PARENTAL PREDICTORS OF YOUNG ADULTS' BELIEF SYSTEMS OF MARRIAGE

Scott S. Hall
Ball State University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine how young adults' beliefs about marriage related to past, self-reported family-of-origin variables, including parental marriage characteristics and parental support. A sample of 527 college students completed a survey about their beliefs about marriage and the nature of their family relationships while growing up. Parental variables differentially predicted multiple dimensions of marital beliefs (elements of a belief system) in a path analysis model. Parental marital characteristics were generally predictive of the meaning dimensions in unique ways. Parental support mediated some associations between marital characteristics and beliefs, though maternal and paternal support had some distinct associations among the variables.

INTRODUCTION

A growing body of research has demonstrated that personal cognition about intimate relationships is an important factor in explaining relationship satisfaction and behavior (e.g., Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996; Bradbury & Fincham, 1993; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Franuik, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002; Knee, Patrick, Vietor, & Neighbors, 2004; Kurdek, 1992). Such research has emphasized "unrealistic" or "dysfunctional" relationship beliefs about gender roles, conflict, and happiness and their associations with marital strife and communication problems. One's assumptions about marriage as a particular type of relationship may contribute to one's perceptions about one's own marriage and how one addresses issues related to marital adjustment. Much less is known, however, about the origin and development of marriage-related cognitions.

In a prior investigation, I reviewed how beliefs, attitudes, and expectations that people have about marriage typically had been studied and reported in scholarly literature (Hall, 2006). I noted that a significant proportion of studies of relationship beliefs were not specific to the marital relationship, thus failing to account for any unique aspects of marriage that may involve a particular set of personal beliefs and expectations. It was also apparent that researchers usually took a narrow approach to the study of marital beliefs that only captured a small portion of a person's overall perception or belief system of what marriage means as a specific type of relationship. I proposed taking a more comprehensive yet marriage-specific approach to studying the possible beliefs that young adults could have about marriage and I organized the marital beliefs that had been identified in the literature as a whole into five key themes or dimensions of martial meaning. The purpose of the current study was to investigate associations between young adults' marital beliefs and family of origin relationships—namely perceived parents' marital characteristics and parental support.

Theoretical Background

One's knowledge and understanding of something can be thought of as a system of beliefs (Rokeach, 1968). One's system of marital beliefs is important to analyze because it likely plays a role in how one feels about and acts in regard to marriage. According to a Symbolic Interactionism (SI), the meaning that something holds for an individual shapes the individual's behavior toward it (Blumer, 1969). Personal assumptions about marriage would reflect what marriage means to someone, and behavior in regard to preparing for and participating in a marriage should be influenced by those assumptions. In a prior study, I introduced the concept of *marital meaning* as the meaning that the marriage holds for and individual, which broadly incorporates beliefs and assumptions about what marriage is as a particular type of relationship. I cited multiple theoretical and empirical examples to illustrate possible implications of marital meaning for understanding marital functioning and stability (see Hall, 2006 and the subsequent literature review for examples). I reviewed prior research to investigate how meanings of marriage (or any facet of marriage) had been conceptualized and studied, and conducted a qualitative content analysis that sought to identify recurring themes or dimensions of marital meaning. Five themes/dimensions emerged from the analysis. Their descriptions are as follows:

1. *Special status of marriage vs. neutral alternative*. This dimension encompasses ideas about the nature of marriage that elevates it to a special if not sacred status above other types of intimate relationships. Marriage can be seen as the ultimate expression of love and intimacy toward a partner, the most satisfying type of relationship one can have. Conversely, marriage may be thought of as simply one of many types of equally valuable couple relationships available for couples, or simply a "piece of paper."

2. *Self-fulfillment vs. obligation*. This dimension includes various notions of what one can obtain from marriage that is self-oriented. Marriage can be perceived as a means for receiving emotional fulfillment and/or economic security, and for completing one's sense of self. Conversely, marriage can be though of as more of a social obligation for individuals, to be placed ahead of personal fulfillment.

3. *Mutuality vs. individuality*. This dimension addresses issues of what marriage means for one's sense of individuality. Some may perceive marriage as a necessary surrender of individuality and merging of identities to gain of a joint, symbiotic identity, while others see spouses as more independent with little dependency and/or restriction of autonomy.

4. *Romanticism vs. pragmatism*. This dimension incorporates the views that marriage is ideally for soul mates; that it is only good when there is complete acceptance and agreement; that it should always be happy, spontaneous, and satisfying; and that it shouldn't require much work to make a successful marriage. Conversely, people can also see marriage as a very practical exchange system that is not strongly associated with these romantic ideals.

5. *Role hierarchy vs. role parallelism*. Some marital concepts may relate along a common dimensions of power and control in marriage. Marriage can be seen as a hierarchy of roles that are often associated with gender, or it can be seen as a more mutual, egalitarian union characteristic of sharing and companionship.

These dimensions do not cover every possible facet of marriage, but are reoccurring themes within the literature as a whole (but not within a single study). They can be thought of as interrelated but distinct facets of a specific phenomenon (the marital relationship). Simultaneously accounting for these multiple facets or dimensions can give a more complete representation of what marriage means to an individual and can be thought of as a system of beliefs of marriage. The extent to which an individual more heavily endorses one end of each dimension over the other is likely influenced by a variety of sources (to be discussed below), some of which may be more relevant to one or more particular dimensions.

SI also includes assumptions that address how people develop their subjective interpretations of their roles and circumstances that can be applied to finding meaning in marriage. First, people learn about the nature of the roles they will acquire from the larger social/cultural environment in which they live (Stryker, 1980; Thornton & Nardi, 1975). Social norms regarding family relationships, religious values, and ethnic heritage may help shape the meaning people ascribe to their identity roles that are associated with the institution of marriage (Oropesa, & Gorman, 2000; Rogers, & Amato, 2000; Wimberley, 1992), and thus influence the very meaning that marriage can have for them as a spouse or eventual spouse. Those growing up in the same time

period and within similar societies or subcultures would be expected to have substantially similar understandings of marriage.

An additional assumption of SI is that social interaction with people in one's immediate context/environment also acts to socialize people how to think (create meaning) about circumstances and concepts (Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1980). In the case of forming meaning about marriage, interaction with family members during one's childhood would logically play an important role in shaping one's ideas about intimate relations in addition to the influences of boarder social norms (Stryker, 1980; Wamboldt & Reiss, 1989).

The theoretical framework provided by SI is consistent with the fundamental assumption of this study—namely, that the way people think about and define marriage has implications for behavior relevant to preparing for and being married. Most existing research has not been framed within the particular aim of understanding marital meaning. However, some studies have investigated individual and interpersonal links to people's beliefs, expectations, and attitudes about marriage that could be thought of as reflections marital meaning. I reviewed this body of research as a guide to select relevant constructs (prior to or outside of marriage itself) that would be expected to relate to marital meaning (the five dimensions) based on the premises of SI.

Predicting Marital Meaning

Consistent with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), children are expected to imitate behavior modeled by their parents, especially if such behavior is rewarded. This line of reasoning has been applied to investigating an intergenerational transmission of divorce (Feng, Giarrusso, Bengtson, & Frye, 1999), marital discord (Amato & Booth, 2001), and intimate violence (Egeland, 1993). Such research typically focuses on the transmission of behaviors. However, for an observed behavior to be imitated, the observer must cognitively encode and retain the information (Bandura, 1997). It would be expected that witnessing parental interaction (or the nature of the parents' marital relationship) would have a cognitive impact on an observing child's perceptions of marriage, or—within the Symbolic Interaction framework—marital meaning. Exposure to parental interaction contributes to a template or "schema" for thinking about family relationships (including marriage) that is fairly stable through one's life (Baldwin, 1992).

As noted in the theoretical framework for this study, the creation of meaning is influenced by interaction with family members. There is some evidence to support connections between parental relationship variables and child perceptions of marriage or marriage-related processes. For example, parents' marital conflict has been associated with offspring's negative attitudes toward marriage (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992) and less confidence in having a successful marriage (Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Partner psychological abuse toward one's mother was associated with more dysfunctional beliefs about marital conflict and a spouse's ability to change (Dostal & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1997). Parental divorce has been associated with less confidence about one's ability to maintain a future long-term marriage (Dostal & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1997), less commitment toward marriage (Amato & DeBoer, 2001), and greater acceptance of non-marital cohabitation and of divorce (males only) (Black & Sprenkle, 1991). These studies have not directly analyzed marital meaning per se, and have not

analyzed a wide variety of parents' marital characteristics, but illustrate that a subjective cognitive component that may be relevant to one's future marriage may be related to a one's exposure to parental marital characteristics. Perhaps other characteristics of the parents' marriage (not investigated in these prior studies) may also influence offspring's marital meaning because of what was modeled in the home.

Other parental factors may also be relevant to marital meanings. A supportive parent-child relationship has been a key antecedent of a variety of outcomes in child developmental and family relations literatures (Amato & Booth, 1997), and could similarly be related to a child's eventual expectations of how love and support should be expressed in the home. The nature of parents' interactions with their children can shape children's general "paradigms" of intimate relationships, such as marriage (Marks, 1986). Furthermore, parents transmit their values and attitudes to their children, especially when they have a close parent-child relationship (Taris, Semin & Bok, 1998). Such transmission may also be an important pathway from the family context to a person's perspectives on marriage. For example, mothers' negative attitudes toward living together outside of marriage predicted their children's negative attitudes toward cohabitation—as well as a lesser likelihood of cohabiting (Axinn & Thornton, 1993). Regarding the parent-child relationship and cognitions/perceptions related to marriage, some previous research illustrates possible connections. Namely, those who were abused by their fathers reported less confidence in their own ability to maintain a long-lasting marriage (Dostal & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1997), and those who felt more parental intimidation and pressure to choose sides with a parent held more negative attitudes about marriage (Larson, Benson, Wilson, & Medora, 1998). Growing up with at least one alcoholic parent has been associated with more negative opinions and feelings about marriage, feeling less ready for marriage, and desiring to wait longer (compared to other youth) before marrying (Larson & Thayne, 1998). Previous research reveals little about specific cognitions directly regarding what marriage means to people, but these studies suggest that parent-child experiences correlate with some specific notions or feelings about marriage that could be rooted in one's system of marital beliefs.

The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to explore associations between the meaning (belief system) that marriage has for unmarried young adults and family constructs that could be related to that meaning. A path analysis was constructed that included the three dimensions of marital meaning that were identified in a previous analysis (Hall, 2006) as endogenous variables. Parental variables were largely viewed as exogenous or predictor variables relative to the meaning dimensions. Previous research has found that the nature of the parents' relationship can impact how parents interact with their children (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Thus, in addition to being predictors of the meaning variables, the parent-child relationship variables were incorporated into the model as being predicted by the other parental relationship variables and predictive of the meaning dimensions. The specific research question was: how did variation in marital meaning relate to parental relationship variables for a sample of unmarried young adults?

I expected that because the marital dimensions focus on conceptually and empirically interrelated but distinct facets of marriage (see Hall, 2006) that the family variables would be differentially related to (or in some cases not be associated at all) each of the three dimensions. Because

learning that occurs through modeling/transmission is most likely to take hold when that which is modeled is relevant or generalizable to the observer's circumstances or alternatives (Bandura, 1977), a given family variable that is similar in content to a given meaning dimension (and thus potentially more generalizable to one another) were expected to be more strongly associated than other pairs of variables. Thus, for example, affection in the parents' marriage was expected to be more likely (or highly) correlated with *romanticism* than *role-hierarchy* because the first two variables are conceptually more similar than the first and third variable. Furthermore, given that variables representing one's parents' marriage and parent-child relationships are concurrently in the model, it was expected that the parental support variables be less predictive of beliefs about marriage than the parents' marriage variables because the parents' marriage is conceptually more parallel to thoughts about marriage as an institution than is a parent-child relationship.

It was difficult to have specific expectations regarding the associations between each predictor variable and each of the five dimensions because of the sparseness of existing literature that has directly and broadly studied marital meaning. However, some general patterns may be expected that would be consistent with the related reviewed literature as a whole. For example, I expected that indications of more stability, harmony, and support in one's parents' marriage would relate to more parental support and optimistic or idealized marital beliefs (favoring *special status*, *mutuality*, and *romanticism*). Such indications of "positive" family relationships could also be related to more self-fulfillment (over obligation) in that the young adults may associate having martially satisfied parents with the positive qualities they observed in the marriage, assuming that the apparent reward of the marriage is also the function of the marriage. Conversely, "positive" marital qualities would be expected to correlate with less *self-fulfillment* (and thus more *obligation*) because those with more positive family experiences would be prone to have a more positive self image and likely be less preoccupied with viewing marriage as the means for fulfilling one's unfulfilled self (Avenevoli, Sessa, & Steinberg, 1999). Similar expectations and rationale can be made for the parental support variables to correspond with these more optimistic notions of marriage in the same ways. For the *role-hierarchy vs. role parallelism*, the nature of parents' roles related to decision-making and power would be expected to mirror one's beliefs along this dimension, more so than would the other parental characteristics. Parental disapproval of cohabitation may serve as a proxy for more traditional perspectives of marriage. Thus, disapproval would be expected to predict beliefs about marriage having a special status, being about obligation over self-fulfillment, and more role-hierarchy. Given that variables representing one's parents' marriage and parent-child relationships are concurrently in the model, it was expected that the parental support variables be less predictive of beliefs about marriage than the parents' marriage variables because the parents' marriage is conceptually more parallel to thoughts about marriage as an institution than is a parent-child relationship

METHOD

Participants

Participants were elicited among undergraduate students at a large Midwestern University. Students were enrolled in classes from a variety of departments, including Child Development and Family Studies, Computer Graphics, and Computer Technology. A total of 780 students were enrolled in the classes when the opportunity for participation was offered, though the exact

attendance figures for the days on which the survey was introduced is unknown. This general population was selected because this age group is often involved in meaningful dating relationships, some of which may turn into marriages or at least have potential implications for whom/when someone marries. This population is also not far removed from family-of-origin experiences about which they would be asked to report. The convenient nature of the sample has limited generalizability but is useful for exploring minimally-studied theoretical associations of cognitions about marriage.

A total of 527 students (158 males, 369 females) participated fully in the study. Respondents replied to a questionnaire on the Internet after having been introduced to the survey. Participants ranged from 17 to 25 years old ($M = 20.40$, $SD = 1.70$). The sample was 89% white, 3% African American, 3% Asian American, 1.7% Latin American, and included a small number of students from other races. This racial composition of the sample was similar to the overall composition of the university. Almost 82% grew up with both biological parents, nearly 78% had married parents (including step parents), 36% of the sample were not seeing anyone romantically at the time of the survey, and about 13% were engaged and/or cohabiting.

Measures

Marital Beliefs

A list of 30 statements that reflect a variety of beliefs about marriage was assembled (see Hall, 2006 for the instrument). These statements were inspired by the five themes of marital meaning identified in the literature, and to the extent possible, were similar to measures used in the studies from the lit review. Respondents evaluated how true each statement was for "what [they thought] marriage is like" on a 5-point scale ranging from "not true at all" to "very true." Based on a confirmatory factor analysis of the data from the 527 respondents, items were used to create scales that represented the dimensions of marital meaning (see Hall, 2006). For the current study, inter-item reliability analyses were conducted on the scales to help create reliable endogamous variables. Only three of the five scales had alpha scores above .70, so the remaining two were not used for the current analysis. Further measurement development will have to be conducted in the future to adequately represent the other dimensions in subsequent research. Items for each scale were added together and then divided by the number of respective items. All scales range from one to five. Model items for the three dimensions include, "The personal happiness of an individual is more important than putting up with a bad marriage" (*self-fulfillment vs. obligation*; three items; *alpha* = .80), "Maintaining romantic love is the key to lasting marital happiness" (*romanticism vs. pragmatism*; 11 items; *alpha* = .73), and "One spouse should have the final say on how the couple spends money" (*role hierarchy vs. role parallelism*; *alpha* = .77). Descriptive statistics for the scales and all other variables are displayed in Table 1.

Family-of-Origin Measures

Recollection of parents' marriage. Respondents reported their parents' marital status and characteristics. Parents' marital status was collapsed into two categories in order to create a dichotomous dummy variable for the analyses: married, without having experienced divorce (yes=1); or having experienced divorce at some time (which may include remarriage) (yes=0).

A measure to capture young adults' recollections of their parents' marriage was adapted from a similar measure used in previous research (Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Participants indicated "how well [each] of the following descriptions (or characteristics) describe [their] parents' marriage while growing up," by rating a series of 14 (usually one-word) descriptors on 5-point scales ranging from "not well at all" to "very well." An important consideration for using these items was to retain information about discrete aspects of the parents' marriage that could be related to distinct dimensions of marital meaning. In other words, if the list of items were simply scaled together, specific information potentially relevant to a particular dimension could be overlooked. On the other hand, many of these items were highly correlated and could hamper analyses when included in the same model. To maintain as much unique information from the items (i.e. avoid scaling them all together) while avoiding correlations among the characteristics of .70 or above (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996), two scales were created that represented somewhat distinct characteristics of marital quality. The first scale averaged three items: "affectionate," "expressive (express feelings openly)," and "together (doing many things together)." This scale was thought of as representing general affection in the marriage (*alpha* = .82). The second scale averaged two items: "domineering (one gets own way at the other's expense),"and "verbally abusive." This scale was though to represent a general uncooperativeness in the marriage (*alpha* = .77). Having two distinct measures of martial characteristics—one seemingly positive and the other seemingly negative—is consistent with past research that has measured marital quality along two separate (one being positive and the other negative) dimensions (Fincham & Linfield, 1997).

Parents' values. A single item represented the nature of parental values related to potential child behavior; specifically, how much it would "bother" the parents if their child lived with someone outside of marriage (adapted from Axinn & Thornton, 1992). The item was a 5-point scales ranging from "not at all" to "extremely."

Parent-child relationship. Measures from a study that analyzed similar parent-child constructs were used to measure maternal and paternal support (Amato & Booth, 1997). All items were rated on 5-point scales. Ten items measured support (five for each parent). Items ascertained the perceived frequency of certain behaviors, such as helping with homework, showing affection, and talking together "while [they] were growing up." Respective items were scaled to represent maternal and paternal support (*alpha* = .82 and *alpha* = .84, respectively).

RESULTS

A correlation matrix revealed that every family-of-origin variable was related to at least one of the three dimensions of marital meaning (see Table 1). In the correlation matrix and the following path diagram, a positive coefficient between a predictor variable and a meaning dimension indicates a positive correlation between that particular family relational characteristic and the end of the dimension that corresponds to the label on the meaning variable (parents having always been married positively correlates to the "role-hierarchy" end of the *role-hierarchy vs. role-parallelism* dimension). Some variables were unrelated or related in opposite ways to some or all of the dimensions, as predicted due to the distinct focus of each dimension. The next step was to enter the family variables and the dimension scales into a path diagram using AMOS 5 (Arbuckle, 2003). Paths were drawn that indicated the parental relationship and

values variables to be exogenous (all of which were allowed to correlate with one another), the parental support variables as endogamous relative to the parental relationship variables and predictive of the meaning dimension variables, and the meaning dimension variables (each labeled by one end of the dimension) as endogamous relative to all of the above variables. The errors of like endogenous variables (parental support or meaning dimensions) were allowed to correlate. Because of the limits to previous research and theory that specifically addresses predictors of marital meaning, the path analysis was largely driven by the data in that a full model was initially tested with the intention of removing statistically insignificant paths.

All predictor variables had significant direct (and in some cases indirect) paths to at least one of the meaning dimensions. Model fit statistics indicated a good fit between the data and the model (GFI = .99; AGFI .98; RMSEA = .02). Because the sample included both male and female participants, a multi-group analysis was conducted that tested the assumption of invariance in the factor structures between male and female subsamples. The fit statistics (GFI = .98; AGFI = .93; RMSEA = .04) suggest that the factor structures for males and females appear to be sufficiently similar to justify utilizing the same measurement model for a combined sample of males and females. Squared multiple correlations for *Self-fulfillment* (.06), *Romanticism* (.05), and *Role-hierarchy* (.05) indicated that most of the variance for the meaning dimensions was left unexplained by the family variables.

Some of the bivariate correlations were no longer significant once other variables were accounted for in the model. This was especially the case for correlations between family variables and the *romanticism* dimension and among the parents' marriage variables and the parental support variables. Subsequent experimentation with different models (not reported here) indicated that eliminating the parental support variables from the model did not result in the paths from "uncooperative" and "parents always married" becoming significant, suggesting that shared variance among the parents' marriage variables accounted for a decrease in the number of significant coefficients for the final model.

As expected, both maternal and paternal support variables were predicted by parental relationships variables and predicted at least one meaning dimension, suggesting both direct and indirect effects from "affection," "uncooperativeness," and "having always been married" to at least one meaning dimension. Parental disapproval of nonmarital cohabitation was predictive of two meaning dimensions, namely *self-fulfillment*, and *romanticism*.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with assumptions rooted in a symbolic interactionist framework, parenting constructs were relevant to how young adults thought about marriage along three specific dimensions. As expected, variables were generally related to one or more meaning dimensions but no single parenting variable was predictive of all dimensions; some parenting variables were related only indirectly to the dimensions. Because each of the dimensions focuses on a different topic or facet of marriage, some predictors appear to be more salient to one facet than another. Past research has typically investigated more global attitudes and levels of optimism toward marriage as an institution (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Dostal & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1997; Gabardi & Rosen, 1992; Larson et al., 1998). The current study

suggests that links between family-of-origin relationships and subjective assumptions about marriage can be multifaceted and complex. Such links may be quite different from a simple connection between having parents with a "troubled" marriage and one's own positive or negative attitude toward marriage. Young people may be very specific about the assumptions they draw about marriage from past experience, applying only certain elements of their past to their perceptions of precise aspects of marriage. These perceptions may not be necessarily inherently positive or negative (such as being very enthusiastic about marriage), but function as a set or system of qualitatively distinct beliefs about marriage. Knowing whether and how the nature of the beliefs has a positive or negative effect on one's marriage requires further and continued research. Such research that incorporates a broad, multi-dimensional, and content-specific approach to marital meaning may yield additional nuances and complexities yet discovered in the expanding research on cognition and marriage.

Based on general patterns in the limited existing research pertinent to marital meaning, I speculated that more positive and supportive family variables, including an affectionate and cooperative marriage, a lack of divorce, and high levels of parental support correlate with favoring *romanticism*. There was some support for this general pattern, especially on the bi-variate level, though fewer variables were predictive of this dimension than expected (see additional discussion below). I offered competing predictions/explanations regarding self-fulfillment, which may account for a lack of correlations associated with this dimension. Perhaps each explanation (seeing a happy marriage demonstrates the rewards of marriage and thus the focus of marriage is the self-fulfilling reward; or that a happy marriage is a sign of a healthy family environment in which a child would grow without the notion of getting married as a compensation for fulfillment that didn't occur in the home) applies to certain types of people or circumstance, thus canceling each other out. Further research may be able to determine moderating variables for such associations, or confirm that such constructs function completely independent of one another. However, having parents who had never been divorced and who were more strongly against nonmarital cohabitation were negatively associated with this dimension, suggesting perhaps that senses of obligation and commitment were modeled by the parents that were transmitted to their children's perceptions of marriage.

The expected associations with *role-hierarchy* were generally accurate. As expected, an uncooperative marriage was the most strongly associated variable with this dimension, which would be expected because they appear to be addressing similar elements of relationship dynamics. Interestingly, both facets of marital quality were positively associated with a stronger sense of role-hierarchy. First, this type of finding is consistent with the idea that marriages can have both positive and negative dimensions that are along separate continua rather than the opposite ends of the same continuum (Fincham & Linfield, 1997)—otherwise these two facets would be expected to have opposite associations with the same dimension. Second, this pattern suggests that children can generalize about marriage based on multiple sources of information, including interrelated but distinct elements of the same marital relationship. In this particular case, it is perhaps more likely that the parents who demonstrate domination and/or verbal abuse of one another may also have more rigidly-traditional gender roles that can enable such behavior, particularly by husbands. Thus, their children may generalize patterns of such a hierarchy toward marriage itself. At the same time (or perhaps for a different subset of the sample), children whose parents follow more traditional gender roles may also see their parents act openly

31

affectionately toward one another, which may be consistent with research that shows higher levels of marital satisfaction and quality reported by more traditional couples (Baker, Kiger, & Riley, 1996; Kelley, 1999). Parents' marital status (having never experienced divorce or having experienced divorce) was also significantly related to the notion of role-hierarchy. This association may reflect a conventionality of traditional roles that one might see a prevalence of in never-divorced couples in that divorced and remarried couples tend to have less traditional gender roles (Bernstein, 2000).

I had reasoned that because the parents' marriage variables were conceptually more parallel with beliefs about marriage than the hierarchical nature of a parent-child relationship that the former would be more associated (compared to the latter) with the belief dimensions. The findings appear consistent with such reasoning. Though the parental support variables were not strongly or frequently associated with the meaning variables, they do exemplify how parents' marriage variables can have indirect effects on the meaning dimensions through the nature of parental-child relationships. This pattern is consistent with the fact that parents' marital quality is often related to each spouse's parent-child relationships (Davies & Cummings, 1994). The path model suggests that both parent-parent and parent-child relationships can be pertinent to marital meaning, and that accounting for both types of relationships in the same model can give a more complete representation of a home environment in which meaning may be created and molded. Furthermore, paternal and maternal support were differentially related to the parents' marriage variables and the meaning dimensions. Future, more refined measures of parents' relationship characteristics could incorporate the gender of parent (each parents' treatment toward one another) rather than more general measures of overall marital quality, which could reveal further differences (or confirm similarities) in associations between specific gendered family relationships and certain belief systems of marriage.

This focus on specific correlations and the paths within the diagram generally addresses family processes that may be involved in constructing marital meaning. As alluded to in the introduction of this study, symbolic interactionism acknowledges the relevance of influences outside the family context, including larger social norms and values (Stryker, 1980; Thornton & Nardi, 1975). When looking at the total explained variance of each of the meaning dimensions, a relatively small amount is accounted for with the family variables. More sophisticated and in-depth measures of the same (or similar) variables potentially could account for greater amounts of variance, but in general the results suggest that family of origin may only play a minor role in cognitions about marriage. In that the institution of marriage has a long history and has both legal and social sanctioning in the United States, and that most of the study participants have likely viewed media portrayals of marriage for most of their lives, much of marital meaning can be informed outside and independent of the family context. Young adults are not far removed from the adolescent cognitive notion of the "personal fable" that is conducive to assuming that what happens or applies to others won't happen or apply to "me" (Steinberg, 1996). This kind of thinking may limit how much a youth generalizes about marriage from concrete family experiences, and that other, more abstract sources of information about marriage may leave a more lasting impression. For example, it is a common observation that contemporary society as a whole holds highly-romantic views of marriage, and that young people tend to embrace such values for themselves (e.g., Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001). Thus, romantic views of marriage may be more an artifact of cultural mores and popular media than what a child witnesses at

home. Future research may benefit by investigating if and how parents respond to or work in conjunction with other influences on marital meaning (media images of social norms, peer and dating relationships) that result in particular marital belief systems. Prospective research that can track changes in family relationships and marital beliefs over time—along with behavior relevant to dating, courtship, and marriage—can be much more conclusive about the processes explored and speculated upon in the current study.

Though there are limits to the generalizabilty of this sample, and to causal interpretations due to the correlational and retrospective nature of the data and simplicity of some of the measures, this study has taken a unique approach to investigating possible origins for young adults beliefs about marriage. What one views and experiences in one's own family while growing up is often assumed to be fundamental in influencing one's expectations and beliefs about marriage, though this process has received little empirical attention, especially in a manner that incorporates a broad system of beliefs about marriage. To the extent that the beliefs and assumptions young people have about marriage influence their own behavior in preparation for (dating, courtship), entrance into, and behavior during marriage, what children learn from their parents about marriage may have meaningful and lasting implications for families. Transmission of such beliefs may occur without intended efforts, but rather through observed marital interaction and the nature of parent-child relationships. Parents and professionals who guide and educate parents may be able to make deliberate steps in preparing children for marriage or other, similar long-term relationships by focusing on the belief systems the children take into their dating and more serious intimate relationships. As research continues to identify and study unrealistic or otherwise dysfunctional relationship beliefs, parents and parenting professionals may have opportunities to compensate for the transmission of unhelpful beliefs by specifically addressing and discussing the beliefs of young people in ways that help them critique and perhaps modify marital assumptions that may lead to less healthy dating, courtship, and/or marital processes. Future research may also be helpful in evaluating the effectiveness of various educational intervention models with such an objective.

REFERENCES

Amato, P. R., & Booth, A. (1997). *A generation at risk: Growing up in an era of family upheaval.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Amato, P. R., & Booth, A. (2001). The legacy of parents' marital discord: Consequences for children's marital quality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81,* 627-638.

Amato P. R., & DeBoer, D. D. (2001). The transmission of marital instability across generations: Relationship skills or commitment to marriage? J*ournal of Marriage and Family, 63*, 1038-1051.

Arbuckle, J. (2003). *Amos 5.0 Update to the Amos User's Guide*. Chicago, ILL: SmallWaters Corporation.

Avenevoli, S., Sessa, F. M, & Steinberg, L. (1999). Family structure, parenting practices, and adolescent adjustment: An ecological examination. In E. M. Hetherington (Ed), *Coping with*

divorce, single parenting, and remarriage: A risk and resiliency perspective (pp. 65-90). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Axinn, W. G., & Thornton, A. (1992). The relationship between cohabitation and divorce: Selectivity or causal influence? *Demography, 29*, 357-374.

Baker, R., Kiger, G. & Riley, P. J. (1996). Time, dirt, and money: The effects of gender, gender ideology, and type of earner marriage on time, household-task, and economic satisfaction among couples with children. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality, 11*, 161-177.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Baldwin, M. W. (1992). Relational schemas and the processing of social information. *Psychological Bulletin, 112*, 461-484.

Baucom, D. H., Epstein, N., Rankin, L. A., & Burnett, C. K. (1996). Assessing relationship standards: The inventory of specific relationship standards. *Journal of Family Psychology, 10*, 72-88.

Bernstein, A. C. (2000) Remarriage: Redesigning couplehood. In P. Papp (Ed). *Couples on the fault line: New directions for therapists* (pp. 284-311). New York, NY, US: Guilford Press.

Black, L. E., & Sprenkle, D. H. (1991). Gender differences in college students' attitudes toward divorce and their willingness to marry. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 14*, 47-60.
Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Bradbury, T. N., & Fincham, F. D. (1993). Assessing dysfunctional cognition in marriage: A reconsideration of the relationship belief inventory. *Psychological Assessment, 5*, 92-101.
Carnelley, K. B., & Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). Optimism about love relationships: general vs specific lessons from one's personal experiences. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships, 9*, 5-20.

Coiro, M. J., & Emery, R. E. (1998). Do marriage problems affect fathering more than mothering? A quantitative and qualitative review. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, *1*, 23-40.

Davies, P. T., & Cummings, E. M. (1994). Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin, 116,* 387-411.

Dostal, C. & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, J. (1997). Relationship-specific cognitions and family-of-origin divorce and abuse. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 27*, 101-120.

Egeland, B. (1993). A history of abuse is a major risk factor for abusing the next generation. In R. J. Gelles and D. R. Loseke (Eds.), *Current Controversies on Family Violence* (pp. 197-208). Newbury Park: Sage.

Eidelson, R. J., & Epstein, N. (1982). Cognition and relationship maladjustment: Development of a measure of dysfunctional relationship beliefs. *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology, 50*, 715-720.

Feng, D., Giarrusso, R., Bengtson, V. L., & Frye, N. (1999). Intergenerational transmission of marital quality and marital instability. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 61,* 451-464.

Fincham, F. D., & Linfield, K. (1997). A new look at marital quality: Can spouses feel positive and negative about their marriage? *Journal of Family Psychology, 11*, 489-502.

Franuik, R., Cohen, D., & Pomerantz, E. M. (2002). Implicit theories of relationships: Implications for relationship satisfaction and longevity. *Personal Relationships, 9*, 345-367.

Gabardi, L., & Rosen, L. A. (1992). Intimate relationships: College students from divorced and intact families. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 16*, 25-35.

Hall, S. S. (2006). Marital meaning: Exploring young adults' belief systems about marriage. *Journal of Family Issues, 37*, 1437-1458.

Kelley, D. L. (1999). Relational expectancy fulfillment as an explanatory variable for distinguishing couple types. *Human Communication Research, 25*, 420-442.

Knee, C. R., Patrick, H., Vietor, N. A., & Neighbors, C. (2004). Implicit theories of relationships: Moderators of the link between conflict and commitment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 30*, 617-628.

Kurdek, L. A. (1992). Assumptions versus standards: The validity of two relationship cognitions in heterosexual and homosexual couples. *Journal of Family Psychology, 6*, 164-170.

Laible, D. J., & Carlo, G. (2004). The differential relations of maternal and paternal support and control to adolescent social competence, self-worth, and sympathy. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 19*, 759-782.

Larson, J. H., Benson, M. J., Wilson, S. M., & Medora, N. (1998). Family of origin influences on marital attitudes and readiness for marriage in late adolescents. *Journal of Family Issues, 16*, 1998.

Larson, J. H., & Thayne, T. R. (1998). Marital attitudes and personal readiness for marriage of young adult children of alcoholics. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly, 16*, 59-73.

Marks, S. R. (1986). *Three corners: Exploring marriage and the self*. Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) (2000). Factors associated with fathers' caregiving activities and sensitivity with young children. *Journal of Family Psychology, 14*, 200-219.

Oropesa, R. S., & Gorman, B. K. (2000). Ethnicity, immigration, and beliefs about marriage as a "tie that binds." In L. J. Waite (Ed.), *The ties that bind: Perspectives on marriage and cohabitation* (pp. 188-211). New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Pleck, J. H. (1997). Paternal involvement: Levels, sources, and consequences. In M.E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (3rd ed., pp. 66-103). New York: Wiley.

Rohner, R. P., & Veneziano, R. A. (2001). The importance of father love: History and Contemporary Evidence. *Review of General Psychology, 5*, 382-405.

Rogers, S. J., & Amato, P. R. (2000). Have changes in gender relations affected marital quality? *Social Forces, 79*, 731-753.

Rokeach, M. (1968). *Beliefs, attitudes, and values*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Steinberg, L. (1996). *Adolescence*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic interactionism: A social structural version*. Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin / Cummings.

Tabachnick, B. G., & Fidell, L. S. (1996). *Using multivariate statistics*. New York: Harper Collins.

Taris, T. W., Semin, G. R., & Bok, I. A. (1998). The effect of quality of family interaction and intergenerational transmission of values on sexual permissiveness. *Journal of Genetic Psychology, 159*, 237-250.

Thornton, R., & Nardi, P. M. (1975). The dynamics of role acquisition. *American Journal of Sociology, 80*, 870-885.

Wamboldt, F. S., & Reiss, D. (1989). Defining a family heritage and a new relationship identity: Two central tasks in the making of a marriage. *Family Process, 28*, 317-335.

Whitehead, B. D., & Popenoe, D. (2001). *Who wants to marry a soul mate? New survey finding on young adults' attitudes about love and marriage*. New Brunswick, N.J.: The National Marriage Project.

Wimberley, D.W. (1992). Religion and role-identity: A structural symbolic interactionist conceptualization of religiosity. *The Sociological Quarterly, 30*, 125-142.

Table 1. *Means/Percentages, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations of all Variables (N = 527).*

	M/%	SD	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Against Cohab	3.7	1.25	.15***	-.17***	.29***	.09*	.14**	-.22***	.08	.19***
2. PM-Affection	3.62	.96	—	-.58***	.33***	.39***	.57***	.01	.06	.16***
3. PM-Uncoop	2.02	1.07		—	-.30***	-.23***	-.49***	.05	.09*	-.11*
4. Parents Married (yes=1)	69%	–			—	.02	.18***	-.14**	.12**	.11*
5. Mat. Support	3.95	.80				—	.37***	.05	-.06	.12**
6. Pat. Support	3.23	.92					—	.04	.02	.16***
7. MD-Self-fulfill	3.33	.92						—	-.13**	-.10*
8. MD-Role-Hier	2.12	.68							—	.28***
9. MD-Romantic	3.53	.52								—

*p < .05; **p < .01.; ***p <.001.
NOTE: "PM" stands for Parents' Marriage; "MD" stands for "Meaning Dimension (of Marriage)."

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Scott Hall is an Assistant Professor of Marriage and Family Relations at Ball State University (Muncie, IN). E-mail is: sshall@bsu.edu.