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Abstract

This article outlines a conceptual framework for summarizing the marital beliefs and values of individuals regardless of marital status. Drawing on concepts from symbolic interactionism and recent midrange theories of marital attitudes, we propose that marital beliefs can be conceptualized as an individual marital paradigm, which comprises both beliefs about getting married and beliefs about being married. Six interconnected dimensions of marital paradigms are proposed: marital salience, marital timing, marital context, marital processes, marital permanence, and marital centrality. We proceed to make connections between the proposed model and relevant recent research on marital attitudes.

Keywords

marriage, attitudes, beliefs, values, theory, divorce

The process and timing of marital formation in the United States and other industrialized countries had changed dramatically in the past several decades.

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In most Western countries, marriage is typically now delayed well into the 20s and early 30s (Johnson & Dye, 2005) and overall marital rates have been steadily declining (Lee & Payne, 2010). Pathways into marriage are also changing and becoming more varied (Amato, Landale, Havasevich-Brooks, & Booth, 2008; Schoen, Landale, & Daniels, 2007), with most individuals cohabiting with a romantic partner at least once prior to marriage (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). These changes have led to what some describe as the “deinstitutionalization” of marriage, as social norms around marriage weaken and trajectories to (or without) marriage increase and grow more complex (Cherlin, 2004; Lauer & Yodanis, 2010).

Although marriage may be less important to the current rising generation, marriage is still a goal for most individuals (Wilcox, 2010). An overwhelming majority of individuals still expect to eventually marry (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001; Wilcox & Marquardt, 2011), and marriage today is still largely governed by the same cultural and institutional rules and regulations as in previous generations (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010; Wilcox, & Dew, 2010). In fact, despite general declines in marriage rates, about 80% of the adult population will be married at least once by the age of 40 (Settersten & Ray, 2010).

Given that cultural perceptions regarding marriage are shifting and the pathways to marriage are more complex, scholars interested in marital relationships have recently focused their attention on understanding the attitudes, values, and beliefs that individuals (especially young, unmarried individuals) have regarding marital transitions and relationships and how those beliefs may alter individual and relational behaviors (Carroll et al., 2007; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009). This scholarship has had two primary purposes: first, to explain why many of today’s young adults now delay marriage for nearly a decade after leaving the home and, second, to understand how perceptions toward future marital transitions influence what some scholars describe as a critical time period for individual and relational development (Arnett, 2000). Studies examining the potential correlates of marital beliefs and attitudes have found associations between marital attitudes and individual risk taking (Carroll et al., 2007; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009), later union formation (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Willoughby, 2012b), premarital sexual behavior (Willoughby, 2012a), and attitudes toward parenting and child bearing (Carroll et al., 2007).

Despite this recent attention, marital attitude research is currently hindered by a large variation in both measurement and methods (Willoughby, 2010) that make developing generalizations regarding the effects of marital attitudes on individual and relational trajectories and outcomes difficult. Although some previous scholars have attempted to develop specific theoretical models

for focused areas of scholarship regarding marital attitudes (see Carroll et al., 2007; Hall, 2006, 2012, for examples), these attempts have largely been focused on specific populations or types of marital beliefs. To date, no scholars have attempted to provide an overarching model describing individual beliefs about marriage that could be generally understood or applied to any individual, regardless of age or marital status.

The purpose of the present article is to synthesize the latest empirical findings and theoretical thinking on marital beliefs to develop a broad conceptual framework that can guide future scholarship in this area. In the following sections, we outline a conceptual framework for marital beliefs, reviewing relevant research that supports the various tenants of this framework and describing the conceptual model. Our goal is not to develop a causal model where the mechanisms behind why marital beliefs lead to varying individual and relational behaviors are articulated. Neither is our goal to focus on which individual, family, or cultural factors create marital beliefs. Instead, the primary purpose for developing this descriptive conceptual model is to both provide context for previous findings and a resource for future work by providing a “conceptual roadmap that must be filled in by theories and data about specific parts of the terrain” (Doherty, Boss, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993, p. 21). Our hope is to provide a model that unifies this area of scholarship around common language, terminology, and conceptualization.

Current Limitations of the Literature and the Need for Theory

As research on marital beliefs has grown, there has become a pressing need for greater theoretical and conceptual thinking to govern work in this area. Before recent attempts to develop midrange theoretical models to understand marital beliefs, much of the scholarship done in this area was atheoretical and included limited methodological scope. The eclectic variety of measurements used to assess marital beliefs provides evidence for this lack of theoretical consistency. Indeed, one of the most disabling current trends in marital belief research is the lack of uniformity in measurement. A survey of research on marital beliefs finds these beliefs being operationalized as anything ranging from the general importance of marriage (Clarkberg et al., 1995) to one’s expected age of marriage (Plotnick, 2007) to expectations regarding relationship characteristics in a marriage (Laner & Russell, 1994).

This diversity suggests both a lack of consensus regarding what constitutes a “marital belief” and suggests the scholarship on marital beliefs encompasses a wide variety of constructs and dimensions. Willoughby (2010) pointed out that such varied measurement implies that “the term

‘marital attitude’ encompasses many different constructs associated with the cognitive meaning attributed to marriage as an institution” (p. 1307). Hall (2006) likewise pointed out that the narrow focus typically applied by previous individual studies of only one specific type of marital belief “may only capture a small portion of a person’s overall perception of what marriage means” (p. 1445).

As an additional conceptual concern, terms such as *attitude*, *value*, *belief*, and *cognition* have often been used interchangeably in past studies, with little conceptual or theoretical distinctions being made among them. Although referring to marital beliefs as attitudes may be the most common approach by scholars, *attitude* had previously been a more specific psychological term used to refer to a positive or negative disposition toward a given person, object, or idea (Ajzen, 1988). Although individuals may have a generally positive or negative attitude toward the institution of marriage, they can have a variety of beliefs about marriage that can differentially correspond with their positive or negative outlook. In the present article, the term *belief* represents a more descriptive construct, not necessarily simply capturing a positive or negative disposition but describing a meaning or thought that an individual assumes to be true.

In developing our conceptual model, we also use the term *paradigm* to describe the entirety of one’s belief system regarding marriage. A paradigm is traditionally defined as a general set of beliefs or theoretical ideals that represent a given academic discipline or area of scholarship. Here we use the term to suggest that each individual has a distinct marital paradigm, or a general set of beliefs that constitute a person’s personal orientation regarding marriage. We therefore propose a conceptual framework aimed at describing one’s *marital paradigm*. We note that the use of the term *marital paradigm* captures one’s collective beliefs about the institution of marriage and their beliefs about marital relationships in an abstract sense. This does not directly incorporate an individual’s specific attitudes regarding a current marital partner or marital relationship—such as if one believes one’s marriage is in trouble, or one’s negative attitude toward one’s spouse. Instead, we assume that an individual’s overarching marital paradigm and marital beliefs are applied to specific situations and contexts as individuals move through the life course—thus the paradigm might shape or be influenced by one’s beliefs and attitudes about one’s own marriage or spouse, but these are not facets of the paradigm itself. Although each individual may have literally thousands of specific attitudes regarding the many intricacies of marriage, we believe generalized marital beliefs can be broken down into a select few categories, which then govern one’s specific attitudes and behaviors.

Theoretical Foundations

In constructing our model, and like some previous work focused on attitudes and belief systems, we base our idea of marital paradigms and our framework on several basic tenants drawn from symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interaction theory has been popular among those who study marital beliefs given its focus on subjective meaning making and the role of social relationships in this process. Symbolic interaction theory suggests that individuals place symbolic relevance to objects, people, and relationships based on meaning-making processes that derive from social interaction. Applied to marriage, symbolic interactionism would suggest that each individual develops a personal meaning toward the institution of marriage through interactions with family, friends, and the larger culture. Furthermore, the meaning and beliefs one places on marriage and marital relationships become critical factors in understanding how one interacts in any situation that invokes that symbolic meaning. In this way, symbolic interactionism provides the foundation for our framework of marital paradigms by suggesting that understanding the dimensions of such marital meaning is a critical component of understanding individual, relational, and marital behavior in a culture that continues to value and place importance on marriage as an institution.

Symbolic interactionism also suggests that one's individual marital paradigm is partially a product of larger cultural interpretations of marriage. Although any given culture may have normalized beliefs and perceptions regarding an institution such as marriage, individuals will vary in their acceptance or adherence to these norms (Hall, 2006), thus giving way to a balancing act between established cultural norms and individual variability in what cultural beliefs one chooses to accept or reject. One's marital paradigm is likely a compromise of one's individual adherence (or lack thereof) to larger cultural messages and norms regarding marriage. As previously mentioned, the term *marital paradigm* in the present framework encompasses a wide variety of individual beliefs and values regarding marriage that are partially framed within the larger context of overlapping cultural paradigms about marriage and marriage formation. Such a recognition is important as it suggests that although there may be infinite variability in how individual perceive marriage, common themes and "types" of beliefs are likely common across given cultures. Thus, it should be possible to summarize the general types or dimensions of marital paradigms across a given population. As the term *marital paradigm* represents an eclectic variety of beliefs regarding marriage, further delineation of the common cultural dimensions of a marital paradigm are needed to fully understand the various aspects of one's belief set regarding marriage and to provide a useful guide for social scientists.

Some scholars have offered suggestions as to what general dimensions might compose an individual's marital paradigm. Several recent conceptual advances in the study of marital beliefs are important to note and serve as a specific foundation for the current framework. One of the first modern attempts to develop a more broad conceptual understanding of marital beliefs was undertaken by Hall (2006) and his study of marital meanings. Hall (2006) contended that various aspects of an individual's expectations, beliefs, and values regarding marriage reflect an underlying marital meaning each individual holds. After conducting a content analysis of the current research on marital beliefs, Hall suggested that most individuals may conceptualize marriage along five dimensions; that marriage is a special and sacred institution; that marriage is a relationship of self-fulfillment; that marriage represents the creation of a joint, symbolic entity between two people; that marriage is centered in romanticism; and that marriage involves a relationship of role hierarchy. In each case, an individual may adhere to these meaning dimensions or believe the opposite (e.g., if one does not believe that marriage is based on romanticism, marriage may be based on more on a pragmatic, rational foundation). Although only a first attempt at showing the multidimensionality of marital beliefs, Hall's work provided an important step forward by showing that individuals hold multiple, overlapping beliefs about marriage.

While Hall's model largely focused on beliefs about marriage as an institution and a future relationship option, Carroll et al. (2007) and Carroll et al. (2009) focused more on how premarital individuals situate marriage into larger life course goals and trajectories. Proposing marital horizon theory, Carroll and colleagues suggested that each young adult holds a marital horizon, conceptualized as a set of beliefs about the timing and context of their future marriage. Carroll and colleagues suggested that this marital horizon contained three dimensions: expected marital timing, the general importance placed on marriage, and one's criteria for marital readiness. These dimensions of marital attitudes were found to be associated with a wide range of individual attitudes and behavior (Carroll et al., 2007; Carroll et al., 2009) and has served as the basis for much of the marital belief work currently done in the emerging adulthood scholarship (Willoughby, 2010; Willoughby & Carroll, 2010; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009).

Dimensions of Marital Paradigms

The work of both Carroll and Hall proposed that one's beliefs regarding marriage are multidimensional, but each included a unique and different focus on marriage. Although Hall's work primarily emphasized individual perceptions of the marital institution itself, Carroll and colleagues focused on beliefs

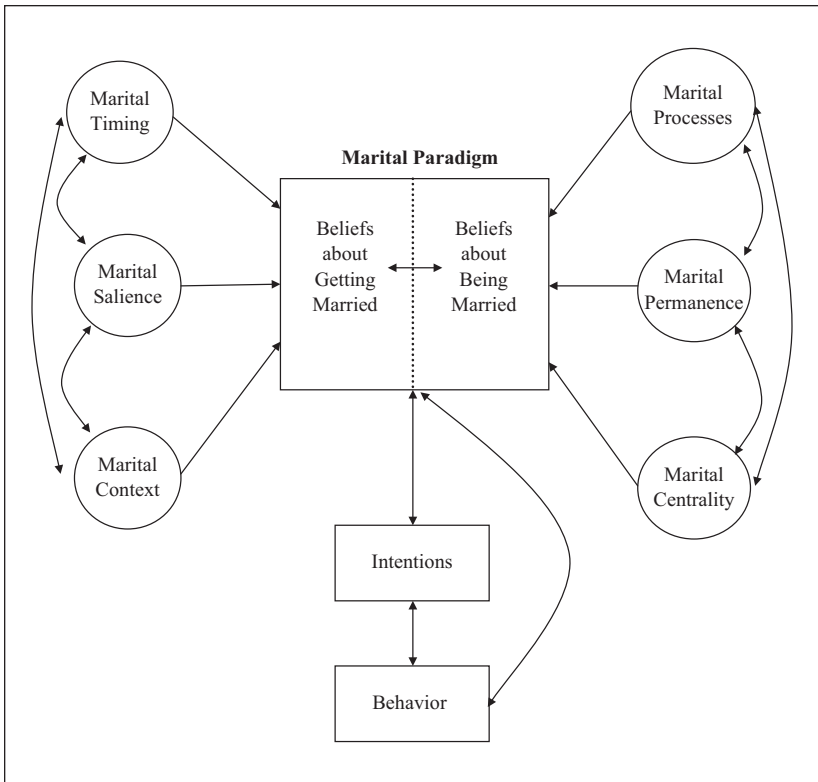


Figure 1. Marital paradigm framework.

about getting married. Both models are also limiting in that they only focus on either one developmental population (Carroll) or one aspect of an individual's belief set about marriage (Hall). Taking cues from both of these important models and expanding on them, the foundation for the current conceptual framework of marital paradigms (depicted in Figure 1) shows that one's marital paradigm is composed of beliefs regarding *both* getting and being married. Marital status does not dictate the category of beliefs one has—one can be married and still have general or abstract beliefs about getting married, and one can be unmarried and still have beliefs about what it means to be married, though we would expect marital status to influence beliefs about a variety of aspects about getting or being married. As seen in the figure, we also propose that one's beliefs about getting and being married can each be broken down into three subcategories.

For beliefs about getting married, we expand on the ideas proposed by marital horizon theory (Carroll et al., 2007; Carroll et al., 2009), generalizing and broadening the model so that it may be used as a broad framework to organize how individuals view the marital formation process regardless of marital status or age. We propose that an individual's beliefs about getting married are composed of three distinct, yet interconnected dimensions: marital timing, marital salience, and marital context. Marital timing refers to beliefs regarding the ideal and expected timing of marriage, formal engagement, as well as the ideal length of courtship. Marital salience refers to general beliefs about the importance of marriage and marrying. Although Carroll and colleagues included marital importance as a dimension in their study of marital horizons, in the current framework we define the salience of marriage as not only the general importance placed on getting married but also the relative importance of getting married in comparison with other life goals such as education and employment (Willoughby, 2010). We also alter Carroll and colleagues' concept of marriage readiness and propose a new dimension entitled marital context. Marital context refers to beliefs an individual has regarding what individual, relational, and cultural context marriage should occur within, including beliefs about mate selection and personal readiness. For example, beliefs that marriage should occur with certain religious rituals or that one should have certain financial obligations paid off prior to marriage would fall under this dimension. Marital context as presently described does not refer to the specific decision to marry a particular partner (i.e., "I will marry you once you've done _____") but instead refers to the generic and general beliefs one holds regarding what context marital transitions should occur within in most situations.

We likewise build off of Hall's (2006) work on the multidimensional nature of marital meaning and suggest that one's beliefs about *being* married can be broken down across three dimensions, which we label marital processes, marital permanence, and marital centrality. These dimensions are narrower and more concrete than the marital meaning dimensions and provide symmetry with beliefs about getting married. Marital processes refer to beliefs and expectations regarding what one expects to happen within marital relationships in regard to marital process. This includes beliefs about the marital transition and marital adjustment, as well as beliefs about what marital relations should encompass regarding issues such as work/family balance, housework, and intimacy. Marital permanence captures one's beliefs about commitment and under what circumstances marriages can be dissolved. Thus, marital permanence captures beliefs about divorce and divorce proneness, another important area of attitudinal scholarship (Amato & Rogers, 1999; Axinn & Thornton, 1992). Marital centrality is a parallel concept to

marital salience, capturing the relative importance one places (or believes one should place) on marriage while married and how central a place the spousal role should play in one's life. This may be in comparison to friendships, career aspirations, or parenthood.

We note that these dimensions of marital paradigms do not imply either a positive disposition toward the marital institution or an expectation to eventually marry. Some individuals may believe that there is no ideal timing or may believe that marriage is unnecessary or not expect to marry at all. These types of beliefs are still applicable to the current model in that the belief that there is no ideal timing is still a belief about marital timing. Having no expectation to marry would likely be linked to beliefs about both marital timing and marital salience. In this way, regardless of one's personal predisposition toward marriage or marital history, each person holds a marital paradigm explained by the six dimensions proposed.

In summary, we propose that one's marital paradigm is encompassed by two large beliefs systems, one about getting married and one about being married. These two belief systems can be conceptualized across six dimensions. In the next section, we review recent empirical findings on marital beliefs to show how each of the previously mentioned dimensions provides a context and structure through which to organize and generalize previous scholarship in this area. Although the proposed model suggests that any individual, regardless of current or future marital status, holds a marital paradigm, the following brief literature review focuses mostly on never-married individuals, as current research on the marital beliefs of other populations is limited. We do not intend to provide an exhaustive review of the literature on each aspect of marital paradigms, but merely to illustrate how the model might organize existing literature and highlight important findings along each dimension.

Beliefs About Getting Married

Marital Timing. Although few studies have explicitly focused on individual's specific beliefs and expectations regarding the timing of dating, engagement, and future marriage, limited research has suggested that beliefs about such timing are important. Recent scholarship has shown that the vast majority of young adults believe that the mid-20s is the ideal time to marry (Carroll et al., 2007). This timing is likely linked to many contextual factors such as dating patterns, pregnancy history, employment, and educational trajectories. All these factors have been found to influence the likelihood that one expects to transition to marriage in the near future (Gassanov, Nicholson, & Koch-Turner, 2008). Although most individuals expect to marry in their young adult

years, scholars have noted an extreme drop in drive to marry by the time most unmarried individuals reach their midadult years (Mahay & Lewin, 2007), perhaps suggesting that as one passes the time they believe to be ideal, individual priorities begin to shift to other roles such as employment and civic responsibilities.

Along these lines, other research has suggested that beliefs about marital timing influence individual decision making. Carroll et al. (2007) found that expecting to marry past the mid-20s was associated with higher levels of substance use, more endorsement of cohabitation, and more sexual permissiveness for college men and women. Using the ADD Health data set, Willoughby and Dworkin (2009) found that those who desired to marry soon tended to have more sexual and relational experiences than those who put marital timing farther out in the life course, mirroring results also found in other areas of the world (Clark, Poulin, & Kohler, 2009).

Marital timing beliefs may also influence long-term relational outcomes. Willoughby (2012b) found that when high school seniors expected to marry younger, this belief was predictive of an earlier transition to marriage compared with high school seniors who expected to marry later. Although similar findings are not currently available regarding if timing beliefs in relation to engagement or dating length are likewise associated with short- and long-term outcomes, these recent results suggest that beliefs about marital timing are one important component of marital paradigms that influence individual decision making.

Marital Salience. Marital salience has been perhaps the most studied dimension of marital paradigms in the current literature. Previous scholarship has consistently linked the importance or salience one places on marriage and marital relationships to numerous current and future outcomes. Research has continuously shown that those individuals who place a high salience on marriage form unions at consistently higher rates than those who do not (Mahay & Lewin, 2007; Willoughby, 2012b). Research also suggests that an individual's general appraisal of marriage as an institution significantly predicts whether an individual will choose to form a marriage or cohabitating relationship (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Clarkberg et al., 1995).

Although the general salience of marriage has been shown to be predictive of relational behavior, the relative importance of marriage has also been shown to influence individuals as they move through the life course. Overall, most individuals tend to value marriage and family over other areas of their lives, including careers (Hoffnung, 2004). Willoughby (2010) found that as adolescents move into young adulthood, many begin to place more value on marriage compared with their friendships and/or career aspirations. Women who go against this trend and who put a high value on work, occupation, and

career success compared with marriage tend to be less likely to marry than other women (Clarkberg et al., 1995; Hoffnung, 2004) and have been shown to have an overall lower drive, or desire, to marry (Blakemore, Lawton, & Vartanian, 2005).

Despite the high importance generally placed on marriage, scholars have noted important demographic differences in marital salience, suggesting cultural variations may be of particular importance with this dimension of marital paradigms. Previous scholarship has noted differences in the general importance of marriage based on religious denomination, religiosity, (Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore, 2007), race (Crissey, 2005), and socioeconomic status (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005).

Marital Context. Beliefs about marital context include a range of factors, such as specific educational, financial, cultural, or experiential benchmarks that need to be met by the individual holding the beliefs or by that individual's potential spouse before one feels ready to marry. Previous research has suggested the importance of several of these factors in determining mate selection and marital behavior. For example, religious beliefs serve as an important contextual factor for many individuals; evidenced by the fact that male partner religiosity has been found to be a significant predictor of women's positive expectations to marry (Manning & Smock, 2002). Additionally, although most individuals intend to get married regardless of socioeconomic status, many marriages of low-income couples are prevented by unmet expectations regarding marriage financial prerequisites (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Specifically, Gibson-Davis and colleagues found that almost three fourths of low-income unmarried couples interviewed mentioned financial concerns as a major barrier to marrying. Sexual compatibility with one's partner as an important prerequisite for marriage is another contextual factor many modern couples and individuals consider important as they move toward marriage (Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby, 2010; Clark et al., 2009).

Many of these marital context beliefs are often based on larger cultural norms. For example, many Americans hold to common contextual elements considered as prerequisites to marriage including mutual love (Campbell & Wright, 2010) and a relationship that is emotionally fulfilling. In effect, most Americans continue to search for the ideal partner or "soul mate" (Campbell & Wright, 2010) displaying an largely romanticized view of marriage and expecting that with one's "soul mate" an individual can find marital satisfaction, acceptance, and happiness with little work or effort (Hall, 2006). Individuals that hold strong soul mate beliefs regarding marriage will likely have specific requirements of both their partner and relationship before deciding to marry, influencing both dating and marital decision making.

Career and educational contexts are perhaps the most studied aspects of marital context beliefs in the current literature. High education levels are traditionally related to higher marriage rates in both men and women (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). Measures of individual educational level likely tap into beliefs about marital context as many young adults believe that ideal marital partners need to be educated, employed, and have practical life skills (Clark et al., 2009) and may postpone marriage until such prerequisites are met for either themselves or their partners. Education aspirations often create a delay in union and family formation as individuals wait to marry and form families until after they have obtained an education (Plotnick, 2007). High school students who hope to attend postsecondary education also tend to have a later expected age of marriage (Willoughby, 2010). These findings are likely in part a response to the common goal to be a financially stable individual *before* the marriage takes place (Mahay & Lewin, 2007; Manning & Smock, 2002; Sessler & Schoen, 1999). These educational context beliefs eventually link to marital context beliefs regarding employment and career aspirations. In today's society, a majority of men and women have certain career goals and expectations they consider essential prerequisites to marriage (Blakemore et al., 2005; Clarkberg et al., 1995).

Another important marital context belief for recent cohorts has been beliefs about the role of premarital cohabitation. Many individuals turn to cohabitation during premarital relationships as a way of testing a given partnership to see if a future marriage will be successful and if a given partner meets one's expectations for a future spouse (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). Although more couples are now using cohabitation as a more committed form of dating (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004), a substantial percentage of cohabiting couples still cite testing the relationship as the primarily reason for coresiding with their partner (Rhoades et al., 2009). Cohabitation, however, may not have the desired effects of preparing for marriage, as some research has shown that as length of cohabitation increases, expectations and desire for marriage decrease (Manning & Smock, 2002) and cohabitation has generally been linked to negative relational and marital outcomes (Willoughby, Carroll, & Busby, 2012).

Marital context also encompasses the concept of marital readiness (Carroll et al., 2009; Holman & Li, 1997). In order to transition to marriage, most individuals need to feel personally ready and that readiness is based on a self-defined group of criteria. Marriage readiness is often influenced by multiple factors including family background and religious affiliation (Larson, Benson, Wilson, & Medora, 1998; Mosko & Pistole, 2010) and has been linked to individual decision-making premaritally. For example, young adults who believe sexual experience is an important criterion for marriage tend to

engage in more high-risk behavior prior to marriage (Carroll et al., 2009). Regardless of the specific contextual marital beliefs held, this body of research has continued to show that such marital context beliefs are helping shape general behavioral trajectories as well as specific relational decisions with given romantic partners.

Beliefs About Being Married

Marital Processes. Beliefs regarding what marital process will be like are another commonly studied dimension of marital paradigms. Beliefs about marital process have been the focus of several recent studies (Dennison & Koerner, 2006; Sessler & Schoen, 1999) and are the basis for some of the standardized measurements developed to assess marital beliefs and attitudes (Larson et al., 1998). Many Americans seem to have positive illusions about their own marriage (Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001), expecting marital interactions to be a generally positive and that marriage will be a fulfilling relationship. These positive beliefs tend to crystallize as one approaches marriage with research consistently finding that engaged individuals have higher idealistic distortion scores (believing something to be unrealistically positive) and more unrealistic marital expectations than those who are married or dating (Bond-Raacke, Bearden, Carriere, Anderson, & Nicks, 2001; Fowers, Veingrad, & Dominicis, 2002). Some research suggests that such unrealistic, positive expectations regarding marital process may have potentially negative effects on individuals (Fowers et al., 2001), perhaps leading to disappointment and dissatisfaction following the marital transition (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001).

Beyond general expectations regarding if marriage will be a positive or negative relationship, previous scholarship has identified a variety of types of beliefs people have about how spouses should behave and treat each other. Hall (2006) conducted a content analysis of such scholarship and suggested that beliefs about marriage often fell within five interrelated dimensions of marital meaning. The first is similar to what was mentioned above regarding an overall positive perception of marriage itself—even to the extent it is viewed as having a special status. In addition, beliefs about what marriage should be like in terms of levels of individuality versus mutuality, its purposes of being self-serving versus being socially obligatory, levels of romanticism versus pragmatism, and the extent of hierarchy of roles arguably incorporate a broad, multifaceted system of beliefs about marital process that contribute to one's overall marital paradigm. It would be expected, for example, that beliefs that endorse more individuality, a more self-serving function of marriage, and a less special status of marriage could contribute to less

personal sacrifice for the sake of spousal unity and a more fragile commitment to avoiding divorce.

Other scholars have suggested that, similar to beliefs about marital context, narrower expectations regarding finances, intimacy, and domestic labor are key content areas of marital process beliefs. For example, couples may have varying financial arrangements as they transition to marriage including joint banking accounts that are handled together, separate accounts, or an arrangement where one partner handles the majority of finances (Burgoyne, Clarke, Reibstein, & Edmunds, 2006). Recent qualitative research of newlyweds investigating unexpected adjustments to marriage suggested that some of the early conflict that newlyweds encounter is because of unmet expectations from both partners regarding how money would be handled and how household chores would be divided (Hall & Adams, 2011).

Beliefs about intimacy and sexual processes are also important for many individuals as they move toward and into marriage. For example, the vast majority of unmarried and married individuals believe that marriage should be a sexually monogamous relationship (Campbell & Wright, 2010). Other cultural perceptions, such as the belief that sexual frequency declines during marriage, have found support in empirical investigations (Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995). Limited evidence also suggests that beliefs and expectations regarding sexual frequency may influence relational outcomes (Simms & Byers, 2009).

An individual's expectations regarding the familial and career roles each partner will enact have also been shown to predict individual and couple behavior within a marriage. Overall, recent cohorts of women have been found to hold more equalitarian expectations of marriage than in previous generations (Botkin, Weeks, & Morris, 2000), expecting to share housework and other responsibilities with their spouse. These beliefs about career and family roles within a marriage are often on the mind of individuals even before the marital transition. Peake and Harris (2002) found that young adults who were about to marry were already actively planning out how to balance career and family responsibilities after the marital transition.

Marital Permanence. Despite the abundance of research on marital process beliefs, less work has focused on how permanent individuals believe marriage and marital relationships to be. In perhaps the most direct test to date of the importance of marital permanence, Dew and Wilcox (2010) found that individuals who placed more importance on marital stability were more likely to enjoy high-quality marital relationships, providing at least partial support for the importance of this dimension. Although little scholarship has specifically targeted beliefs regarding the permanence of the marital

relationship after marriage, research on divorce proneness and attitudes toward divorce offer insights into how permanent individuals feel marital relationships are (Martin & Parashar, 2006). Holding permissive attitudes toward divorce are likely related to marital permanence beliefs in that they tap into one's general orientation toward ending marital relationships.

Such beliefs regarding divorce and marital permanence not only influence current marital relationships but have also been linked to other aspects of family process, particularly intergenerational relationships. For example, children of parents with more accepting views of divorce have been found to be more likely to cohabitate than marry when compared with children with parents with a low acceptance of divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1992, 1993). Other research has shown that experiencing parental divorce or the potential for divorce significantly alters children's perception of divorce and marriage, with young adults who thought their parents should get a divorce feeling more accepting and positive toward divorce in general and less likely to value marriage (Kapinus, 2005). Although it may be assumed that those whose parents divorce may be universally more likely to devalue marriage, other research actually suggests that children from divorced families tend to value and expect to marry at similar rates as those from intact families (Burgoyne & Hames, 2002). Although beliefs about divorce may only serve as a proxy until more specific marital permanence research is undertaken, such findings do provide evidence that beliefs about when and under what circumstance marriages should be ended affect individual and family outcomes.

Marital Centrality. Of the six marital paradigm dimensions, the centrality that one places on the marital relationship once in marriage is the most understudied. Little research exists exploring how individuals conceptualize the relative importance the marital relationship will hold for them after marriage. However, some scholars have proposed ideas regarding how marital centrality beliefs may be important to individuals. For example, some individuals may view marriage as something that requires constant effort to maintain. Whitehead and Popenoe (2001) found that young adults tended to define marriage as a "full-time job" that required hard work, suggesting that many individuals understand that personal resources will likely be expended in a marriage. Thus, beliefs about marital centrality can be conceptualized by understanding that individuals must decide the quantity of personal resources they will, or more generally that one should, dedicate to a marital relationship. Premarital research finding that the relative importance placed on getting married is an important component of marital beliefs (Willoughby, 2010) suggests that a parallel concept likely exists regarding beliefs about being married. Since scholars have established that adolescents and young adults

hold beliefs about how to prioritize getting married compared with other endeavors in their lives (Carroll et al., 2007; Willoughby, 2010), it is logistical that these same individuals hold beliefs about how they will allocate resources to their marriage once married.

Other evidence for the importance of marital centrality beliefs lies in current research regarding interpersonal commitment. Beliefs about marital centrality likely closely mirror general beliefs about marital commitment as both types of beliefs focus on how individuals generally value marital relationships. Indeed, Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2011) recently suggested that dedication commitment, a form of commitment previously found to be beneficial and protective of marital relationships, was partially defined as “making the relationship a priority” (p. 822) implying placing importance on the marriage above other obligations. Thus, beliefs about marital commitment are likely a specific type of marital centrality belief. Commitment has long been a staple of strong, long-term relationships (Stanley & Markman, 1992), and beliefs about marital centrality may be strongly linked to general feelings of commitment.

Interconnections Between and Across Dimensions

Although we have discussed each dimension of marital paradigms in isolation, we note that beliefs in one dimension of the model interconnect and influence beliefs in other dimensions. In general, previous research has suggested that various beliefs about marriage tend to correlate with each other. For example, in regard to beliefs about getting married, expecting to marry earlier (marital timing) has been associated with more general importance being placed on marriage (marital salience; Carroll et al., 2007). In a more recent study, Willoughby and Carroll (2012) found that young adults who expect to marry younger (marital timing) also tend to believe that cohabitation is neither beneficial nor acceptable unless there are explicit marital plans (marital context). These hypothesized associations between the three dimensions on each side of the model are represented in Figure 1 by double-sided arrows connecting the various dimensions of one's marital paradigm.

In a similar fashion, one's beliefs about getting and being married are likely linked in reciprocal ways. For example, women who hold more traditional gender expectations about marriage (marital processes) are more likely to desire to marry sooner (marital timing; Blakemore et al., 2005). The same study also found that females who hold traditional beliefs about eventual gender roles (marital process) also tend to have a stronger drive to marry (marital salience) compared with females who hold less traditional beliefs about marital process. This association between both sides of the model is

represented in Figure 1 with the double-sided arrow connecting beliefs about being and getting married.

Based on these examples, dimensions of marital paradigms should not be viewed as isolated and unrelated constructs but as variations and connected components of one's more general paradigm toward marriage. The nature and number of connections might be extremely diverse, though there may be certain patterns that are predominant in certain types of individuals based on subcultural, economic, family of origin, genetic, and other influences. Such possibilities are ripe for further, empirical investigation.

The Effect of Marital Paradigms on Intentions and Behavior

The previous review of recent marital belief literature suggests that all six dimensions of one's marital paradigms are at least partially linked to individual or couple-level decision making. Taken together then, the six dimensions do not simply describe holistically one's marital paradigm, but collectively influence daily individual and relational decisions by influencing both behaviors directly and intentions to engage in specific behaviors. This is depicted in the bottom half of the model in Figure 1. We use the word intention here to describe a specific inclination to engage in a behavior, similar to previous conceptualizations of the term *attitude*. Although a detailed discussion of how marital paradigms influence and interact with individual intentions and behaviors is not the focus of the present article, we here discuss several general components of this interaction to better understand the importance of the proposed marital paradigm framework on current and future behavior.

We note that marital paradigms may have a direct influence on behavior as well as an indirect effect through specific intentions. It is important to note the conceptual difference between general paradigms and specific intentions. Although much of the scholarship on values, attitudes, intentions, and beliefs intermixes these terms and uses them in similar ways, we suggest that paradigms and intentions capture two related, yet differing aspects of an individuals' cognition. As previously noted, one's marital paradigm encompasses generalized beliefs and values regarding the timing, importance, context, and expectations of marriage and marital transitions. These beliefs are generalized in the sense that they reflect broad beliefs that then need to be applied to specific individuals, relationships, and contexts. Intentions, on the other hand, are specific inclinations to act in particular ways depending on the specific situation or relationship.

The concept that intentions derived from general paradigms are often the catalyst for specific behavior has previously been suggested by Ajzen's

(1991) theory of planned behavior. In formulating his theory, Ajzen pointed to growing empirical evidence that general dispositions and beliefs sets are poor predictors of actual individual behavior. Applied to a marital framework, one's marital paradigm is likely a weak predictor of specific behaviors within a given relationship or situation. Instead, Ajzen (1991) suggested that broad beliefs sets "have an impact on specific behaviors only indirectly by influencing some of the factors that are more closely linked to the behavior in question" (p. 181). Ajzen argued that intention is the driving force behind behavior and that beliefs, values, and cultural norms help drive intention, not behavior directly. Applied to the present framework, the general assertion is that marital paradigms and the dimensions that comprise them will likely have a modest direct effect on specific behaviors and a more substantial indirect effect on the intentions to engage in specific individual and relational behavior.

The connections among marital paradigms, intentions, and behavior are also reciprocal. Drawing again on symbolic interaction theory, as individuals gain life and relational experience, they are consistently altering their views and perceptions of marriage. One might also develop a specific intention or desire to engage in a particular behavior and then alter larger beliefs or paradigms in order to internally justify such behavior. Although most marital belief research has been conducted with the assumption that marital beliefs are static and unchanging, Willoughby (2010) found that several assessments of marital beliefs, especially those focused on marital salience, shifted across late adolescence, suggesting a more dynamic understanding of marital beliefs. Thus, in the present framework we understand that experience will change marital paradigms and this is depicted in Figure 1 by the double-sided arrow linking behavior (experience) to marital paradigms. As mentioned earlier, we might expect that marital status would be an important experience that would change all aspects of one's marital paradigm. As one transitions to marriage and obtains lived experience, beliefs about both being and getting married are likely altered to reflect these experiences.

For premarital individuals, marital paradigms will likely alter eventual marital formation trajectories and marital outcomes. This idea draws from traditional notions from family development and life course theories, which suggest that current and past individual behaviors and decisions will influence future behavior and decision making. As individuals make decisions about what to do in terms of education and career choices, select dating partners, and gain relational experiences, they put themselves on a probable trajectory toward (or away) from eventual marital transitions. These decisions in turn will influence their eventual marital outcomes. A long history of scholarship has shown that premarital individual and relational factors

influence later marital outcomes (Holman, 2001), and these factors are likely partially influenced by one's marital paradigms. The three dimensions of beliefs about *being* married likely continue to influence behavior and decisions within marriage, including those related to levels of marital commitment and investment. These beliefs also provide a comparison between what one believes marriage should be like and actual marital processes, which in turn can influence one's satisfaction level (McNulty & Karney, 2002). Taken together, the present framework suggests an important and complex relationship between larger paradigms, specific intentions, and individual behavior.

Moving Forward

The present framework of marital paradigms was designed to provide a road-map and common language for future scholarship on marital beliefs, values, and attitudes. This type of scholarly consensus is vital to developing more meaningful hypotheses and methodology regarding an increasingly important area of study. More specifically, for the first time, the proposed model provides a framework that holistically describes how an individual views marriage. We hope such a framework will help push scholars past many of the limitations currently existing in the present literature. For example, when viewing marital beliefs holistically by using the marital paradigm framework, it become quickly apparent that most of the scholarship in the past several decades has focused on only three dimensions of marital paradigms (marital salience, marital context, and marital process). This has left the field with only a limited understanding of how the remaining three dimensions (marital timing, marital permanence, and marital centrality) influence individuals and couples, despite the fact that existing scholarship hints at their importance.

Beyond describing a much needed general framework for marital attitude research, the present model also provides two additional benefits for scholars. First, the concept of marital paradigms may help clinicians and educators develop a broader array of relational and marriage education materials. Although most educational efforts focus on skill building, developing educational materials around promoting "healthy" marital paradigms may be another way educators can promote healthy relationships. Additionally, by understanding that marital paradigms are multidimensional, future research may be able to identify which dimensions of marital paradigms are the most important for relational outcomes and which should be the focus of both educational and interventional efforts.

Second, the current framework will help provide scholars with an increased emphasis on how perceptions and beliefs may contribute to healthy or unhealthy relationship formation and maintenance. For example, belief in

what has been termed “marriage myths,” such as the belief that cohabitation is beneficial to future marital relationships, can potentially undermine healthy relationship development (Larson, 2006). On the other hand, marital paradigms may help promote healthy behavior. For example, if an individual believes that having a steady income is an essential prerequisite for getting married and desired to eventually get married, this individual may seek higher education or choose a vocation that will provide a higher income, both outcomes that will likely increase that individual’s overall life satisfaction and outcomes. Additionally, although all six dimensions of marital paradigms may describe how one thinks about marriage and marital relationships, scholars may discover that only certain dimensions, or certain combinations of dimensions, are important for given relational outcomes. Indeed, one of the primary benefits of using the proposed model may be that it helps scholars think about how patterns *across* dimensions may be uniquely important in predicting outcomes. Future researchers can use the current framework to understand which dimensions of a marital paradigm matter at given individual and relational developmental periods and across a multitude of individual and relational outcomes.

Given the potential daily and long-term impact that marital paradigms may have on individuals, scholarship and theory in this area will continue to be an important aspect of both family and developmental scholarship on relationships and marriage. The framework of marital paradigms presented in this article will continue to push scholarship in this area forward and provide a clearer, more direct pathway for research on marital beliefs.

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