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The Lived Experience of Child Marriage in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Despite international and domestic calls to end child marriage, 48 U.S. states permit the marriage of minors younger than age 18 as of August 2018. In developing nations, child marriage is associated with a wide range of adverse economic, health, and mental health outcomes, yet little research has been done to understand its effects on developed nations such as the United States. This study is the first to interview adults who were married as children in the United States, to investigate the reasons why the marriages occurred, and qualitatively understand the experiences of married American children. 21 participants (20 females and 1 male) self-selected into this study to complete an online questionnaire and be interviewed by phone. Participants were married between ages 13 and 17. Most participants (n = 18) reported physical, sexual, financial, or emotional abuse during their marriage as well as unwanted and/or unplanned pregnancies. This study shows some important social justice issues related to consent and the qualitative differences inherent in deciding to marry during childhood. Notably, this study did not find that pregnancy was the reason most participants married as minors, as some policy debates across the U.S. report.

KEYWORDS

Child marriage; forced marriage; early marriage; domestic violence; child welfare

Child marriage is defined by the United Nations as the marriage of any person before age 18 years (United Nations Fund for Population Activities [UNFPA], 2012). The practice is widely considered a violation of human rights that undermines girls’ health, education, and economic opportunities (UNFPA, 2012). Efforts to prevent the marriages of children are ongoing across the globe. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018) call for an end to child marriage by the year 2030 and the U.S. State Department (2016) has adopted strategies intended to prevent child marriage abroad.

Despite international and domestic calls for action to end child marriage, 48 U.S. states permit the marriage of minors younger than age 18 as of August 2018. Although the minimum age for marriage is often set at 18, exceptions can be granted under varying conditions. Many states do not have an explicitly defined minimum age for marriage when the minor’s parents consent to the union (Tahiri Justice Center, 2017). Recent research found that more than 78,000 15- to 17-year-olds living in the United States between 2010 and 2014 had been married (Koski & Heymann, 2018). The same study found that girls were more likely to be married as children than boys and that children born outside of the United States were at greater risk of marriage than their peers born in the country. Nonetheless, to date, most research on the issue has been conducted in low- and middle-income countries where the practice is more common (Koski, Clark, & Nandi, 2017), and little is known about the long-term outcomes of child marriages in the U.S.
The economic, psychological, and health concerns of child marriage

Child marriage is associated with a wide range of adverse health and economic outcomes. Marriage often leads to changes in sexual behaviour, and it is therefore unsurprising that early marriage places girls at risk for poor reproductive health outcomes. Research from South Asia has linked child marriage with limited access to contraception and more unwanted pregnancies (Godha, Hotchkiss, & Gage, 2013; Raj, Saggurti, Balaiah, & Silverman, 2009). Limited agency to negotiate family planning and more frequent unprotected sex place married girls at greater risk of pregnancy at a young age, and obstetric complications are the leading cause of death among adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries (Patton et al., 2009). Where child marriage rates are high, a substantial proportion of adolescent pregnancies likely occur within marriage. In addition to early and unwanted pregnancies, married girls in sub-Saharan Africa report having more frequent unprotected sex, resulting in a greater risk of contracting HIV than unmarried girls of the same age, possibly as a result of limited ability to insist upon condom use and marrying older partners who were infected with HIV before the marriage (Clark, 2004).

Young girls with little schooling and few resources may have limited power within their marriages, which may place them at greater risk of experiencing violence. A survey conducted by the International Center for Research on Women found that women in India who married as children experienced physical violence twice as often and sexual violence three times as often as those who married after age 18 (Jain & Kurz, 2007). The link between child marriage and violence has been found in other settings as well: a recent study using data from 34 low- and middle-income countries across the globe found that women who married as children were more likely to experience physical and sexual violence (Kidman, 2016). Research also suggests that married girls are at risk of poor mental health outcomes. A recent study from Ethiopia found that married girls were more likely to report suicidal ideation (Gage, 2013).

Some of these relationships between child marriage and poor outcomes may be the same in wealthier countries like the United States whereas others may differ where public education and health systems are stronger. Some factors that the United States have in common with developing nations include lower educational attainment than their peers when girls marry as children as compared to those who delay marriage to adulthood. Additionally, girls who marry as children in the United States are much more likely to live in poverty later in life when compared to their peers who delay marriage (Dahl, 2010). Delaying marriage to after age 25 may be a protective factor in mental health of women as well. In a study conducted on American pregnant and postpartum (within one year of birth) women age 18 and older, findings show women younger than age 25 were found to be at a greater risk of experiencing substance abuse, major depressive disorder and postpartum depression especially if they are divorced or widowed (Le Strat, Dubertret, & Le Foll, 2011) compared to women older than 25 years.

However, the scientific evidence on the link between child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and poor obstetric outcomes in the United States is murkier. Teen pregnancy has fallen dramatically in recent decades (Hamilton, Martin, Osterman, & Curtin, 2014), and there are no current estimates of the proportion of teen pregnancies that occur within marriage in the United States. Children born in the United States to mothers age 17 or younger have lower Apgar scores (a measurement is designed to predict the health of a newborn) than those born to older adolescents (Chen et al., 2007), but it’s unclear what proportion of these births occur within marriage or whether marriage would modify the relationship. As they grow older, children of teen mothers tend to have increased behavioral problems, lower test scores, and higher rates of abuse and neglect, compared to children born to adult mothers (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008). Children of teen parents are also more likely to be placed in foster care and more likely to be incarcerated as adults, compared to children of adult parents (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008). More research is needed in the United States to better understand the relationship between teen pregnancy and child marriage to determine if child marriage protects or creates more vulnerability for teen mothers.
Child marriages in the United States are also more likely to end in divorce than those that begin later in life. A recent study found that nearly 25% of 15- to 17-year-olds who had been married were also separated or divorced before their 18th birthdays (Koski & Heymann, 2018). Higher rates of divorce continue at later ages as well (Glenn, Uecker, & Love, 2010). Teenage marriages result in higher divorce rates compared to those who delay marriage past teenage years (Glenn et al., 2010; Hamilton, 2012), and divorcing at an early age also contributes to economic instability and poorer mental health outcomes (Hamilton, 2012) that is already present in child marriage survivors. More research within the United States needs to be conducted to confirm whether being married as a child, and divorced at an early age, can enhance one’s predisposition to poorer economic and health outcomes for the life span.

From a policy perspective, a minor is unable to file for divorce in many U.S. states, thus prohibiting a route for married children to escape abusive and/or unhappy relationships legally. To make matters worse, minors are not allowed in domestic violence shelters without an adult’s permission, potentially leaving married minors trapped in a legal vice.

Child marriage continues in the United States despite these concerns regarding the public health and economic consequences. However, the motivations for child marriage in the country are poorly understood. There are two commonly hypothesized drivers of child marriage frequently raised in public and political discussion on this topic. First, the “Romeo and Juliet” scenario, in which a young couple, at least one of whom is younger than age 18 years, falls in love and actively pursues marriage through their own accord. Second, the “shotgun wedding” scenario, in which a pregnant teen is pressured to marry to avoid the perceived stigma of unwed motherhood. This study examined the reasons why children marry in the U.S. and what their experiences are within those marriages. This study was designed to elicit the participants’ perspectives on the factors that led to their marriages and their experiences of being a married child.

**Methods**

Married children are a hidden population. There is no way to identify them through publicly available records, which prevents the selection of a random sample of persons married as minors. Therefore, participants were recruited through snowball sampling, stemming from social media posts (Facebook, Twitter) and email solicitation sent through social service and university organizations throughout the country. See Appendix A for language used in recruitment messaging.

An interested participant was asked to email the researchers, and in response, a member of the research team sent an email invitation to participate in the two-part study, which consisted of a semistructured telephone interview followed by an online survey. Those individuals who were interested in participating in the study were asked to call the research team and complete a verbal consent over the phone prior participating in the study. After providing consent, each participant completed a 30- to 60-minute interview over the phone with one of four research team members.

After completing the telephone interview, each participant was sent an electronic link to complete a 10- to 15-minute online survey. The online survey was conducted through Qualtrics software [version XM] (2018, Qualtrics, Provo, UT) and consisted of 27 free response and multiple choice questions regarding the participants’ and their spouses’ demographic characteristics, as well as information about their marriage and childbearing, including experiences with the legal system when marrying as a minor, military affiliation, religious and/or cultural influences, experiences with abuse, education attainment, and other long-term outcomes related to their marriage. All responses to the online survey were anonymous. Participants provided their contact information though the email they used to volunteer for the study, and the email was immediately destroyed once the survey and questionnaire were completed. Because the survey was anonymous, it was impossible to ensure the participants completed it, though there were 21 interviews transcribed and 21 surveys completed. Upon completion of the online survey and the phone interview, participants were provided a $30 gift
card for their time. Questionnaires for the semistructured interview and the online survey are included in the appendix.

Phenomenological inquiry is the chosen methodology for this study given its ability to understand the subjective experience of participants and to describe or interpret human experience as it is lived (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). The research was designed to understand the experience of being married as a child in the United States, not the experiences of the individual themselves. As Vagle (2014) states, phenomenological inquiry centers on, “how a particular phenomenon manifests and appears in the lifeworld” (p. 23), therefore the research interview and survey were designed to collect autobiographical narratives of experience that could be coded, themed, and saturated for commonality. The survey questionnaire is included in Appendix B.

The semistructured interviews were recorded and transcribed. Once transcription was complete and assigned a sequential number, (Interview 1, interview 2, etc.) the recorded interviews were deleted. No names or other identification were recorded to uphold anonymity. Once transcribed, the interviews were uploaded into NVivo 11 software (QSR International, 2018). To ensure inter-rater reliability, the team double coded each interview and held weekly meetings to discuss thematic analysis. Traditional phenomenological research methods were upheld and included open coded, thematic analysis, horizontalization, and the development of both primary and secondary themes that will be described below (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). Saturation of the data, or the finite amount of themes identified, appeared to be reached within the 12th interview of the coding process as no new themes were found in the last nine interviews being analyzed.

Results

Demographic information about the sample

A total of 21 participants completed the semistructured interview and the online survey. There were two potential participants who initially showed interest but did not follow through on scheduling the phone interview. This sample consisted of 20 females and a single male, who ranged in age from 26 to 74 years at the time they were interviewed. More than one half of respondents were White (n = 13), 4 were Hispanic or Latina(o), and the remainder identified as Middle Eastern (1), Pacific Islander (1), multiracial (1) or other (1). Most participants were born in the United States (n = 18), 1 was born in Mexico, 1 in Pakistan, and 1 in Yemen. Religious identity varied widely within the sample. Respondents reported that they were agnostic or atheist (n = 5), Catholic (n = 4), Mormon (n = 4), Muslim (n = 3), Christian (n = 2), Jewish (n = 1), Jehovah’s Witness (n = 1), and “spiritual” (n = 1). Three respondents indicated that their religious beliefs had changed over time.

Participants were married between ages of 13 and 17. Their spouses were between age 17 and 31 years and were an average of 5.7 years older. Four women in our sample married men who were more than 10 years their senior. In 15 of the 21 cases of child marriage that we documented both spouses were citizens of the United States at the time of the marriage. In four cases, a girl child who was a U.S. citizen was married to a man who was either living in the U.S. without documentation, had a temporary visa, or was living in another country. Eighteen of the 21 child marriages we documented occurred in the United States; one took place in Canada, one in Pakistan, and one in Yemen. Those that occurred within the United States happened in California (3), Florida (1), Hawaii (1), Idaho (1), Nevada (4), New Mexico (1), North Carolina (1), Texas (2), and Utah (4). Thirteen respondents reported that family members pressured or threatened them to marry. Only three of the 21 respondents were still married to their first spouse at the time they participated in the study. The 18 marriages that ended in divorce ranged in duration from 1 and 30 years and lasted an average of nearly 10 years.

The child marriages we documented were characterized by high levels of violence. Eighteen female respondents reported that their husbands were either physically, sexually, or emotionally abusive at some point during their marriages; seven reported experiencing all three types of violence.
Financial control was also commonly reported: eleven of 21 respondents indicated that their spouses restricted their access to household financial resources or forced them to surrender their earnings. Fewer than one half \((n = 10)\) of respondents indicated that they could have used birth control if they had wanted to, and 17 of the 21 respondents had at least one child with their spouse. The number of children resulting from these marriages ranged from one to four.

**Qualitative results**

Three major themes were identified to be (1) Romeo and Juliet: consent and love, (2) La La Land: Knowledge about marriage or parenthood, and (3) that was the expectation: culture and family beliefs. Each of these major themes also had a common subtheme of “time” or “age” that indicated a sense of the adult being interviewed and their memory of what they understood and felt as children. Each theme and subtheme will be discussed in detail below.

**Romeo and Juliet: lack of control/consent to the marriage and the notion of love**

The conversation of consent to the marriage was expected to be a straightforward “black-or-white” answer for the participants, but it was found that this discussion was ripe with “gray” answers of ambivalence, uncertainty, and an overall desire to please the adult parent or caregiver. In fact, out of 21 responses only four reported full consent without any qualifying information. For all other responses, there was a spectrum of experiences that varied from Participant 2’s response of “I don’t know,” to Participant 19’s statement “I was not forced, but I didn’t agree to it,” to Participant 10’s internal struggle of “At the time I felt it was consensual, but I feel differently about the whole situation now,” to Participant 13’s narrative of:

> Very coerced. When I told my mother that I was pregnant her very first question was when are you getting married? She wasn’t able to take care of the baby and neither was I so there was no option, I didn’t have any other choice but to get married.

With the exception of the four participants who reported full consent, there was an ambivalence of what exactly the younger version of themselves wanted and how the powerful figures in their life guided their decision.

Interwoven into this conversation was also the concept of love. Just as the consent conversation showcased above, the Romeo and Juliet notion of young love and lust was hard to find in many of the responses—what took its place for qualifications for what the child thought was love versus the reality of what the adult knows now. Out of the 21 responses, seven of the respondents said they did not love their husband when they were married as a child, 11 reported they did think they loved their spouse, and nine of those qualified it with “at the time,” and the final three were confused on how to answer the question. The clear finding on this topic was that a spectrum of uncertainty exists for 18 out of the 21 in understanding what love meant to them as a minor. For example, Participant 1 was clear she held not love, but hate, for her spouse from the beginning,

> I hated him since January 2005 till 2014, then I learned to forgive him but I never loved him.

Participant 3 discussed a desire to will herself to love her husband:

> I think I thought I loved him when I was first married to him and because of my age I didn’t know any better. I convinced myself that this was the right thing for me to be doing and so I forced myself to love him. I think I did this out of a survival response because after the spiritual marriage he took me out of the country. When I was there I didn’t have anything, anywhere, or anyone to turn to. I was with his family. I think I just flocked to him. Today though, I don’t think that at all … I don’t love him.

A subtheme of time is showcased in Participant 3’s above statement and is seen in many others narratives such as Participant’s 5’s statement of, “I thought I did [love him]. I was 14 at the time and was under the impression that he loved me too. We were about to have a child and the emotions were high on both ends. At the time I thought I loved him.” as well as Participant 8 stating, “I think
at the time I felt like I did. I’m not sure if I was even old enough to understand what it meant to love somebody, but I think I did as much as I could at that age.”

This notion of time is also true for the few respondents who did report being in love at the time of their marriage, Participant 14 states, “Yes, as much as a fifteen-year-old can love,” and Participant 13’s discussion of despite a divorce later in life, “At the time I really did love my husband. So, when we got married I do believe there was love between us.”

Another final observation within the consent theme is about education. 19 reported that their education was interrupted as a result of the marriage. Participant 2 stated, “I tried to go back to school several times and he would punish me,” and Participant 5 stated, “Because of this marriage I was completely restricted on things I could become educated on…. I was primarily used as a stay at home wife … the marriage impacted my dreams tremendously as I was forced to walk away from them.”

However, two participants who married with full consent and out of love did not report a disruption in education. Participant 4 stated, “It did not affect our goals too much because both my husband and I went to graduate school,” or Participant 7 who stated the spouse helped this participant a lot in that area because, “I don’t think I would have really been successful in college without help.”

**La La Land: knowledge about marriage and parenthood**

This theme coded the concept of what the adult participants understood as children when they entered into the marriage and for those who also became parents as children. In total 20 participants spoke about their understanding of what marriage meant, and 17 out of the 20 said they did not understand what marriage was. Participant 20 elaborated:

I saw my older sister get married and she made it seem as if it was La Land to me. I saw her wear the beautiful dress, the beautiful party, and she looked so beautiful the day of the party. And when we went over to see her she said her husband treats her like a princess and her husband loves her and he pampers her and all this, I thought it was, you know, good.

The term princess brings up childhood movies and stories about the “happily ever after” illustrated in fairy tales. Many participants suggested this make-believe fairy-tale life as something they envisioned or were too naïve to realize was not real life. Participant 7 relayed his boyish notion of being married as one of sitcoms:

I pictured myself in a Lazy Boy waiting for her to bring me a Diet Coke and my newspaper while we were passing out our wedding invitations. I had just turned 16 in February, at first I was so excited to pass out wedding invitations because I had just gotten my driving license. So it was a pretty skewed picture of life. I didn’t even have a job yet.”

This same “make-believe” or childish understanding of how marriage was lived is also seen in the narratives about wanting children. Participant 19 stated:

*When I was pregnant and I had my own little baby inside of me I was like, “Wow, I get to have my own baby. I don’t have to keep giving it back to the parents. It was mine.” And I was thinking about it as a child’s perspective.*

This same participant also discussed a “doll” growing inside her belly and thought of her daughter as a toy she could dress up and who would love her. Her perception changed after the birth of her daughter:

*I was lost, I was depressed, I was scared, I turned into a depressed worried person, I was like a zombie. It was a scary, scary moment of my life. But when I found out I was pregnant, I was excited, I thought I had a little toy inside of me.*

Participant 19’s account also brings in the common subtheme of time and age that so many participants described. As in other themes, some participants had definitive yes’s and no’s to
planning and wanting children (six yes and six no) whereas another nine participants reported a lack of clarity if wanting to be pregnant when they were. Participant 18 stating she never had a conversation with her husband about having a child, nor really wanted their child, “We were just young and kind of flying through life not really thinking about the consequences of what would happen.” Participants distinguished between their initial desire to get pregnant and their subsequent feelings for their children. Participant 8’s statement showcases this common feeling, “Once I knew I was pregnant, I wanted to have him. Had I had a choice, I definitely would have waited.” However, it is important to note that a few participants stated they did have discussion and choice in having children.

It is important to note that even the participants who did marry for romantic love in the Romeo and Juliet theme also endorsed the same feelings of La Land here. Despite being in love, their childhood fantasies of the meaning of love was not the reality.

That was the expectation: culture and family beliefs

The title of this theme comes from Participant 6’s description of her family’s influence on her marriage, “You were supposed to be married. My identity was to be a wife and a mother and to be a homemaker. I knew that was the expectation, but I wasn’t ready for that at the time.” Many participants discussed how culture and family influenced their decision to be married as a child. Participant 1 discussed her family’s Pakistani culture and the expectation to marry a relative, knowledge that her mother was married at age 14 years, and the feeling of having a “stamp on me saying ‘taken’ and I was going to grow up to be his wife. A man I didn’t even know.” Participant 2 described her family’s belief about pregnancy, not religion, and that she had no choice but get married if she was pregnant, “my mother wouldn’t have it any other way.” Participant 4 desired to be married to a boyfriend she loved very much, but her family’s cultural expectations intersected her immediate desire. Instead of being married as soon as the couple decided to do so, the family insisted they have 9 months of Pre-cana (Catholic premarital) counseling through their church before they consented to the marriage.

Interestingly, a few participants described a lack of desire to be married, and a feeling that their family did not want it for them, but their cultural or religious community insisted that it must happen because of pregnancy or other expectations. For instance, Participant 8, whose marriage was motivated by a childhood pregnancy, reports:

I had a strict LDS family and for them it was you don’t have a baby until you are married…. My parents didn’t like him, so for them to encourage me to marry him was heart breaking. They could see how unhealthy our relationship was, but for them it was more important for us to get married and raise this child together rather than think what might happen to her and her mental health if she gets married.

Participant 12 discussed how neither parent, nor she, wanted to be married but the cultural expectations were pressuring the decision, “My father was against the marriage … he felt hat we were both too young to even consider marriage…. My mother was neutral throughout the entire process.”

Discussion

This study is the first to systematically interview adults who were married as children in the United States, to investigate the reasons why the marriages occurred, and qualitatively understand the experiences of married American children. As outlined in the beginning of this article, child marriage survivors are at risk for high rates in divorce, a delay or disruption of educational attainment, high incidence of physical violence, and early and unwanted pregnancies. As discussed in the Results section, the majority of the 21 interviewees endorsed early and unwanted pregnancy (six responding no and nine not clear if they did or not) though all participants reported keeping and
wanting their children once they were born. Most \((n = 13)\) divorced before the age of 25 (one was widowed), and most reported incidents of physical, sexual, or emotional violence, as well as high amount of fiduciary abuse where the spouse took control of finances, and 19 reported having their education affected as a result of disapproval from their spouse or the necessity of being a parent/primary caregiver above education.

This study also shows some important social justice issues related to consent and the qualitative differences inherent in deciding to marry during childhood. As described in the qualitative themes, many participants had a hard time defining if they consented and reported varied spectrum of how they truly felt at the time. Many respondents instead described coercion by family, culture, and religious leaders as the main drivers for motivating the marriage. This finding should be studied further to determine how *consent* can be defined, and explained, in the court process before a marriage license is obtained within U.S. law.

Additionally, as seen in developing nations across the globe, the study participants were mostly women. The sole male participant was not forced into his marriage, he did so out of love, and he did divorce in early adulthood. For the 20 female respondents, their experiences coincide with U.S. findings that child marriage is more prominent among girls in the United States than boys (Koski & Heymann, 2018) and supports the classification of child marriage as a form of gender-based violence. Second, this study supported findings nationally by Koski and Heymann (2018) that individuals who marry as children divorce more frequently than those who marry as adults as 18 out of 21 participants were no longer married at the time of data collection.

The reason minors marry in the United States is poorly understood. Many policy makers believe children in the United States have the ability to understand the legal ramifications of being married and assume the “adult” functions of sexuality and reproduction as a result. Koski and Heymann (2018) state:

> Although these policy makers appear to believe the marriage of minors is justifiable in specific circumstances, knowledge of the social factors that perpetuate child marriage in the United States and other high income countries is very limited. Who has instigated these marriages and their reasons for doing so, especially in recent years, remain unclear. One commonly hypothesized reason for child marriage in the United States is the so-called shotgun wedding, entered into under pressure from family members or others who aim to avoid perceived stigma resulting from premarital sexual activity and pregnancy. (p. 6)

Only three of the 21 participants in this study indicated that pregnancy was the primary reason they married as children. Of those three, only one reported a desire to marry after the pregnancy was discovered. The theme titled Romeo and Juliet found that romantic love was not a majority factor in the experiences and decision to be married and family members “threatened or pressured” the marriage in 13/21 cases. Further, as described in the Results section, consent was something most participants did not provide out of their own desire and will.

Lastly, a commonality among participants regardless of whether they provided full consent to the marriage or were forced was their discussion of the childlike forecasting that marriage and having children was for them at such a young age. The discussion of dolls, princesses, and T.V. show perceptions—essentially what family is shown to be in a child’s imaginary play world—was the expectation for their own life. Many participants described a shock or let down in the qualitative theme of La Land in how reality set in once they had to care for their baby or begin the household chores affiliated with married life. This finding should be further explored and can begin a conversation about what a minor younger than age 18 is actually consenting to when they fully consent to a marriage.

**Limitations and further research**

Identifying persons who were married as children is difficult. We attempted to recruit participants through a variety of channels, including social media (Twitter and Facebook), religious (institutional
email listservs), university (social work and public health faculty listservs), and advocacy groups (Unchained At Last, Tahirih Justice Center mailing lists, and community contacts) that provide services to persons seeking assistance in leaving a marriage. Participants who heard about this study through these groups may be different from others who were married as children in many ways. As a result, the experiences of this sample may not reflect the experiences of the majority of persons who marry as children in the United States. Future research should attempt to collect responses from a larger and more representative sample. Moreover, speaking with researchers about child marriage may be risky, and concerns about sharing sensitive information may have prevented some potential participants from contacting us. Several of the women who did participate indicated that their family members would probably disapprove of them speaking with researchers.

It is also important to note that the respondents in our sample were born in different generations and their marriages took place at different points in time. Three of the marriages in our sample occurred in the late 1950s or early 1960s. The motivations for and consequences of marrying before age 18 may have been different then than they were after the year 2000, when five of the marriages we document took place.

**Recommendations for future research**

One important area of future research is with military sample specifically. This study only captured three marriages that had military-affiliated spouse and did not inquire if military status was a reason for marriage (such as pending deployment) or other. This is a policy topic and could be examined in greater depth to determine how military status, if at all, matters when being married younger than age 18. Another important area for future research is the topic of family planning. The participants were asked about sexual knowledge during the interviews and what arose was a three pronged response of (1) understanding what sex was (i.e., that babies came from it), (2) understanding of sexual health and sexual anatomy to participate in sex, and (3) a general understanding that came from school health class on birth control. Regrettably, the study questions were not designed with these three distinctions, and future research could investigate this topic in more depth.

Further, as lawmakers in the U.S. debate if child marriage should be allowed in the case of pregnancy, another question that should enter the debate is if child marriage encourages teenage pregnancy. The present study finds that 17 of the 21 participants had children during their marriage. However, the mother’s age at the time of pregnancy and delivery was not assessed. Therefore, it is unclear whether these were teenage pregnancies. Future research should determine a mother’s age at the time of pregnancy to better understand the relationship between child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

Most of the research that links child marriage to negative health and economic outcomes comes from low-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Only a handful of studies have examined the consequences of child marriage in wealthy countries such as the United States. Future research can begin to look at health determinants of those who were married as children and the potential effects on their children. Recent research shows that girls who are married as children have children with poorer health outcomes than those who are married as adults (Efevbera, Bhabha, Farmer, & Fink, 2017). This research has been conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, and it would be important for social work and public health researchers to investigate if a wealthy country such as the US also shows the same finding.

Despite significant social justice and public health concerns of children who enter marriage and the child marriage being defined as a human rights abuse (Mathur, Greene, & Malhotra, 2003), American states have struggled to pass laws that protect minors from being coerced or forced into marriage (V.V.B., 2018; Van Der Zee, 2018). Moreover, civil rights organizations such as the ACLU in California, have gone a step further and opposed a bill to ban child marriage stating that the bill “unnecessarily and unduly intrudes on the fundamental rights of marriage without sufficient cause” (Luna, 2017). In 2016, the U.S. State Department issued a strategy to empower adolescents across the
world and named child marriage as a threat to the well-being of adolescents stating, “It produces devastating repercussions for a girl’s life, effectively ending her childhood” and “before she is physically and mentally mature” and “depriving her of the chance to reach her full potential, and preventing her from contributing fully to her family and community” (p. 6). Yet the practice continues at a rate of 6.2 out of every 1,000 U.S. girls (Koski & Heymann, 2018).

Further, despite the National Association of Social Workers (NASW; 2015) taking a stance on marriage related issues such as same sex marriages legalization, NASW does not have an active stance on the topic of child marriage, nor has the national branch backed any legislature to prevent child marriages in the United States. The results of this study clearly illustrate the potential dangers associated with child marriage and thus constitutes attention from the U.S. social work community. This research hopes to be the first of many future publications on the policy and practice implications on this topic within the social work community and harness the power of social work to improve the lives of adolescent girls across the United States.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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References
Appendix A

"Were you married before you turned 18 years old? If so, researchers from the University of Southern California would like to speak with you about your experience. Please email SpeaktoUSC@gmail.com if you are willing to participate in a telephone interview and a brief online survey."

Appendix B

Child Marriage Study – Quantitative (Online) Survey

1. Date questionnaire completed

Demographic information about the respondent

2. What is your gender? [write in]
3. How old are you (in years)?
4. What is your race?
5. Where were you born? [state, country]
6. What is your religious background?
7. Were you a member of the armed forces at the time of your marriage?

Information about the marriage and childbearing

8. On what date did your first marriage occur? [mm/dd/year]
9. How old were you when you were married the first time (in years)?
10. How many times had you met your spouse before you got married?
11. Where did your marriage take place? [state, country]
12. Were you given the opportunity to speak to a judge before the marriage?
13. Did you have to show that one or more of your parents consented to the marriage?
14. Was a marriage license filed when you got married?
15. What was your legal residency status in the United States at the time of your marriage?
   a. I was a United States citizen.
   b. I was a permanent resident (green card).
   c. I had a temporary visa or residency permit (for work, study, etc.)
   d. I was living in the United States without residency documents.
   e. I was living in another country and had no legal residency status in the United States at that time.
   f. I don’t know.
   g. Other [write in]
16. Did you feel pressure or receive threats to marry? [y/n]
   a. If yes, was it from a member of your family? [y/n]
   b. Your future spouse? [y/n]
   c. Other? [write in]
17. Did you have children with your spouse? [y/n]
   a. If yes, how many?
   b. How old were you when your first child with this spouse was born?
18. Did you continue your education after being married?
19. Did you experience abuse during your marriage? [y/n]
   a. If yes, was it physical abuse? [y/n]
   i. If yes, who was the abuser?
   b. Emotional abuse? [y/n]
   i. If yes, who was the abuser?
   c. Sexual abuse? [y/n]
   i. If yes, who was the abuser?
   d. Financial abuse (for example, not having access to household money or having to give your paycheck to your spouse.)
   i. If yes, who was the abuser?
20. Are you and your spouse still married?
   a. If no, how old were you when you got separated or divorced?

Demographic information about the respondent’s spouse
21. What is/was your spouse’s gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Other [write in]
22. How old was your spouse at the time of your marriage?
23. What is your spouse’s race?
24. Where was your spouse born? [state, country]
25. What is your spouse’s religious background?
26. What was your spouse’s legal residency status in the United States at the time of your marriage?
   a. United States citizen
   b. Permanent resident (green card)
   c. Temporary visa or permit (for work, study, etc.)
   d. Living in the United States without residency documents
   e. My spouse was living in another country and had no legal residence status in the United States at that time.
   f. Don’t know
   g. Other [write in]
27. Was your spouse a member of the armed forces at the time of your marriage?

Appendix C

Child Marriage Study – Qualitative Interview
1. What is your gender?
2. How did you meet your spouse?
   a. What was your age when you first met your spouse?
   b. How long did you know your spouse before you were married?
c. How many times did you meet your spouse before you were married?

3. Why did this marriage happen?
   a. What were the circumstances that led to the marriage?
   b. Did you feel that you were coerced into the marriage or was it consensual?
   c. What were your family’s views on marriage?
   d. Did you understand what marriage was at the time of your marriage?
   e. Were you or your spouse a member of the armed forces?

4. Interactions with the legal system: was a marriage license filed, was a judge present?
   a. Memory of the legal process (their own narrative)
   b. Did you participate in counseling sessions?
      i. If so, was it with a religious leader?
      ii. What were the sessions/conversations like?
   c. Did you meet with a judge or get a court order?
      i. If so, did you feel comfortable meeting with them?

5. Did you (do you) love your spouse?
   a. Do you feel you loved your spouse when you were married?

6. Was there physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse in your marriage?
   a. If so, by whom?

7. Did you understand how children were conceived when you were married?
   a. Did you feel fully educated on birth control?

8. Do you have children from the marriage?
   a. If yes, did you want to have this(these) child(ren)?

9. Did you discuss your plans for a family with your spouse? (In other words, was the decision to have children mutual?)
   a. How was the marriage after becoming pregnant? Was there a change in the dynamic between you and your spouse after the pregnancy or after you had children?
   b. Did you have sexual education and understand your own body?

10. Did you have sexual education and understand their own body? Was child marriage a common practice in your community/family?
    a. Did you know others who were married as minors?
    b. Did you anticipate that you may be married as a minor?

11. What did you want to be when you grew up?
    a. How did this marriage impact your goals for the future?