, we have an even greater interest in intermarriage of St. Olaf students. We first intended to investigate to what degree St. Olaf students are socialized into considering Ring by Spring a relevant aspect of campus culture. After having some preliminary conversations with students and familiarizing ourselves in the current literature, we became aware of two additional dimensions of this topic: one is the stigma associated with becoming engaged while still a college student. As the average marriage age continues to increase, this has been a more frequently reported concern for students who get married at relatively younger ages. Next is a misalignment between the student perception of Ring by Spring culture at St. Olaf and the reality of this phenomenon, especially with regard to how common it is.

We were also drawn to a qualitative study of the Ring by Spring culture at St. Olaf because of a study done on this very same topic in the quantitative research methods course two years ago. That study also investigated the attitudes and beliefs regarding intermarriage of students within the St. Olaf community via an online survey. Their research found that most students do not expect to find a spouse while at St. Olaf. Most students, however, still do believe that Oles marrying Oles is very common.[\[1\]](#) As students, we believe their findings aptly characterize the general ethos of intermarriage culture at St. Olaf. Though the qualitative study demonstrated some interesting findings, it fails to offer an effective explanation of

why St. Olaf students believe intermarriage is common when it is actually not. A qualitative analysis of this phenomenon allows us to offer possible answers to these questions.

Given the extreme discrepancy between how students perceive intermarriage between students and the reality of it being relatively infrequent, we wanted to investigate what sources were at play for institutionalizing the Ring by Spring culture at St. Olaf. Specifically, we were curious how the perception of “Ring by Spring” culture is developed and maintained within the daily culture of St. Olaf. To help us analyze how the perception of “Ring by Spring” culture is developed and maintained within the St. Olaf community, we utilized Foucault’s Discourse Theory as an analytical framework in which to address our question. The very basic meaning of this theory is that we use language and communication (discourse) to shape and create our society and culture. Foucault says, “Discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined” (117). Not only does this language influence what we consider important and our feelings and attitudes about certain ideas but also it is also directly related to knowledge and the dissemination of this knowledge throughout our society. Additionally, with regard to knowledge, discourse affects what we regard as true. It creates power dynamics through what we are talking about and who is talking about something. When someone who is considered to be an authority figure, or someone with more knowledge and power engages in discourse with another, their statements are generally regarded as true.

Discourse also speaks something about who is saying what. Within the topic of our study, someone who talks about the engagements at St. Olaf directly impacts the general perception of what has been coined, Ring by Spring.

Findings

Engaged Students

Parents' Marital Status

There were no discernable trends among the parents of the engaged respondents. Some had parents who did attend St. Olaf, but most did not. Some parents were still married while others were divorced. Some had been Ring by Spring couples while others married later in life. In sets of couples however, one respondent usually had parents that were still married while the other had gotten divorced. What can be concluded from this is that these current Ring by Spring couples are not being influenced by their parents. They are still getting married despite exposure to divorce and their own parents being married later than they themselves will be.

Families' Reactions to Engagements

We found that family reaction to engagements were split between being very supportive and openly discouraging. Those that were supportive have helped to plan the wedding and have seemed to provide genuine enthusiasm for their son or daughter and their partner for this life decision. One set of parents even expressed how they wish they could help the couple more, but due to geographical distance struggle to do so. Another set expressed that they were pleased that the couple had not set a date and were taking it slow as well as relieved of the financial burden of

paying for two weddings in a small time frame as one of their other sons was due to be married in the next year.

On the reverse side, some families have been hostile to their child's impending wedding. One respondent reported that her parents said, "That's wonderful. You never know what will happen, but good for you for trying." One of her older siblings told her, "Congratulations. It probably won't work out." This has not had any effect on the couple or their decision to get married, but the couple expressed sadness that her family could not be more supportive of their decision but is happy that the male respondent's family has been supportive.

Friends' Reactions to Engagements

Friends' reactions have tended to be more mixed than families'. They typically express their happiness and congratulations to the couple upon hearing about the engagement. Many couples, however, cited later incidents of socializing with the same friends when the topic of engagements and marriage comes up and those friends will say something to the effect of "I can't believe people are getting engaged now. We are too young to be getting married," and then realize that their engaged friends are sitting there and add, "But not you guys, you guys are great! You're the exception." This has created discord between the engaged couples and their friends as they begin to question if the initial positivity expressed to the couple is genuine or an act.

Engaged couples also considered this behavior to be passive-aggressive in nature: to them, it seems like their friends wished to be able to express their disapproval of their decision but could not find a constructive way to do so. Instead

they expressed their disapproval of *other* couples hoping that their engaged friends would infer their disapproval from these statements. This contributes to our findings regarding the stigma attached to the Ring by Spring label and the negative perceptions of young engagements on campus.

Children and Family Planning

When asked about plans for having children and starting families, most couples articulated well thought out plans regarding their postgraduate plans and how family life would be integrated into that. No couples planned on having children immediately after graduation; however, most wanted to have children within at least the next ten years. The primary reason for delaying having children was the worry of children interfering with professional and career plans immediately following graduation. One respondent said that they had recently realized that children are not necessary if they do not want them and that the realization was very liberating. Several couples expressed that they do not want to be world travelers with children. Many have also expressed that they are considering adoption. One couple also mentioned they simply wanted time with just the two of them so that they can continue to get to know one another and deepen their relationship. Fundamentally, having children following graduation was simply not feasible or affordable.

Public Interest in Engagements

Many couples discussed the public interest in engagements at St. Olaf. One could make the claim that part of pervasiveness of the phenomenon is due to this public interest. St. Olaf is a small school, which leads to a small, well-connected

group of students. Many of us are introduced to this concept of Ring by Spring during our first year at St. Olaf. President Anderson alludes to it in his speech he gives during freshman orientation and we often hear the statistic that approximately 80% of Oles marry other Oles during their lifetime.

Foucault's Discourse Theory helps to explain how President Anderson's words regarding marriage culture are regarded as truths. Even with *statistics* to legitimize his statements, his institutional power augments the perceived reality of intermarriage of St. Olaf students and Ring by Spring culture on campus. As a consequence of our Week One orientation, the seed is planted early on in our college careers to have marriage on the mind.

When springtime comes many students inquire within their friend group as to whether anyone had become engaged. Facebook also exacerbates this curiosity as you have access to the relationship status of your close friends and those you might classify more as acquaintances and typically receive a notification if they have changed their relationship status, whether they have become single or engaged. Several of the engaged couples reported that they have had complete strangers come up to congratulate them on their engagement. One female respondent told a story of how she was having her ring cleaned and a random classmate had approached her to inquire if she was still engaged. Another female respondent discussed how she had limited the news of her engagement to only her close friends to avoid her engagement from becoming a public topic of conversation. She noted, "Other students seem more excited about my engagement than even I am!" She also remarked on how many students required her to qualify or defend her engagement

with statements such as, “Why are you getting married? You’re a feminist.” Other couples expressed their surprise that the news of their engagement had traveled so quickly and had become a topic of “hot gossip.”

Discussion of Engagements Prior to Proposal

Of the engaged students that were interviewed, every couple mentioned that they had had a conversation regarding becoming engaged before the actual proposal. Though these conversations usually avoided talk of marriage directly, they were implicit in their meaning. A common conversation would involve one couple asking the other “where they saw themselves in a few years,” or “do we want to take this to the next stage?” In avoiding talk of marriage directly, these conversations offered engaged students the means to continue their relationship with a known but unspoken reality that they would eventually become engaged. Such conversations also involved practical discussions regarding housing arrangements, familial concerns, and personal needs/ wants from their relationship following graduation from college.

Off-Campus Proposals

None of the students that were interviewed had their proposals actually occur on the St. Olaf campus. In fact, it appeared that many students were interested in choosing contexts for their proposals that were separated from St. Olaf as well as environments that were not closely related to their friends and family. Likewise, there was a great deal of concern and anxiety regarding making their engagement public to the St. Olaf community. Couples expressed concern over the lack of privacy that exists at St. Olaf and speed in which information is passed along.

Ring by Spring Stigma

All couples we interviewed spoke of the stigma associated with the Ring by Spring label. The general perception of Ring by Spring couples is that Ring by Spring couples are somehow immature, rush their relationships, plan poorly. Our interviewees had gotten engaged prior to the actual spring of their senior year, hoping to avoid this label but all acknowledged that they knew they were still falling into the category because they had gotten engaged prior to graduation. All spoke about their distaste of this label and hurt feelings with being thought of as rash, careless individuals for wanting to commit to each other for their lifetimes and having had figured this out prior to graduation was somehow a bad thing in the eyes of their peers.

Some engaged students perceived the stigma from their peers as a result of jealous feelings towards their committed and enriching relationship. For example, one respondent said that everyone who has voiced a negative opinion of their engagement came from an unhappy relationship or were single. Another respondent said that people were jealous of their bold and uncommon decision to marry at a young age that others are afraid to make.

After Graduation and Marriage

Engaged students overall had more concrete plans following graduation than did non-engaged students. It was more common, for instance, to hear engaged couples planning on going to medical and law schools following graduation while non-engaged students had less concrete or long-term plans. One engaged couple

addressed this directly: both of the individuals had high-paying jobs lined up following graduation expressed confusion towards other students who were delaying maturation and “stepping into the real world.”

Prior Relationships

Prior relationships were common among students who were engaged. These relationships were relatively longer compared to previous relationships among non-engaged students. Many engaged individuals also reported starting relationships at younger ages prior coming to college. Often, these early relationships lasted several months to a few years. Once at college, many engaged and non-engaged students expressed a desire to look for a meaningful relationship with someone at college. Though interested in finding a quality partner, students disagreed that they did this with the purpose of finding someone they would eventually marry.

Sexuality and Religion

Engaged students at St. Olaf were more likely to be sexually active than not. There were a few instances in which students would wait to have sex until marriage. Among these couples, they mentioned familial, personal, and religious motivations for waiting to become sexually active. Families played an especially important role in decisions regarding cohabitation decisions for time after graduation. Religious belief played other roles in engaged students’ decision to get engaged. These included religious beliefs that encouraged marriage and having a family. Religious convictions regarding marriage, however, seemed to be kept out of public attention within the college community.

Cohabitation

The topic of cohabitation also came up in the interviews. The feelings towards the topic were mixed. Some engaged couples had already cohabitated and intended on doing so prior to their wedding. Others had not yet lived together but intended on doing so before their wedding, and still others had not lived together and were opposed to do so before their wedding. Those that had cohabitated expressed that it had made them closer as a couple and more sure of their decision to get married as they felt they had gotten a preview of what their married life together will be like. They will also be relocating together and feel that it makes sense to live together, for their relationship and economic concerns. Likewise, those that had not yet cohabited but will said that it just made sense to live together after graduation. One couple experienced some family disapproval for this decision; so to accommodate them will be moving in with the male respondent's family for their cohabitation. The last group of engaged students who do not intend on living together listed many reasons for their decision. One couple said that they did not want to be distracted by each other, as they will be starting graduate programs in the fall. One couple said they just do not see the need to live together prior to marriage. And another said that due to familial disapproval they would not be living together after graduation.

Non-Engaged Students

Expectations for Marriage

There are discernible differences regarding attitudes regarding ring by spring between engaged and non-engaged students, regardless if they were in a

relationship or not. Every non-engaged couple or individual we interviewed told us that they intended to get married at some point in their lives. There was considerable variability, however, in *when* students thought they would get married. Some who were in relationships anticipated engagement within a few months whereas many single students expressed it may be several years until they even begin to contemplate marriage. Dating couples varied in their responses depending on the duration and intensity of their relationship. Many couples said that they simply had not spent enough time with their partner in order to have discussions regarding marriage.

We came across additional reasons that both single and engaged students listed for wanting to get married at a later age. The most common reasons were a desire to wait until they met someone they could see themselves marrying and a desire to achieve other certain benchmarks in their lives before getting married. The latter examples were especially common among single students. Certain single students expressed a desire to travel independently, establish a stable job, or even develop a greater sense of self before beginning a relationship that could potentially lead to engagement and marriage. The desire for independence and autonomy among single students was quite prevalent and perhaps helped explain some of their indifference to their peers giving up some independence by getting engaged while in college.

Perceptions of Engagements

Among non-engaged students there were a variety of views regarding students who participated in the Ring by Spring phenomenon. Firstly, many

students have a negative stigma towards students who decide to get engaged while still attending college. Often students perceived such early engagements to be naïve and rash. For example, some students believed that engaged students are doing so to meet intense religious, social, and familial demands. They also attached a stigma to young engagements because they feel as if doing such limits their agency and independence.

Religion and Sexuality

In terms of religion and sexuality there was little difference between engaged and non-engaged students. Some were more devoutly religious while others identified themselves as agnostic or atheist, covering a wide spectrum of religiosity. Students who were more religious typically had more traditional views regarding marriage and engagement. Additionally, they had less hostile views towards young engagements and Ring by Spring culture at St. Olaf. These students were also more likely to abstain from sexual activity until marriage or at the very least, an exceptionally committed relationship. The students who identified themselves as agnostic or atheist were sometimes less comfortable with young engagements and Ring by Spring culture. They also tended to be sexually active or open to the possibility of being sexually active prior to marriage.

Cohabitation For Non-Engaged Students

Just as religion and sexuality influenced views on marriage and young engagements for non-engaged students, they also played a role in decisions regarding cohabitation following graduation. First, most were more open to the idea of living with their partner immediately following graduation. Even in

instances where family may have shown less approval, irreligious, non-engaged students were often still comfortable with living with their partner. While in the minority, one respondent was opposed to the idea of cohabitation due to religious convictions. The respondent said, “If you’re going to be making that step and physical commitment to each other, why not take that extra step?” One could argue that the reported comfort with cohabitation is indicative of larger social trends and values. These trends include marriage at older ages as well as not seeing marriage as a requisite for a committed, long-term relationship.

Summary and Conclusions

One of the most interesting findings we came across in this investigation was an understanding that young engagements at St. Olaf represented a highly rational decision and ensures a host of tangible benefits to students who decided to do so. Contrary to the perceived stigma attached to Ring by Spring couples at St. Olaf, these couples represent an exceptionally egalitarian relationship model. Their futures have been diligently planned to encompass their personal career goals while maintaining a healthy and enriching relationship. While many young people may perceive these relationships to be constricting, limiting of agency, and the result of naiveté, they in fact are quite the opposite. Engaged students may have a partner financially support them through medical school and provide emotional support through this transition time. Unlike many graduating seniors, all interviewed engaged students have concrete post-graduation plans, many of which are among some of the most coveted jobs and prestigious graduate schools in the country.

We were also able to characterize some of the most negative associations regarding intermarriage of St. Olaf students and Ring by Spring culture. Students have assigned a variety of terms and phrases to describe young engaged couples. Some would depict it as crazy, trashy, uncultured, or even archaic. This is a product of our liberal college environment that values sexual and emotional freedom as well as a high degree of social mobility. The upper class, white, highly educated, population that represents the St. Olaf community may perhaps view young marriages as an abnormality with regard to current, normative standards of relationships and marriage. In an age where hook-ups are becoming more frequent than dating, it could be argued that marriage is becoming less common and even less socially popular among college students. For instance, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that the median age for marriage has been on the rise with an age of 26 for women and 28 for men[2].

Again, Foucault's theory of discourse would suggest that the current dialogue regarding relationships among college students increasingly devalues emotional intensity and commitment, further contributing to a negative stigma towards marriage and especially young marriage and Ring by Spring.

Just as the quantitative research project on this topic uncovered a disagreement between the perceived and actual frequency of intermarriage between St. Olaf students, especially during spring of their senior year we too observed that most students are misinformed of the reality of young engagements at St. Olaf. Largely, that most students do not expect to find a spouse at St. Olaf although they do perceive Ring by Spring culture to be highly prevalent. We

attribute this to the high degree of public interest surrounding the engagements of currently enrolled students. Students are interested in these decisions due to discourse as described by Foucault and the heightened status of this phenomenon due its lifelong impact.

Potential Uses of Research

Our findings could be used to help students be better informed of what it means to be engaged at a young age. There is clearly a gross misunderstanding of the frequency and reasons for the intermarriage of young college students and Ring by Spring culture, especially among people who think poorly of young marriage. This data could also be used to foster better conversation between engaged and non-engaged student and aid them in breaking down the barriers presented by these misperceptions. Additionally, this information could be used in the on-campus counseling center, especially for the utility of helping engaged students who are having difficulty navigating an environment that is hostile to their engagement.

Future Research

The main weakness of our study was the lack of diversity present in our participants. Many of our participants were Caucasian, heterosexual, Protestant seniors. If granted more time, we would like to add more diversity to our study by interviewing those of different racial, economic, and religious backgrounds as well as sexual orientation. We would also like to interview people multiple times over their course of study at St. Olaf to see if their views changed, or if we could identify a pattern of students more likely to get engaged before graduating. Also given the

increasing ability for gay Americans to marry, it would be relevant to better include them in future studies regarding young marriage among college students.

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Notes:

[1] 60% of students reported definitely not or probably not finding a spouse while at St. Olaf. However, 90% of St. Olaf students believe that “Oles marrying Oles” is somewhat common or very common.

[2] Statistic reported by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2007