OPINION | COMMENTARY

'The Sequence' Is the Secret to Success

Go to school, work, marry, have children. Why do we fail to convey this message to poor young people?

By Wendy Wang

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A student receives flowers and kisses from her parents after finishing the National College Entrance Exam in Tianjin, China. **PHOTO:** YOU SIXING/ZUMA PRESS

'You should wait until you are older to date." Growing up in a working-class family in China, I learned this at an early age. Like many Asian parents, my mother stressed the importance of working hard and getting a good education before beginning a family.

Having a child outside marriage never crossed my mind. In the small city where I grew up, it isn't done. Even today, less than 4% of births in China are out of wedlock, and the same is true in India, Japan and South Korea. For the vast majority of young adults in Asia, the path to success clearly runs through education, work and marriage—in that order. Families, schools, media and society at large all reinforce that message.

A similar path to success for young adults exists in America. Brookings scholars Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill call it the "success sequence": getting at least a high-school diploma, working, and then marrying before having children—again, in that order. But the message isn't much discussed on this side of the Pacific—and when it is, it's controversial. Liberals often dismiss it as a right-wing notion. They shouldn't. Following the success

sequence is associated with a much lower chance of being poor and much better odds of realizing the American Dream.

Tracking a cohort of young adults from their teenage years to early adulthood in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox and I recently tested how well the three success sequence "steps" work among the millennial generation. We found that at ages 28 to 34, 53% of millennials who had failed to complete all three steps were poor. The poverty rate dropped to 31% among millennials who completed high school, 16% among those who had a diploma and a full-time job, and 3% for millennials who also put marriage before the baby carriage. Among childless and unmarried millennials 28 to 34 who followed the education and work steps, the poverty rate was 8%.

In regression models that predict the odds of being in poverty after controlling for a range of background factors—including intelligence, childhood family income, race and ethnicity—the probability of ending up poor was reduced by 60% for millennials who married before having children and by about 90% for millennials who followed all steps of the sequence compared with those who missed all three.

More important, the success sequence benefits young adults from low-income backgrounds. Among young adults who grew up in low-income families, those who followed all three steps had a poverty rate of only 6%, compared with 35% for their peers who missed one or more steps. Eighty percent of those with lower-income backgrounds made it into middle- or upper-income brackets when they followed all three steps, versus only 44% for those who missed one or more steps.

The bad news is that young adults from less privileged families are much less likely than those from upper-income families to follow the sequence. Our study found that some 68% of millennials age 28 to 34 who grew up in the bottom third of the income distribution missed one or more steps in the sequence, compared with only 35% of their peers from upper-income families. Nearly half of young adults from lower-income families had children out of wedlock, versus only 19% of their peers from upper-income families.

This divide is troublesome. It's an important example of the how the American upper class is "hoarding the American dream" for itself, as Brookings scholar Richard Reeves has argued. Young adults from more-privileged backgrounds generally get the message from parents, peers and teachers that they need to get a degree, work and marry before having children. And most of them act accordingly. But this message doesn't filter down to young adults from poor and working-class families, among whom unmarried parenthood is more than twice as common as in the upper middle class.

One high-school student, the daughter of a single mother, recently told me she was aware that teen pregnancy was a bad idea. But the idea that school,

work, marriage and childbearing form a sequence that leads to success was new to her: "No one in my school talks about this," she said. "My mom never said anything either."

It's time to stop hoarding the success-sequence message and start sharing it with those who need it the most. As we have done with teen pregnancy, we need to teach the success sequence in our schools, incorporate it into MTV shows, and launch media campaigns targeting young adults from poor and working-class communities with the message that some ways of entering adulthood are more prudent than others.

In this way, the U.S. could learn a thing or two from the wisdom of the East.

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