Rethinking marriage metabolism:

The declining frequency of marital events in the United States

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Abstract

Previous research has used the concept of marriage metabolism to represent churning in the marriage system, but the measurements used to date have been inadequate. This paper addresses changes in the incidence of marital events in the United States from 2008 to 2021. I offer a measure, the Total Rate of Marital Events (TRME), of the projected lifetime experience of marital transitions (marriage, divorce, and widowhood) for life table cohorts. I find that the TRME declined steeply over this relatively short period: 22 percent for men and 19 percent for women. All three components declined in every age group below 90. The decline in divorce was most pronounced. More accurately than the term "retreat from marriage," I describe the slowing churn of the marriage system as reflecting the diminished social presence of marriage in daily life. Rather than a retreat, this coincides with the increasingly selective status of married life. A higher status marriage system is a smaller, slower, and more stable marriage system.

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Describing the marriage system

How should we systematically describe a set of social practices and interactions as complex as marriage, spread across time and space? Andrew Cherlin expressed a common view among scholars in 2005 when we wrote that, "Marriage is less dominant as a social institution in the United States than at any time in history" (Cherlin 2005). He attributed that state to marriage's "deinstitutionalization," by which he meant a "weakening of the social norms" around the institution, in an analysis focused on demographic as well as cultural changes (Cherlin 2004). Cherlin's declining dominance echoed Schoen and Weinick (1993) from a decade earlier, who wrote, "recent changes suggest that [marriage] has retreated to a position of diminished prominence in the life cycle." Since then, marriage has become less universal but also more stable (Smock and Schwartz 2020), which poses a problem for a simple description of change (Cherlin 2020). Nevertheless, images of decline and retreat dominate characterizations of trends in the system of marriage.

This paper takes off from one such motif, that of the marriage metabolism, to address changes in the incidence of marital events in the United States over a 13-year period, with an eye toward developing useful measures for future temporal and social comparisons. I offer a measure, the Total Rate of Marital Events (TRME), that combines for the first time the lifetime experience of all marital transitions (marriage, divorce, and widowhood) for a life table cohort – that is, taking mortality into account. Metabolism – the set of chemical reactions necessary to sustain life in an organism – remains a metaphor, but the TRME approximates that concept with regard to marriage more closely than previous descriptive work. Using the most recent data available, I find that the TRME in the United States declined steeply between 2008 and 2021, the years for which comparable data are available: 19 percent for men and 22 percent for women. All three components of the measure declined in every age group below 90. I suggest that the slowing churn of the marriage system is consistent with the diminished social presence of marriage in daily life, which coincides with the increasingly selective status of married life.

Background

Before discussing measurement, a brief historiography of attempts to describe broad marriage trends will be useful background. In 1984, Kobrin (later Goldscheider) and Waite wrote, "Since the 1950s the American family has seen a major retreat from the pattern of early, stable, and nearly universal marriage," and then shortened that to the phrase "retreat from marriage" (Kobrin and Waite 1984). This is the earliest occurrence of the term I can find. Demographer Robert Schoen

(1987) used the term to refer to the falling odds of marrying and the rising age at marriage over time, both indicating fewer years spent in marriage for the average American since the 1950s. The phrase was then seized upon by advocates for pro-marriage social policy, including Bryce Christensen in 1988, who attributed it to Schoen (Christensen 1988).

The phrase spread widely among sociologists in the early 1990s, and it was used colloquially, as in, "the current retreat from marriage," without attribution (Lichter et al. 1992), as many scholars linked the decline in marriage to widening race and class inequality (Wilson 1997) and worsening social disorder, including crime (O'Brien, Stockard, and Isaacson 1999). When Norval Glenn introduced the phrase in a conservative 1996 volume, he attributed it to Christensen's 1990 book (Popenoe, Elshtain, and Blankenhorn 1996). In a 2004 symposium, Pamela Smock (Smock 2004) cited a "litany of indicators" of the retreat: "declining fertility, increasing age at marriage, high levels of marital disruption, a growing separation between marriage and childbearing as manifested in an increasing proportion of children being born outside marriage, and the growth of nonmarital cohabitation." In retrospect, that litany underscores the fact that the "retreat," although described as empirical fact, was never linked to a commonly accepted measure or index. The most common element of the "retreat from marriage" was probably families with children headed by single mothers, and especially Black single mothers (Lichter, McLaughlin, and Ribar 1997), who were depicted as leading the retreat (if that's linguistically possible). Recent uses of "retreat from marriage" focus on lower rates of entry into marriage among adults (Brown 2022), with no reference to falling divorce rates (Cohen 2019a).[1] In summary, the "retreat from marriage" is ill-defined, and the term creates an unfortunate impression of marriage as a fixed object or institution, one that people are actively turning away from. One goal of this paper is to help move the field away from the concept of "retreat."

Rethinking marriage metabolism

Schoen and Weinick (1993) titled their paper, "The slowing metabolism of marriage," because they identified both declining rates of entering into marriage and a tapering off of divorce rates, which had been rising steeply through the 1970s. They attributed the metabolism concept to Norman Ryder (1975), who analyzed entrance into and exits from the working-age population and adapted it to

[1] The fact that divorce rates leveled off after the 1980s (Goldstein 1999), and then started to decline (but see Kennedy and Ruggles [2014]), should have proved a thorny complication for the "retreat from marriage" thesis, but it did not seem to. Despite reporting no increase in divorce rates from 1980 through 1995 at the turn of the century (Schoen and Standish 2001), Schoen (Schoen 2016) went on to write another paper titled, "The Continuing Retreat of Marriage" almost 20 years later – while still finding no increase in the rate of divorce.

marriage. In the metaphor, the married population is the organism, so marriage and divorce are its anabolism and catabolism, respectively. As I argue below, widowhood should be part of the model, but the core idea of modeling the ebb and flow of marriage is interesting, and provides a connection in our work to ecological processes in way that may be helpful conceptually. Such models are a central function of demography, and attaching those models to social processes is one definition of social demography.[2]

Schoen and Weinick (1993) offered no substantive rationale for their choice of variables (incidence of marriage and divorce), although the empirical pattern was persuasive. The lack of clarity evidenced the underdeveloped nature of the concept of metabolism. However, their paper did provide a metric for Cherlin (2005) to compare the U.S. to other countries. He summed first marriage rates and divorce rates to measure "marriage metabolism", and found the U.S. scored much higher than countries with high marriage and low divorce (e.g., Italy) as well as those with low marriage and high divorce (e.g., Sweden). Since Cherlin's 2005 paper, unfortunately, the marriage metabolism concept has remained dormant (perhaps because it was not clearly defined). In subsequent work, Cherlin (2010) elaborated on the American exceptionalism of high rates of entry into and exit from marriage, cohabiting relationships, and demands for marriage equality by the gay rights movement, but he did not mention metabolism.

Neither Ryder (1975) nor Schoen and Weinick (1993) offered a rationale for defining the metabolism of marriage to include marriage and divorce but not widowhood. They may have been trying to capture the deliberate choices people make with regard to marriage, rather than natural events. However, there are several reasons metabolism always should have included widowhood. First, the assumption that marriage and divorce reflect volitional elements of the system while widowhood does not is too strong. Not everyone chooses the time of their marriage or their partner, and many people are divorced against their will. Second, from the point of view of individual or social stability, the concept of metabolism should measure all manner of churning in the system. This is how the term, from life sciences, has been adapted to social systems to reflect the holistic dynamics of production and consumption (Kennedy, Cuddihy, and Engel-Yan 2007). Third, widowhood contributes bodies back to the pool of those eligible for marriage, as widowed people often remarry (in 2021, 21 percent of people who experienced widowhood were under age 60, and many remarry).

The measure of marriage metabolism I develop here asks simply: How often do people experience marital events? Of course, for married people, one could say every moment is a marital event, so

[2] "The major concern of social demography is the analysis of how general social and cultural factors are related to population structure and process" (Ford and De Jong 1970:4).

marriage prevalence matters, but marital events in the sense of metabolism are better thought of as incidents of transition. So I use the sum of marriage, divorce, and widowhood incidence rates (described below). The metabolism concept does not map onto the "retreat" from marriage, as falling divorce rates reflect more marriage but lower marriage metabolism. And it is also orthogonal to Cherlin's (2020) "deinstitutionalization" of marriage, which concerns the extent to which marriage dominates intimate relationships, and the behavior of married couples. But the measure I propose does reflect a core property of the system: its rate of turnover. In this respect it follows the initial insight of Ryder (1975), who saw metabolism as a tradeoff between stability and flexibility. Systems with low metabolism will change more slowly, for better or worse (Hulbert and Else 2000).

Consider some ideal-typical marriage metabolism profiles, listed from high to low metabolism:

- *Backlash against tradition*. Everyone gets married because marriage retains its traditional appeal, but most people get divorced before widowhood, as the random walk of individualism in the absence of institutional constraints eventually leads couples apart. This is what conservative activists against divorce feared in the 1980s (Whitehead 1993).
- *Transitional individualism*. In this transitional scenario, everyone gets married under a traditional regime, but when divorce is subsequently permitted only about half of couples break up. Contrary to the fears of the anti-divorce activists, this is best approximated by the US Baby Boom cohorts, but seems unlikely to persist (Brown and Lin 2012).
- *Strong marriage*. Everyone gets married and every marriage ends in widowhood. In this case, half the population are eventually widowed. This is what Christian marriage advocates imagine when they call for policies that "strengthen marriage," reflecting a return to a mythical traditional past (Wilcox, Wolfinger, and Stokes 2015).
- *Neoliberal freedom*. With weak institutional constraints, people only get married when they want to, and a large share of them end up getting divorced (and remarried). The overall divorce and widowhood rates are low because the marriage rate is low. The US has been described as approaching this scenario (Cherlin 2005).
- *Free love*. No marriage, and thus no divorce and no widowhood – as was proposed by anarchists such as Emma Goldman (Hsu 2018) – included for comparison.

These scenarios are shown in Table 1, ranked from high to low metabolism. In what follows I present a measure of marriage metabolism that includes marriage, divorce, and widowhood, and applies age-specific marital event rates to US lifetable numbers for 2008 and 2021.

Data and method

In the absence of national vital statistics on marriage and divorce since around 1995 (Schoen 2016), the best source of age-specific marital events data is the American Community Survey (ACS) (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014). The historical range of the present analysis is thus limited to the ACS data collection period, beginning only in 2008, as data for age-specific rates of each type of event is not available earlier – especially widowhood – making accurate historical comparisons impractical. The ACS is an annual national household survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, of more than 3.5 million addresses, with interviews conducted by mail, phone, in person, and Internet (the composition of which has changed over the years). Selected households are legally required to participate. Respondents answer for themselves and for all members of the household. Institutionalized individuals also have proxy responses (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). The survey begain in 2001, but only since 2008 has the survey has asked whether individuals age 15 and older have been married, divorced, or widowed in the past 12 months. Same-sex and different-sex marriages are not differentiated; only two sex/gender categories are reported. The unweighted sample sizes of people age 15+ are 2.4 million in 2008 and 2.7 million in 2021. Census population weights are used in all analyses here. I use the public use data files prepared and distributed by IPUMS (Ruggles et al. 2022).

The ACS data are generally suitable for measures of incidence, which are reasonably well covered, according to Census Bureau analyses (Elliott, Simmons, and Lewis 2010). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, survey operations in 2020 were severely disrupted, and response rates fell dramatically (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). After analyzing the results and detecting inconsistencies in a number of time series trends, the Census Bureau developed a new set of weights for use with the 2020 data (Shin 2021). Those weights have been released with ACS microdata by IPUMS, and are used in this analysis (IPUMS 2021). In this analysis, I include the 2020 data, although caution is warranted in interpreting those results, and the conclusions are based on 2021.

Having assembled the ACS data, I combined it with life table estimates from the National Center for Health Statistics to create the Total Rate of Marital Events (TRME). TRME is a period-based synthetic cohort measure of lifetime occurrence of marital events. It uses the ACS to estimate age-specific rates of marriage, divorce, and widowhood, by sex and single years of age from 15 to 95.[3] Then the age-specific event rates are multiplied by person-years lived (the Lx life table column) by sex and

[3] In principle there is no limit to the number of marital events a person might experience in one year, but in the ACS the maximum possible is one of each type, or three per year in total. Fewer than .05 percent of adults have more than one event in one year. Without a basis for prioritizing them, I count these events separately, so each contributes to the numerator of the TRME.

single years of age[4], to produce a number of events per 100,000 for the life table population (reported here as events per person). This method is similar to that used by the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) to estimate lifetime migration events. Because of age top-coding in the ACS, and because very few marital events occur at the bottom of the life table, I stop the analysis at age 95, with no open interval, so the TRME is interpreted as marital events per person from ages 15 to 95, or "lifetime" for short. (A replication package of Stata code and data for the calculations are available on the Open Science Framework at: https://osf.io/at64y.)

Results

Although marriage is increasingly occurring at older ages (Brown, Lin, and Mellencamp 2022), the trend toward fewer marital events is not principally the result of population aging, as Figure 1 confirms. For both men and women, at every age below 90, the rates of marriage, divorce, and widowhood declined over the period. In terms of metabolism, entering and exiting marriage (the latter measured two ways) both slowed. The shift in the curves shows them all moving toward older ages. Thus, occurrence of marital events is aging as well as slowing.

I note here that divorce rates in the ACS are lower for men than for women, continuing a long-standing pattern in self-reported marital histories (Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet 1991). The higher rates of widowhood for women result from men's lower life expectancy as well as the tendency toward age hypergamy, so that men are usually older than their wives (Mayol-Garcia, Gurrentz, and Kreider 2016).

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The TRME for the years 2008 through 2021 is summarized in Table 3, with totals from the last row of the life table. The final numbers are expressed as lifetime events per person in the synthetic cohort. The TRME shows a drop from 2.00 marital events per person to 1.56 for men, and from 2.43 to 1.96 per woman – a decline of 22 percent for men and 19 percent for women over the period. The cumulative totals by age for these events are shown in Figure 2 for the endpoints of the period, 2008 and 2021. The drop in total events is greater for women than for men (-.47 versus -.44 events per person), with the largest difference in the frequency of widowhood (-.12 versus -.07), although

[4] Life tables for 2008-2020 are from National Center for Health Statistics (2022). The 2021 data were extracted by Magali Barbieri for the Human Mortality Database (2023).

men show a larger decline in marriage (-.18 versus -.15). Notably, on a percentage basis all the declines are greater for men, and the drop in divorce – about one-third – is most dramatic. A notable milestone is reached during this period: the average number of lifetime marriages for both men and women fell below 1.0 – which implies that remarriages no longer occur frequently enough to offset less-than-universal rates of first marriage.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

The attempt to describe systemic properties of the marriage system in simple terms – its metabolism, or the frequency of marriage transitions in the life course – does not imply a singular explanation for the observed changes. Marriage, divorce, and widowhood are highly interrelated, but they each have their own dynamics as well – social and demographic, cultural, or legal. An enthusiasm for marriage, for example, might increase marriage rates but decrease divorce rates (unless it is accompanied by an enthusiasm for remarriage). A decline in marriage does not necessarily imply a subsequent decline in divorce or widowhood (even though there are more people to divorce or become widowed) if it is accompanied by changes in who marries, or when and how people exit marriage. If everyone divorces, for example, the rate of marriage would have no effect on the rate of widowhood. On the other hand, an increase in divorce or widowhood might lead to an increase in marriage, if the larger pool of eligible spouses improves the chances of people looking for marriage, but only in cultural conditions in which greater choice increases the odds of marrying and remarriage is acceptable. And it also is worth reiterating that these demographic indicators are at best partial measures of the cultural dynamics of marriage.

Three specific limitations deserve recognition. First, using life table populations – synthetic cohorts – creates a projection based on data observed for many different cohorts in a single year (or years). This is not a prediction of future events, and if future cohorts differ from those covered in this analysis, the TRME on a cohort basis will differ from the results reported here. Second, marital events, by definition, do not include cohabitation, living apart together (outside of marriage), or other forms of intimate relationship. Even when these statuses can be observed in the ACS data – such as cohabitation – transitions in and out of them cannot. The extent to which marriage itself remains important enough to justify a measure such as TRME is a theoretical and empirical question. However, if age-specific rates of transitions in and out of other relationships are available, this approach is readily amenable to their inclusion. Third, the US population is affected by inmigration

(and, much less, outmigration), which is not measured here. In the absence of complete life tables separately by nativity, I was not able to estimate the extent to which the lifetime rates here are affected by migration. Again, however, such a comparison would be possible in a time or place with more complete data.

Despite its complexity and multicausality, there may be common elements to the changes in the marriage system. The "retreat from marriage" literature has failed to substantiate a single pattern of social behavior or common preference against (or afraid of) getting or remaining married. But research shows there are discernible historical patterns. Marriage has become, "across the board, a more selective institution in terms of who marries (and who marries directly), who benefits, and who stays married," writes Guzzo (2014). In analyzing the decline in divorce rates, Cohen (2019a) described "a system in which U.S. marriage is rarer and more stable—a more elite status." With regard to mortality, there has been a widening inequality in death rates associated with marriage, especially for Whites, so the married mortality advantage has grown (Cohen 2019b). Those conclusions fit Cherlin's (2004) memorable image of modern marriage as a "capstone … something to be achieved" – an institution at once more rare and more highly valued (a view he reaffirmed in 2020). Thus, one partial explanation for falling marriage, divorce, and widowhood rates may be greater selectivity into marriage, with fewer people achieving a more desirable status – and as a result exiting that status less often. A higher status marriage system is a smaller, slower, and more stable marriage system.

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Table 1. Illustrative marriage systems, by metabolism level

	Marriage	Divorce	Widowhood	Metabolism
Backlash against tradition	High	High	Low	High
Transitional individualism	High	Medium	Low	Medium
Strong marriage	High	Low	Medium	Medium
Neoliberal freedom	Medium	Low	Low	Low
Free love	None	None	None	None

Table 2. Rates of marital events, per 1,000 population age 15-95: 2008-2021

	Men			Women		
	Married	Divorced	Widowed	Married	Divorced	Widowed
2008	19.6	10.0	3.7	17.9	10.5	8.4
2009	19.1	9.2	3.5	17.5	9.7	7.8
2010	17.8	9.3	3.4	16.7	9.8	7.5
2011	17.5	9.4	3.6	16.4	9.7	7.8
2012	17.8	9.4	3.5	16.7	9.8	7.8
2013	17.5	8.5	3.5	16.3	9.0	7.5
2014	18.2	8.1	3.5	17.1	8.7	7.6
2015	18.5	8.1	3.5	17.3	8.3	7.6
2016	18.3	7.8	3.6	17.1	8.3	7.5
2017	18.3	7.6	3.5	17.2	8.0	7.3
2018	17.8	7.4	3.5	16.7	7.8	7.4
2019	17.4	7.1	3.5	16.4	7.6	7.4
2020*	15.5	6.5	3.5	14.7	7.0	7.1
2021	15.9	6.6	3.9	14.9	6.9	8.2

Calculated from single-year American Community Survey public use data (see text).

* 2020 results should be interpreted with caution (see text).

Table 3. Total marital events per person: 2008 to 2021, life table populations

	Male				Female			
Year	Married	Divorce	Widow	Total	Married	Divorce	Widow	Total
2008	1.09	.57	.34	2.00	1.07	.63	.72	2.43
2009	1.06	.53	.33	1.91	1.05	.58	.67	2.30
2010	1.01	.53	.31	1.84	1.01	.59	.64	2.24
2011	1.00	.54	.33	1.87	.99	.59	.67	2.25
2012	1.01	.55	.32	1.88	1.01	.60	.67	2.28
2013	1.00	.50	.32	1.82	.99	.55	.64	2.19
2014	1.04	.48	.31	1.82	1.04	.53	.65	2.23
2015	1.06	.47	.30	1.83	1.05	.51	.64	2.20
2016	1.05	.46	.31	1.82	1.05	.52	.62	2.19
2017	1.04	.45	.29	1.79	1.05	.50	.60	2.15
2018	1.02	.43	.29	1.74	1.03	.49	.61	2.12
2019	1.00	.42	.29	1.71	1.01	.48	.60	2.09
2020*	.88	.38	.25	1.50	.91	.44	.53	1.88
2021	.91	.38	.27	1.56	.93	.43	.61	1.96
Total change	-.18	-.19	-.07	-.44	-.15	-.21	-.12	-.47
Percent change	-16.5	-33.3	-20.6	-22.0	-13.1	-31.7	-15.3	-19.3

Calculated from single-year American Community Survey public use data (see text).

* 2020 results should be interpreted with caution (see text).

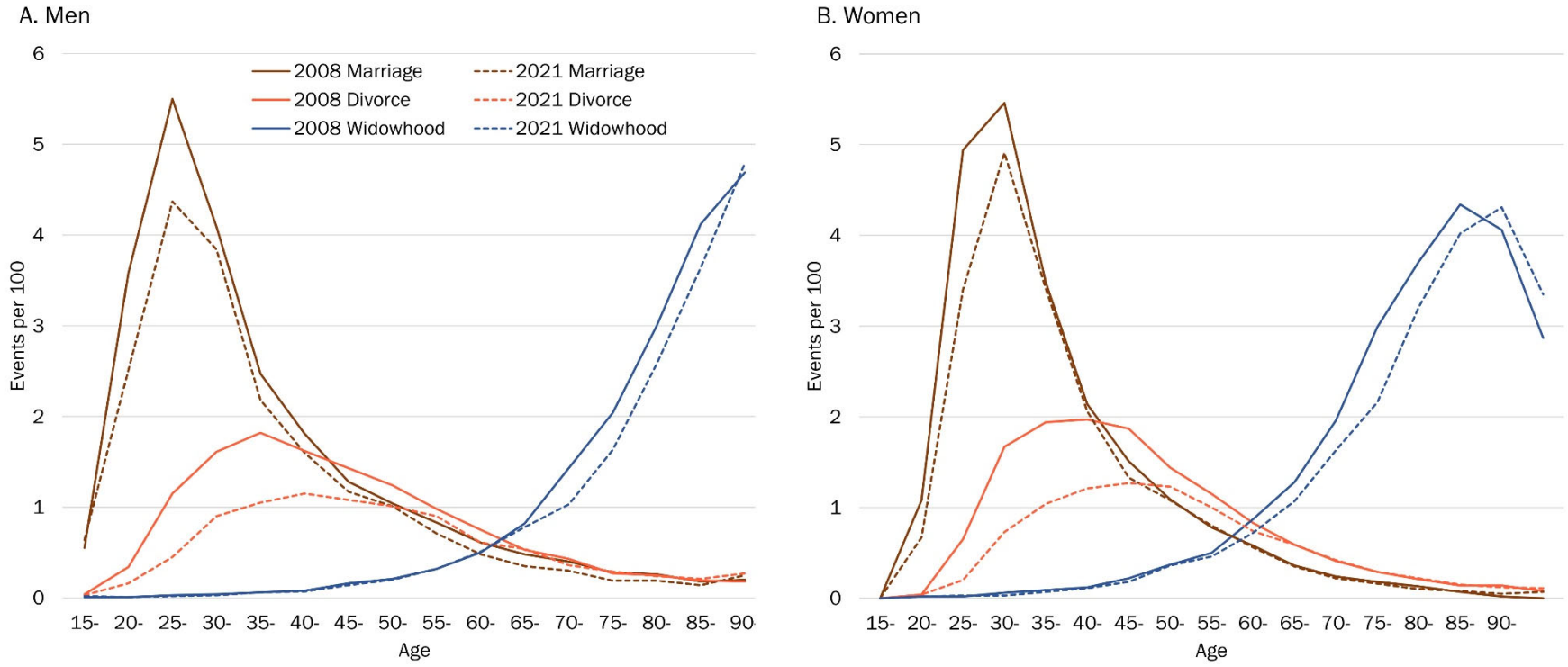

Figure 1. Age-specific rates of marriage, divorce, and widowhood, by sex: 2008 and 2021.

Note: Calculated from single-year American Community Survey public use data. See text.

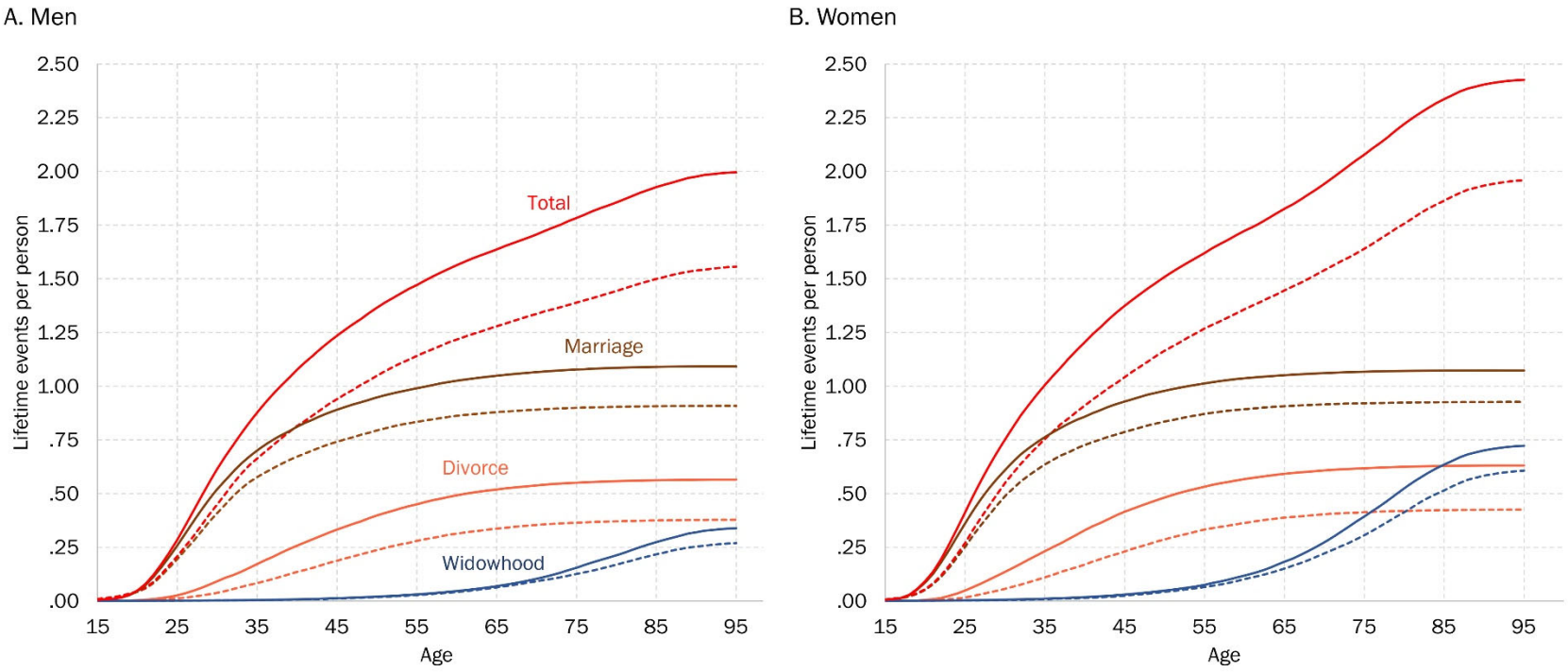

Figure 2. Cumulative rates of marriage, divorce, and widowhood by age for men (A) and women (B), showing 2008 (solid lines) and 2021 (dotted lines). Rates from single-year American Community Survey data applied to life table person-years lived to produce lifetime events per person. See text.