

Always the bridesmaid: People who don't expect to marry

by Susan Crompton

Despite all our worries about “fractured families” and declining family values, most Canadians still want to be husbands, wives and parents. A 2004 study of Canadians’ opinions about family life found that the vast majority still hold very traditional views about love, marriage and having children.¹ However, researchers still warn that despite their most honourable intentions, people who delay marrying may never walk down the aisle.

Research consistently shows that delaying marriage tends to increase the likelihood that a person will never marry.² After age 30, a single person may not wish to marry; it may seem less feasible or less desirable than it did when they were younger.

This article uses the 2001 General Social Survey to look at “mature singles,” that is, men and women older than the average age at which people first marry (28 for women, 30 for men) but not yet past prime working-age (under 55). These men and women numbered over 1.1 million in 2001; they had never legally married and were not living common-law at the time of the survey. More than half a million of them (550,000) did not think they would ever get married. This article examines some of the differences between those mature singles who do not expect to marry and those who do.

GST What you should know about this study

Data in this article are drawn from the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) on family and marital history. The survey was conducted by telephone in over 25,000 households in the 10 provinces. All respondents who had never been legally married were asked: “Do you think you will ever marry?” This study uses only those respondents who answered either “Yes” or “No” who were not living common-law at the time of the survey, and who were at least one year older than average age at first marriage, yet still of prime working-age.¹ The resulting study population of *mature singles* comprises just over 1,600 respondents representing about 526,000 women aged 29 to 54 and almost 621,000 men aged 31 to 54.

The sample was restricted in order to create a clearer picture of the study population. Respondents under the average age at first marriage might reasonably expect to marry simply because of their age, which is highly correlated with marriage. However, after age 30, the likelihood of contracting a first marriage begins to fall and by age 55, it is virtually nil. Respondents who answered “Do not know” were excluded as having no opinion, as were persons living common-law since they are neither single nor married and would confound the results.

Will-marrys, wills: Mature singles who think they will eventually marry.

Won't-marrys, won'ts: Mature singles who do not think they will ever marry.

1. In 2002, average age at first marriage was 28 for women and 30 for men; prime working-age is conventionally defined as ages 25 to 54, because it is the age group with the highest rate of labour force participation.

Dreaming of Mr. or Ms Right

Madame Sosostri³ and her psychic sisters all know that women want to marry a man who is tall, handsome and wealthy, while men want to marry

a supermodel. Social researchers know this too, and numerous studies of mate selection identify the same basic characteristics. Simply put, women generally want a wealthy,

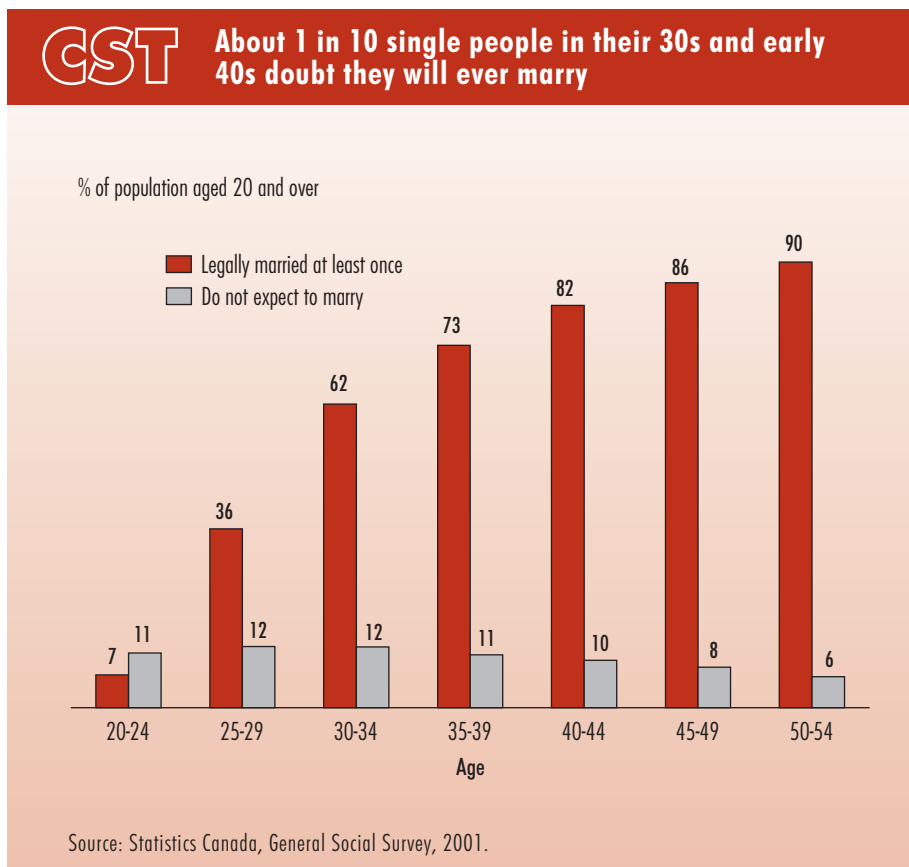
socially dominant man and men generally want an attractive younger woman able to have children.⁴

A particularly detailed U.S. study of single 19- to 35-year-olds ranked some of the principal criteria people consider when looking for a marriage partner.⁵ They differ somewhat for men and women, but in general, they are quite mercenary. Both sexes would prefer to marry someone who earns more money and has more education than themselves, and they would be willing to consider someone who is more than 5 years older (age is highly correlated with income). They would not really want to consider accepting someone who has trouble keeping a steady job, has children or has been married already.⁶

Won't-marrys tend to have fewer socio-economic resources

Mature singles who do not think they will marry have lower incomes than those who do. Their median income is 16% lower than that of *will-marrys* (about \$29,700 versus \$34,400). In addition, mature singles who don't envisage marriage are less well-educated than those who do, with only 24% versus 34% having a university degree; in contrast, they were almost twice as likely to be high school drop-outs, at 17% versus 9% of *wills*. And while most mature singles in both groups are employed, 13% of *won'ts* (but virtually no *wills*) were not in the labour force because of family responsibilities or illness.⁷ *Will-marrys* were also more likely to be men (56% compared with 44% women) but *won't-marrys* were no more often men than women. (For many characteristics, the differences between men and women are not statistically significant; therefore, male-to-female comparisons will be limited only to those that are significant.)

That *will-marrys* have higher incomes, and the educational qualifications to maintain or improve their earning power, certainly makes them better potential mates. Also, they are younger and have more years during



which to use those advantages to build wealth and economic security. Just over half of mature singles who expect to marry are 35 years or older, with an average age of about 36. In contrast, 83% of *won't-marrys* are 35 or older, with an average age of 42. Women in both groups tended to be younger than men.

Being older may also influence a person's expectations of marriage in other ways. With friends, work and leisure interests, mature singles satisfied with their lives may feel no need for the companionship of a spouse; alternatively, they may have obligations to an existing family that might make it difficult to accommodate a spouse.

About half of *won't-* and *will-marrys* live alone, and about one-third with their parents or other adults. However, *won't-marrys* were significantly more likely to be living with children—20% versus 12% of *will-marrys*. Furthermore, the responsibility for

childcare falls preponderantly on women: fully 38% of female *won'ts* and 23% of *wills* live with their children, compared with few men.

Almost two-thirds of mature single women living with their child (or children) do not think they will find a husband, which may reflect a realistic assessment of their marital potential. On the one hand, single mothers most often want a partner who helps to provide economic support and improves their social standing;⁸ on the other hand, having a child without a husband increases the chances of living in poverty, making these single mothers less attractive partners to the type of man they would consider marrying.⁹

As is clear from the fact that many have children, a substantial number of mature singles may never have married, but they have lived in a conjugal relationship. Proportionally more *won'ts* (43%) than *wills* (33%) have lived common-law, and it is

| | Mature singles | | | | | |
|---|----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| | Won't marry | | | Will marry | | |
| | Total | Men | Women | Total | Men | Women |
| Number ('000s) | 550 | 288 | 261 | 597 | 332 | 265 |
| Average age | 42.1 | 42.2 | 41.9 | 36.5 | 37.3 | 35.6 |
| Median income ('000s) | 30 | 31 | 29 | 34* | 36 | 32 |
| | % (distribution downward) | | | | | |
| Age group | | | | | | |
| 29 to 34 | 17 | 13 | 21† | 48* | 43 | 55† |
| 35 to 39 | 23 | 25 | 19 | 28* | 32 | 24 |
| 40 to 44 | 26 | 28 | 25 | 14* | 14 | 13 |
| 45 to 49 | 17 | 18 | 16 | 7* | 7 ^E | 7 ^E |
| 50 to 54 | 16 | 15 | 18 | 3 ^{E*} | 3 ^E | F |
| Annual personal income | | | | | | |
| Under \$30,000 | 46 | 42 | 50 | 37 | 32 | 44† |
| \$30,000 and over | 54 | 58 | 50 | 63 | 68 | 56† |
| Highest level of schooling completed | | | | | | |
| University | 24 | 23 | 25 | 34* | 34 | 35 |
| College | 26 | 24 | 28 | 30 | 29 | 30 |
| Some postsecondary | 11 | 9 ^E | 12 | 12 | 12 ^E | 13 |
| High school | 21 | 25 | 17 | 13* | 14 | 12 |
| Less than high school | 17 | 16 | 17 | 9* | 10 ^E | 8 ^E |
| Main activity in previous 12 months | | | | | | |
| Working | 77 | 79 | 75 | 82 | 83 | 81 |
| Looking for work | 4 ^E | 5 ^E | F | 4 ^E | 4 ^E | F |
| Family responsibilities | 6 ^E | F | 11 ^E | 3 ^E | F | 7 ^E |
| Long-term illness | 7 ^E | 8 ^E | 7 ^E | F | F | F |
| Other | 5 ^E | 5 ^E | 5 ^E | 7 ^E | 7 ^E | 7 ^E |

| | Mature singles | | | | | |
|--|----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Won't marry | | | Will marry | | |
| | Total | Men | Women | Total | Men | Women |
| | % (distribution downward) | | | | | |
| Living arrangement | | | | | | |
| Alone | 51 | 62 | 40† | 48 | 51 | 44 |
| Child, children | 20 | 4 | 38† | 12 | 3 ^E | 23† |
| Parents with or without siblings and/or others | 14 | 18 | 11 ^E | 20 | 21 | 18 |
| With others | 14 | 16 | 11 | 20 | 24 | 15 |
| Romantic liaisons | | | | | | |
| Have lived common-law | 43 | 37 | 50† | 33* | 29 | 38 |
| Have never lived common-law | 57 | 63 | 50† | 67* | 71 | 62 |
| Currently in intimate relationship | 20 | 24 | 16 | 39* | 36 | 43 |
| Not in intimate relationship | 77 | 74 | 79 | 58* | 61 | 54 |
| Region of residence | | | | | | |
| Atlantic region | 5 | 5 ^E | 5 ^E | 7 | 7 | 8 |
| Quebec | 43 | 44 | 43 | 17* | 16 | 18 |
| Ontario | 27 | 25 | 29 | 40* | 40 | 39 |
| Prairie region | 12 | 11 | 12 | 17* | 18 | 16 |
| British Columbia | 12 | 14 | 10 | 18* | 18 | 19 |
| Main language spoken at home | | | | | | |
| English | 52 | 54 | 50 | 73* | 77 | 68 |
| French | 42 | 42 | 42 | 13* | 11 ^E | 15 |
| Other (including multiple languages) | 6 ^E | 4 ^E | 7 ^E | 14* | 12 ^E | 16 ^E |

Note: Women aged 29 to 54, men aged 31 to 54. Family responsibilities include caring for children and household work.

^E Use with caution.

F Too small to be reliable.

* Significantly different from *won't-marrys* ($p < 0.05$).

† Significantly different from men in same marital expectation group ($p < 0.05$).

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

possible that their reluctance to marry may stem in part from an unfavourable experience in such a relationship. Interestingly, women who don't expect to marry are more likely than men to have lived common-law (50% and 37%, respectively).

While the mature singles in this study were not living common-law at the time of the survey, many were dating. However, the *wills* were

certainly more active: twice as many were in an intimate relationship with someone living in a separate household, at 39% versus 20% of *won't-marrys*. Since marriage is a potentially viable option for them, their romantic attachment may influence their expectations of marrying; alternatively, the fact that they wish to marry may have led them to look for a partner in pursuit of that goal.

Hearing the beat of a different drummer

There are socio-economic differences between *wills* and *won't-marrys* that may play into their respective suitability as marriage partners. But it seems the real sticking point is that love (being part of a couple), marriage and family are simply not as important to *won't-marrys* as they are to other mature singles.

| | Mature singles | | | | | |
|---|----------------|-----------------|-------|------------|----------------|-------|
| | Won't marry | | | Will marry | | |
| | Total | Men | Women | Total | Men | Women |
| Number ('000s) | 550 | 288 | 261 | 597 | 332 | 265 |
| | % | | | | | |
| Being part of a couple is... | | | | | | |
| Important or very important to my happiness | 54 | 57 | 52 | 92* | 94 | 91 |
| Not very or not at all important | 46 | 43 | 48 | 8* | 6 ^E | 9 |
| Being married is... | | | | | | |
| Important or very important to my happiness | 13 | 12 ^E | 14 | 69* | 72 | 65 |
| Not very or not at all important | 87 | 88 | 86 | 31* | 28 | 35 |
| Having a child is... | | | | | | |
| Important or very important to my happiness | 42 | 34 | 52† | 68* | 68 | 68 |
| Not very or not at all important | 58 | 66 | 48† | 32* | 32 | 32 |

Note: Age range for females is 29 to 54 years of age; for males it is 31 to 54 years. Excludes no opinion.

^E Use with caution.

* Significantly different from *won't-marrys* ($p < 0.05$).

† Significantly different from men in same marital expectation group ($p < 0.05$).

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

Respondents were asked to rank how important it was to their personal happiness to achieve certain family-related goals.¹⁰ In each instance, *won't-marrys* were significantly less conventional than *wills*. Of course, most *won'ts* (87%) do not think that being married is important to their happiness, while 69% of *wills* believe that it is. They are more open-minded when it comes to being part of a couple: 54% of *won'ts* concede that having a partner would add to their happiness, whereas almost all *wills* (92%) feel that way. For both groups, being a parent is less critical than being in a partnership: having a child is important or very important to 42% of *won'ts* and 68% of other mature singles. And while male and female *wills* are equally agreed on the importance of children to their happiness, male and female *won't-marrys* are sharply split on the issue, at 52% of women but only 34% of men.

Although unique experiences and beliefs have no doubt shaped *won't-marrys'* unconventional attitudes to love, marriage and family, it is worthwhile to have a brief glance at some of the factors that may have helped to mould them. For example, people who attend religious services frequently tend to be more family-oriented, placing more importance on marriage and raising children than other adults.¹¹ Half of *won'ts* claiming a religious faith had not attended religious services in the past year compared with less than one-third of *wills*.¹²

Will-marrys were also substantially more likely to be foreign-born (24% versus 10% of *won'ts*) or to have foreign-born parents (36% compared to 13%). This might be expected since many recent immigrant communities highly value family formation.

When discussing attitudes to marriage, it is crucial to remember that they differ substantially between

Quebec and the rest of Canada. Common-law relationships are far more popular in Quebec, where they effectively function not just as a "trial marriage" but as a socially acceptable marriage substitute. Sure enough, a substantial proportion of *won't-marrys* are Quebecers, at 43% versus 17% of *wills*. *Won'ts* are also over three times more likely to be francophone, at 42% compared with 13%.

While people generally absorb the values and mores of the society in which they live, their experiences growing up within their own families will also shape their attitudes toward marriage. The breakdown of their parents' marriage is often viewed as contributing to a negative assessment of matrimony. But there seems little evidence of this.

Almost all mature singles in both groups were born to married parents and 8 in 10 lived with both their parents until they were at least 15; in fact, about two-thirds of them reported that their parents were still together as a couple (or had remained so until death separated them). *Won'ts* were slightly less likely to report being close to their parents when they were children: 17% of *won'ts* and 11% of *wills* felt they had not had a close relationship with their mother growing up; 38% and 22%, respectively, had not been close to their father. But over 80% of both *wills* and *won'ts* did agree that they had had a happy childhood.

What makes a mature single think they will never marry?

Clearly, *won't-marrys* differ in some measurable ways from other mature singles who do think they will eventually walk down the aisle. But do any of these factors have a greater predictive power than the others in identifying whether a mature single thinks she or he will not get married some time in the future?

Using a logistic regression model, it is possible to estimate the odds that a person will be a *won't-marry* rather than a *will-marry*, given a particular set of characteristics. The

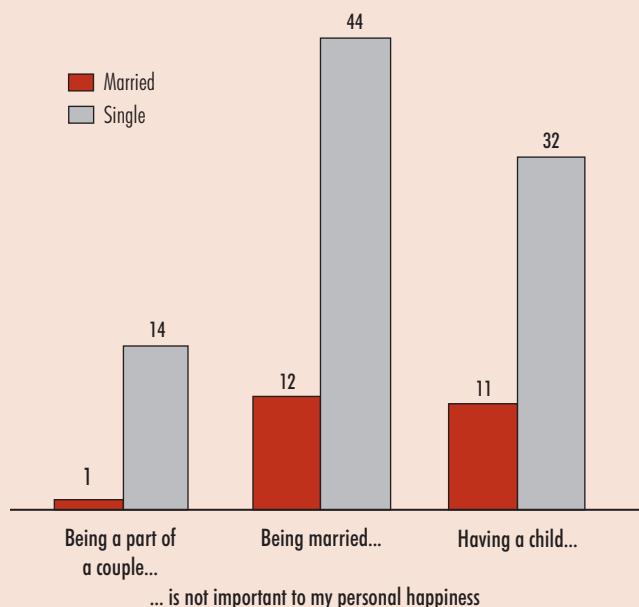
GST Singletons and smug marrieds (with apologies to Bridget Jones)

Historically, marriage has marked the transition to adulthood and so people who remain single are often thought to be rejecting their proper role in life. Society has implicitly viewed marriage as “natural and necessary” and has shown a tendency to stigmatize single adults. In 1957, just over half of Americans considered unmarried people to be sick, immoral or neurotic.¹ In the post-war decades, some psychologists and psychotherapists agreed, describing single adults as having schizoid personalities² and (as late as the 1970s) being “selfish, irresponsible, impatient, frigid, hedonistic, immature or a combination of these characteristics.”³

Even today, when so many diverse family forms are generally accepted by society—from lone parents and blended families to unmarried and gay couples—many single people clearly feel the sting of condescension, if not outright prejudice. For example, in recent news articles, singles describe being made to “feel like a second-class citizen” by their married acquaintances, and of being excluded from employment benefits because of society’s “fetishizing of coupling.”⁴

Many single adults are certainly more indifferent than the average person to love, marriage and family, but their views are not nearly as unconventional as they might think. Some married people express similar views; for example, according to the GSS, over 1 in 8 married Canadians aged 20 and over do not think it is important for them to be married to be happy. This finding is in the same vein as a large 2003 German study which showed that most people were no more satisfied with their lives after marrying than they had been before. The researchers concluded that marriage does not affect everyone the same way, and that people who are very satisfied with life may have less to gain from marriage than those who are dissatisfied.⁵

% of population aged 20 and over



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

1. Israel, B. 2002. *Bachelor Girl: The Secret History of Single Women in the Twentieth Century*. New York: William Morrow. 233.
2. Johnston, M.W. and S.J. Eklund. December 1984. "Life-adjustment of the never-married: A review with implications for counselling." *Journal of Counseling and Development* 63: 230-236.
3. Edwards, M. 1977. "Coupling and re-coupling vs. the challenge of being single." *Personnel and Guidance Journal* 55. Cited in Johnston and Eklund.
4. Stone, A. February 25, 2004. "The high cost of not marrying." *Business Week Online*; Zernike, K. November 30, 2003. "Just say No to the dating industry." *The New York Times*.
5. American Psychological Association. March 16, 2003. "Are married people happier than unmarried people? Study involving over 24,000 people finds general life satisfaction affects attitude toward marital happiness." APA press release.

model's results show that, of the 20 possible contributing factors discussed, only a handful are significant predictors. Models were run separately for men and women.

The clearest indicators that a mature single of either sex does not expect to marry are his or her attitudes to love and marriage. If they do not believe it is important to be

part of a couple, the odds that a man is a *won't-marry* are 4.8 times greater than a man who does, and 3.0 times greater for a woman, all other factors being equal. Similarly, mature singles who place no real importance on being married have very high odds (7.4 for men and 8.8 for women) of being *won't-marrys*.

Age is also a prime predictor of marital expectations, especially for women. The probability of being a *won't* is between 5.0 and 13.1 times higher for mature single women in their 40s or early 50s than for those aged 35 to 39; the odds for a man aged 50 to 54 is 2.6 times higher.

As one might expect, men who do not have good employment prospects more frequently believe they will never marry. Compared with employed mature singles, men with a long-term illness (8.1) have significantly higher odds of being *won't-marries*. Being unemployed or out of the labour force for other reasons does not seem to affect the probability of being a *won't-married*, perhaps because these men expect the duration of their non-employment to be short.

While employment status is not a predictor of marital expectation among women, education is, and those mature single women with less than a high school education have odds 5.2 times higher than university graduates of being *won't-married*, all other factors being held constant. Having a child or children also increases the odds that a woman is a *won't-married* (1.7) but has no impact on men.

Some cultural factors affected the probability of being a *won't-married*. Odds are 4.6 times higher for a male francophone than a male anglophone. A woman living in Quebec has much higher odds (3.7), compared with a woman living elsewhere in Canada, when all other variables were held constant. In contrast, a mature single woman who was in an intimate relationship has significantly lower odds (0.6) of being a *won't-married*.

Summary

Single people who do not expect to marry represent a small but distinct group of adults. For the most part, they are quite similar to mature singles who plan to marry, but they differ in some key ways; for instance, many are single parents, their incomes tend to be lower, and they are less likely to be well-educated. In this respect, their profile tends to conform to a growing trend, in the U.S. at least, which shows that marriage rates are slipping among people in lower socio-economic groups even as they rise among the highly-educated.¹³



Age and attitudes are the main predictors of being a *won't-married*

| Odds ratio that a mature single would not expect to marry | Men (Model 1) | Women (Model 2) |
|--|---------------|-----------------|
| Love and marriage | | |
| Not at all or not very important to be part of a couple | 4.8* | 3.0* |
| <i>Important or very important to be part of a couple</i> | 1.0 | 1.0 |
| Not at all or not very important to be married | 7.4* | 8.8* |
| <i>Important or very important to be married</i> | 1.0 | 1.0 |
| <i>Not currently in an intimate relationship with someone</i> | ... | 1.0 |
| Currently in an intimate relationship | ... | 0.3* |
| Age group | | |
| 29 to 34 | 0.5* | 1.0 |
| 35 to 39 | 1.0 | 1.0 |
| 40 to 44 | 1.7 | 5.4* |
| 45 to 49 | 1.3 | 5.0* |
| 50 to 54 | 2.6* | 13.1* |
| Highest level of schooling completed | | |
| <i>University</i> | ... | 1.0 |
| College or trade/technical diploma | ... | 1.3 |
| Some postsecondary | ... | 1.4 |
| High school | ... | 2.0 |
| Less than high school | ... | 5.2* |
| Children | | |
| Have one or more children | ... | 1.7* |
| <i>Have no children</i> | ... | 1.0 |
| Region | | |
| Quebec | ... | 3.7* |
| <i>Rest of Canada</i> | ... | 1.0 |
| Main activity during the year | | |
| <i>Working</i> | 1.0 | ... |
| Looking for work | 1.8 | ... |
| Family-related (includes childcare, household work, paternity leave) | 1.5 | ... |
| Long-term illness | 8.1* | ... |
| Other (includes going to school and retired) | 0.5 | ... |
| Main language spoken at home | | |
| <i>English</i> | 1.0 | ... |
| French | 4.6* | ... |
| Other | 0.4 | ... |

Note: This table presents the odds that a respondent would not expect to marry in the future, relative to the odds of a benchmark group when all other variables in the model are held constant. Age range for males is 31 to 54 years of age.

... Not applicable.

* Statistically significant difference from benchmark group (p < 0.05).

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

But it seems that the key distinction between mature singles who do not expect to marry and those who do are attitudinal: they have decidedly less conventional views about the importance of love,

marriage and family. These characteristics have undoubtedly presented *won't-marrieds* with different life options than other mature singles. But it is impossible to say whether their opinions have shaped

their behaviour and thus their life choices; or whether their views have grown out of their life experience.

GST

Susan Crompton is Editor-in-Chief of *Canadian Social Trends*.

1. The Vanier Institute of the Family. December 2004. *The Future Families Project: A Survey of Canadian Hopes and Dreams*. www.vifamily.ca/library/publications/futured.html (accessed December 9, 2004).
2. Surra, C.A. November 1990 "Research and theory on mate selection and premarital relationships in the 1980s." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52, 4: 844-865.
3. "Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante, /.../Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe, /With a wicked pack of cards." T.S. Eliot. "The Wasteland." Part I, lines 43-46. *The Complete Plays and Poems, 1909-1950*. Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.: New York. 1971.
4. Cramer, R.E. and J.T. Schaeffer. Summer 1996. "Identifying the ideal mate: More evidence for male-female convergence." *Current Psychology* 15, 2: 157-166; England, P. 2004. "More mercenary mate selection? Comment on Sweeny and Cancian (2004) and Press (2004)." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66, 4: 1034-1037.
5. South, S.J. November 1991. "Sociodemographic differentials in mate selection preferences." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53, 4: 928-940.
6. Other factors—such as being of a different religion, much younger, not good looking or having less education—fall somewhere in-between, and probably assume more or less importance depending on the attractiveness of the candidate's other qualities.
7. Family responsibilities include caring for children and household work.
8. Huston, T.L. and H. Melz. November 2004. "The case for (promoting) marriage: The devil is in the details." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66, 4: 943.
9. Hollander, D. September-October 1995. "Having a premarital birth reduces the likelihood a woman will marry." *Family Planning Perspectives* 27, 5: 221-222.
10. Respondents were asked to rank their answers using a four-point scale, but these have been collapsed into two categories for the sake of brevity: *Not important* includes the original responses "Not at all important" and "Not very important"; *Important* includes the original responses "Important" and "Very important." Percentages presented exclude no opinion and non-response.
11. Clark, W. Autumn 1998. "Religious observance, marriage and family." *Canadian Social Trends*. p. 2-7.
12. Percentage of those reporting a religious affiliation who attended religious services or meetings in the 12 months preceding the survey, excluding special occasions such as wedding, funerals or baptisms.
13. Huston and Melz. 2004; Goldstein, J.R. and C.T. Kenney. August 2001. "Marriage delayed or marriage forgone? New cohort forecasts of first marriage for U.S. women." *American Sociological Review* 66, 4: 506-519.

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