


May 2013

Parent-Child Communication About Marriage and the Displacement of Marital Myths

Jennifer Anne Jackl

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.uwm.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#), and the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jackl, Jennifer Anne, "Parent-Child Communication About Marriage and the Displacement of Marital Myths" (2013). *Theses and Dissertations*. 120.

<https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/120>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by UWM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UWM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact open-access@uwm.edu.

PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION ABOUT MARRIAGE AND THE
DISPLACEMENT OF MARITAL MYTHS

by

Jennifer A. Jackl

A Thesis submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in Communication

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2013

ABSTRACT

PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION ABOUT MARRIAGE AND THE
DISPLACEMENT OF MARITAL MYTHS

by

Jennifer A. Jackl

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013
Under the Supervision of Professor Lindsay Timmerman

Marriage and divorce are common in the U.S. today, and the question of “why is the divorce rate so high?” lingers in popular culture. The purpose of this study is to examine the need for parent-child communication about marriage to determine if it can help to dispel marital myths that abound in U.S. society. This study takes a qualitative approach to the communication between parents and their children about the topic of marriage. Three research questions are asked regarding what messages were transmitted between parents and their (now adult) children about marriage, how accurate the children perceive these messages to be, and whether these messages have displaced or reinforced existing marital myths for these individuals. An inductive analysis revealed that several themes and sub-themes of messages were transmitted from parent to child about what marriage is, generally these messages were perceived to be accurate by the children, and largely, these messages appear to displace marital myth. Implications and limitations of this study, as well as future avenues for research on this topic, are discussed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. Influence of Parent-Child Communication.....	3
II. Marriage: Myths, Idealizations, and Expectations.....	6
Marital myths.....	6
Marital idealization and expectations.....	8
III. Relationship between Parent-Child Communication and Marital Myths.....	12
IV. Method.....	15
Participants.....	16
Procedure.....	17
Data Analysis.....	18
V. Results.....	20
RQ1: How do parents depict marriage and marital relationships in conversations with their children?.....	20
Working at marriage.....	20
Marriage preparation messages.....	25
Marriage is a lifelong commitment.....	27
Traditional values of marriage.....	28
Did not discuss marriage.....	30
RQ2: What is the perceived accuracy of the marital messages received from parents?.....	30
Parents got it right.....	31
Parents got it partially right, partially wrong.....	32
Parents got it wrong.....	33
RQ3: How does parental communication about marriage reinforce or contradict common marital myths?.....	34
Work on your marriage with your partner.....	35
Pre-marital advice: Know your partner.....	41
Supplemental RQ3 finding: Sources of marital advice.....	42
VI. Discussion.....	43
Parent-Child Communication about Marriage.....	43
Messages about Marriage.....	45
Messages about Marriage: Displacement of Myth.....	48
Limitations and Future Research.....	53
VII. Conclusion.....	56
References.....	58
Appendix.....	71

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the excellent guidance, support, and participation of many individuals. First I would like to thank the 36 participants who opened their lives to me during our interviews. I was a stranger to most of you but you shared your personal stories and memories with me without hesitation. I feel truly honored to have been so readily admitted into the small circle of people that you openly share your life details with. This study would be nothing if it weren't for you.

I would also like to thank all of my friends, family, and loved ones who supported me both emotionally and physically during this process. Two years is a long time to be interested enough in my work to continue asking “how’s it going?” and handle my answer with positivity and calm no matter what I said. Thank you for always inquiring and letting me talk about “my baby”—you are braver than you know. I would like to mention you all by name, but the list would stretch for many a page. I trust that you know who you are and that you recognize how much I love you and how important you are to me.

Finally, I would like to thank my committee and advisor. Erik Timmerman and Kathryn Dindia, your contribution of insight and commentary helped make this project come together in ways that brought it to a better and more polished place. Lindsay Timmerman, words cannot truly express how grateful I am to have had an advisor who is as organized, thoughtful, and kind as you. What could have been a bumpy mess of a project instead was a smooth and joyful ride. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Parent-Child Communication about Marriage and the Displacement of Marital Myths

Upon the wings of the media buzz surrounding a spotlight celebrity marriage that began and ended within 72 days, it would seem that the U.S. is in a bit of a “marriage crisis.” Divorce rates as of 2009 are hovering around 50% for the U.S. (NVSS, 2010); the number of individuals getting married for the first time in the U.S. has experienced a decline over the years since 1970, although over the past decade, it has been somewhat stable (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Regardless of the poor success rate of marriages, the desire to get married seems to have retained most of its popularity in the U.S. The area of marriage and divorce has attracted researchers for years with the hopes of understanding this complex phenomenon.

Studies have indicated that parent-child communication about important topics, such as marriage, helps to give the child a foundation of understanding that they can build upon as their lives progress. Parent-child communication is simply the body of messages that are sent and received between parents and their children in which various topics are covered. Topics such as premarital sex (Mollburn & Everett, 2010), alcohol use and abuse (Miller-Day & Kam, 2010), understanding emotions (Racine, Carpendale, & Turnbull, 2007), and forming socially normative behaviors and gender identity (Gelman, Taylor, Nguyen, Leaper, & Bigler, 2004) have been examined by a variety of scholars. What is important to note is that across all of the studies, parent-child communication does have an (often profound) impact on the development of the child. It is when parents do *not* communicate about certain events or topics that children exhibit some form of maladjustment.

One area that has been given little attention is parent-child communication about marriage, specifically with regard to how this communication helps to dispel marital myths. Marital myths are the unrealistic, fantasy-like ideals of marriage and romantic relationships

that exist in our society on an individual, as well as group, level. Belief in marital myths has been linked to the development of unrealistic expectations of marriage in an individual (Galician, 2004). It has been discovered that these unrealistic expectations of marriage can lead to unsatisfying marriages, which often end in divorce (Demo & Ganong, 1994). It is understood that marital myths are mostly perpetuated throughout society by mass media (Galician, 2004; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Additionally, studies have shown that some adolescents believe marital myths are not myths at all, but rather that they are truths of romantic relationships, love, and marriage (Larson, 1988).

Many studies have explored how mass media perpetuates marital myths; however, it is generally understood to only be one of many methods of transmission. It would be worthwhile to examine what children encounter within their own families; specifically, the communication between parents and their children about marriage, and the discussion that surrounds (un)realistic marital expectations. Scholarship in this area is lacking. Researchers have discovered numerous negative effects of divorce, on divorced individuals as well as children of divorced families (Cartwright & Wood, 1991; Haber, 1990; Sbarra, Smith, & Mehl, 2012); any discovery that could aid in the prevention of divorce would be beneficial. The goal of the present research is to determine whether parent-child communication occurs on the topic of marriage. If there is no parent-child communication about marriage, this research would be the impetus to get that conversation started. It is important for adolescents to develop accurate and reasonable expectations of marriage so they (hopefully) have a better chance of avoiding the negative effects of divorce later in their lives.

First, I will discuss the existing research on parent-child communication and its effectiveness in shaping the understanding a child has about various social situations, health activities, and identity characteristics. Second, I will review research that has shed light on

what marital myths exist, how they are passed among members of society, and the impact these myths may have on their believers. Finally, I will review research that intersects these two separate bodies of work, and present three research questions for a qualitative investigation to examine parent-child communication about marriage.

Influence of Parent-Child Communication

Research on parent-child communication focuses on the body of messages sent and received between parents and their children, including numerous different topics such as sex before marriage (Mollburn & Everett, 2010), underage drinking (Miller-Day & Kam, 2010), gaining emotional cognition (Racine et al., 2007), and creating socially acceptable gender-normative habits and behaviors (Gelman et al., 2004). These studies have shown that parent-child communication about such topics helps to give the child a foundation of understanding that they can build upon. The body of research about parent-child communication illustrates the importance of this foundation in a child's development into a well-adjusted, functional individual in modern society.

Racine et al. (2007) argued that the development of a child's understanding of beliefs and emotions is intertwined with learning how to talk about the psychological world. They discovered that "what is required in social development is for the child to understand talk about social situations" (p. 491). This study placed young children and their parents in a situation where the parents had to make up a story to go along with a picture book that contained no words. After the parent relayed the story to the child, the child was asked to answer a series of questions regarding emotional facial displays. A different group of children and parents experienced the same study, but in reverse; asking children the questions regarding the understanding of emotional facial displays prior to the parent making up a story to go with the book. The children who were told a story to explain the emotions

understood the facial emotion displays better than those who did not get the parental explanation/story beforehand. It was clear that the focused parent-child communication about emotions aided the child in attaining a better understanding of the facial emotion displays.

In a separate study investigating focused (explicit) communication about alcohol use, it was found that unambiguous communication between parents and children affected a child's understanding of the topic, as well as their actions related to the topic (Miller-Day & Kam, 2010). Results demonstrated that *only* when the parent communicated with the child in a direct and clear way about alcohol use, and about their expectations regarding the child's behavior toward alcohol use, was the child's use of alcohol impacted. Indirect and ambiguous messages about alcohol use and expectations had virtually zero impact on reducing the amount of alcohol the child reported consuming. This finding may indicate that parent-child communication has an impact on the child, but only when direct and explicit messages about the topic, and about expectations, are transmitted from parent to child.

In a similar vein, Mollburn and Everett (2010) discovered that when parents communicated with their children about premarital sex, explicit messages were impactful. Parental communication that illustrated the parent's understanding of how the child was (or should be) behaving sexually, generated a self-fulfilling prophecy-type situation. Specifically, Mollburn and Everett found that parents more effectively achieved the goal of teaching their child to practice safe sex "if parents combined concrete information [about sex] with a clearly expressed expectation that the teen will stay safe from sexual risk" (p. 327). The clear expression of expectations, combined with explicit messages from parents, generally resulted in children acting more closely to the way their parents expressed. This, once again, points

to the overarching finding that parents have the ability to impact the child's actions in relation to topics that have an important influence on the child's life.

Another issue of importance in a child's life is gender identity. Gelman et al. (2004) suggest that ways of understanding gender identity through stereotypes may be transmitted from mothers to children. The indirect cues children hear from their mothers, in relation to gendered behavior, could be fuel for the child's construction of essentialist identity beliefs. In the study by Gelman et al., positive affirmations of gender stereotypes (e.g., a boy playing football) depicted in a picture book were neither considered problematic by mothers, nor required explanation for their children. Conversely, negative affirmations of stereotypes (e.g., a boy sewing) led to mothers expressing concern and debating the validity of the picture shown in the book. The study suggests that these patterns of communication may provide some insight into the perpetuation of gender stereotypes that we experience in society today. Here we see the potential of mother-child communication to affect a child's understanding of social gender norms during formative years of the child's life. This finding makes one consider how this communication impacts the gender norms that are being reenacted and thus spread through society today.

A more recent study of the effect of mother-child communication examined stories told from mothers to daughters about romantic relationships (Kellas, 2010). The findings revealed that the daughters vividly remembered the mother's stories of romantic relationships. Additionally, the daughter's current romantic relationship reflected her mother's stories. Kellas noted, "it may be that a daughter's relationship schemata, as related to her current romantic relationship, shapes the types of messages she recalls her mother giving to her, or that both constructs are influenced by some other variable" (p. 475). Despite the "chicken and egg" nature of the findings, they do highlight, at least modestly,

“the relationship between communication content and the development of relationship worldviews” (p. 474). The mother’s romantic relationship stories were related to how the daughters approached their own romantic relationships.

This review of research outlines the importance of parent-child communication in shaping not only the way a child understands the world, but also how the child sees themselves in the world. Parent-child communication gives the child a firmer grasp on the ways they can, and potentially should, act in the world. It becomes obvious that parents have a unique opportunity to convey important information to their children throughout their adolescent years. The communication that occurs between parents and their children has the ability to impact the child’s life in the short- and long-term. Most parents probably hope that their child’s future contains happiness, love, and eventually marriage. What if parents knew that their children were more likely to divorce because they believed in marital myths? And what if these children believed in marital myths because their parents never talked explicitly about marriage with them? In the following section, the existence and perpetuation of marital myths in U.S. society will be explored.

Marriage: Myths, Idealizations, and Expectations

Marital myths. Marital myths are the unrealistic, fantasy ideals of marriage and romantic relationships that exist in our society on an individual, as well as group, level. Myths are understood to be stories that determine a society’s perspective about the world, about a person’s role in the world, and about behaviors and approaches that have meaning or value beyond reality, despite the fact that the audience knows that the myths couldn’t occur in real life (Galician, 2004). In a study conducted by Larson (1988), college students were asked to take the Marriage Quiz. This quiz includes 20 true or false questions about marital beliefs that are focused around known marital myths. A few examples of these

myths include ideas about satisfaction increasing over the length of a marriage, being able to change one's spouse by pointing out their deficits, and spouses' ability to mind-read. (See Table 1 for a listing of Larson's marital myths.)

Larson (1988) found that students responded incorrectly to 47% of the questions on the Marriage Quiz. Additionally, romantics had a higher level of unrealistic expectations for marriage (answered more questions incorrectly), than students who had participated in a family/marriage course. The questions that were most often answered incorrectly by all students involved myths L3 ("in most marriages having a child improves marital satisfaction for both spouses"), L10 ("for most couples marital satisfaction gradually increases from the first year of marriage through the child-bearing years, the teen years, the empty nest period, and retirement"), L18 ("the more a spouse discloses positive and negative information to his/her partner, the greater the marital satisfaction of both partners"), and L20 ("maintaining romantic love is the key to marital happiness over the lifespan for most couples"). The marital myths included in Larson's study are not the only known myths related to marriage; additional myths are found in, and perpetuated through, mass media.

It has been discovered that higher use of certain mass media is related to unrealistic expectations about courtship. These unrealistic expectations have been associated with dissatisfaction in real-life relationships (Galician, 2004). According to Galician's research, there are 12 predominant marital myths that exist in mass media today. Examples of these myths include the ability for partners to read each other's minds, the belief that the man in a relationship should be taller and stronger and the woman shorter and more vulnerable, and the existence of love at first sight. (See Table 2 for a listing of all 12 mass media myths.) In order to conduct her research, Galician surveyed 381 women and men of two different age

cohorts (Generation Xers and Baby Boomers). Each participant completed a Romantic Love and Mass Media Questionnaire (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982), which included the Relationship Belief Inventory, the 10-item Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale of the 32-item Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), and several survey questions that Galician created in order to assess respondents' ideals and models, current relationships, media usage, and demographics. The findings revealed a relationship between the amount of mass media a participant used and the romantic ideals and expectations s/he held. Belief in the mass media marital myths resulted in unrealistic expectations about courtship, and these unrealistic expectations were associated with dissatisfaction in real-life relationships (Galician, 2004). Additionally, Galician determined that there are few healthy models of coupledness to be found in popular culture. This body of work argues that individuals may be making decisions about love and marriage based on myths that are commonly seen in our society in mass media, but that can't possibly be reenacted in real life.

Though the study by Larson (1988) is older, the importance of pointing out the existence of, and belief in, marital myths is crucial. Marital myths have been around for quite some time, and it is not uncommon or strange for individuals to believe in them. Believing in marital myths could have a serious impact on one's dating or marital relationship(s). This impact begins with the development of beliefs about marriage that are unrealistic and overly idealized.

Marital idealization and expectations. Segrin and Nabi (2002) complemented Galician's (2004) work by arguing television viewing that focuses on marriage and close relationships is associated with idealistic marriage expectations. Most of Segrin and Nabi's participants held the belief that they were going to marry soon, and that they were never

going to get divorced, despite the high number of divorces occurring in the U.S. This would seem to indicate that no matter the actual marriage environment of our society, people believe that their own relationship is unique compared to the rest of the population.

The idea that one will marry and never divorce is further supported in a study conducted by Jones and Nelson (1997), which found that children from intact (non-divorced) or non-intact (divorced) homes had similar expectations for getting married. The data upholds the argument that no matter the current divorce rate, or having experienced divorce in an individual's immediate family, marriage is a sought-after event in one's life. Perhaps this is the case because of the established belief that marriage is a relationship that will improve life for those involved (myth G10). It could be that the established belief of marital myths impacts an individual's actions enough to cloud their view of reality. As a society, we celebrate love (engagement parties, weddings/receptions, anniversary parties, baby showers, etc.) and tend to hide conflict in marriage. This creates an idealized picture of love and marriage, even without the involvement of mass media.

Demo and Ganong (1994) argue that “one of the most insidious factors undermining marital satisfaction and longevity is that individuals enter into marriage with unrealistic, idealistic, and romanticized notions about marriage” (p. 199). There is research that argues for the idealization of marriage and marital partners as a *positive* factor in these committed relationships. These studies have found that the idealization of marital partners isn't always bad, and doesn't always lead to divorce or unhappy marriages—on the contrary, it may lead to a happier marriage (Miller, Niehuis, & Huston, 2006; Murray et al., 2011). What is important to understand about this conflicting body of research is that if idealization does exist within a marriage (whether it is for the relationship as a whole or just for the marital partner) the idealization must be maintained over the length of the marriage in order to

produce lasting, positive results. If the idealization fails, due to the actions of the partner or a failure within the relationship as a whole, dissatisfaction or even divorce may still come. Miller et al. state it best when saying, “the lack of an association between illusions and marital stability suggests some limitations on the benefits of positive illusions, that is, illusions do not seem to protect couples against divorce” (p. 1593).

The expectation to marry in U.S. society is high, despite the high levels of divorce (Elliott & Simmons, 2011). A higher percentage of Americans will marry, compared to Europeans, Canadians, and Brits. Additionally, American divorcees have a higher rate of remarriage when compared to Europeans (Lee, 2010). In a 2010 interview with *American History* magazine, marriage historian Rebecca L. Davis noted that it is distinctly “American” to view marriage as a foundation of stable society. DePaulo and Morris (2005) argue that the idea of “singlism” in U.S. society is what encourages Americans to marry.

According to DePaulo and Morris (2005) singlism is an anti-singles sentiment that reflects a widely known/held ideology of marriage and family that is manifested in everyday thoughts, interactions, laws, and social policies that favor couples over singles. The ideology of marriage and family has been described as the “unquestioned belief that everyone wants to, and eventually will, get married because it is believed that married people lead more meaningful and more complete lives” (p. 58). As a result of this ideology, singles in America are subject to stereotyping and discrimination. However, this stigma against singles goes largely unrecognized in society; rather, it is seen as reasonable and expected (DePaulo & Morris). DePaulo and Morris further argue that social science seems to perpetuate the desire to be married, by showcasing studies that focus on the reports of people in happy marriages.

DePaulo and Morris point out that there is little said in scholarly research about happiness in the lives of singles, divorcees, or cohabiters.

Look around popular culture in the U.S. and you will see unrealistic portrayals of unstoppable love and perpetually blissful marriage, and you will also see a lack of strong, happy singles being portrayed. It really is no wonder that Americans seek to find their soul mate (myths L11 and G1) and marry in order to lead picture-perfect, happy lives filled with love and family. It would seem that the plight of the single American is perceived as one that is filled with loneliness and lack of fulfillment because they don't have a spouse and children. DePaulo and Morris reported that:

participants in our studies painted the lives of singles in mostly sad strokes, while they filled in the lives of couples with warm and fuzzy love. There is little evidence, though, of such stark differences in the actual lives of singles and couples. (2005, p. 79)

It is possible that the ideology of marriage and family persists in society because it offers up a simple yet satisfying picture of the way the world is. With the existence of this ideology comes the perpetuation of the anti-singles sentiment—if marriage is paramount, then being single must be bad. Therefore, no rational adult could possibly *want* to be unmarried in America. Communication could be the key to dismantling singlism and marital myths in the U.S. The following section will discuss the link between parent-child communication and the existence of marital myth.

Relationship between Parent-Child Communication and Marital Myths

Research about parent-child communication shows that parents have a unique opportunity to talk to their children and convey important information to them throughout their formative years (Gelman et al., 2004; Kellas, 2010; Miller-Day & Kam, 2010; Mollburn & Everett, 2010; Racine et al., 2007). The communication that occurs between parents and their children has the ability to impact the child's life immediately, as well as far into the future. Separately, research shows that marital myths do exist in our society, are perpetuated by mass media and other means, contribute to the development of idealistic expectations of marriage, and possibly perpetuate the assumption that everyone wants to, and will, eventually get married in the U.S. (Demo & Ganong, 1994; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Galician, 2004; Jones & Nelson, 1997; Larson, 1988; Miller et al., 2006; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). The focus of this section is to review the point at which parent-child communication and marital myths intersect.

Several studies uphold the idea that communication about family and marital matters help reduce the belief in marital myths. Larson (1988) pointed out that the students who participated in a family/marriage class responded to more answers correctly on the Marriage Quiz (i.e., they did not believe as many popular myths about marriage). Honeycutt (1991) also found that marital myth belief was negatively impacted when a family/marital communication class was introduced into the study. These two studies demonstrate how education and discussion about marriage and family can help individuals develop more realistic ideas and expectations of marriage in general; however, those studies don't involve the family of origin in the conversation about marriage. Jones and Nelson (1997) discussed the similarity between individuals from intact (non-divorced) and non-intact (divorced)

homes, and their marital expectations, and made a point to mention that they did not investigate the presence of appropriate parental role models of marriage in each family. It would seem logical to expect parents to become role models, and teachers of marriage for their children.

According to Greenberg and Nay (1982), a child's earliest impression of marriage comes from his/her parents, either directly or indirectly. It is possible that the impression formed from this relationship is closely tied to the individual's feelings and attitudes about marriage. So what about families that experience divorce—does it influence those children's ideas of marriage? Not necessarily. Greenberg and Nay argue that:

rather than signaling personal failure, the divorce experience may actually demonstrate the parents' skills in openly recognizing marital dysfunction as opposed to attempting to ignore or hide its existence. In the event that the child is exposed to maladaptive models, he may seek out alternative role models such as friends, other relatives, or the media. (p. 343)

This study by Greenberg and Nay (1982) illustrates that divorce doesn't necessarily mean an automatic bias against marriage by the children, if the parents properly communicate with their children about what is going on in the relationship. With proper communication, perhaps the child will have a clearer, more accurate understanding of what marriage is (or could be) like. Additionally, their study identified the drive children possess to locate other models of marital behavior in friends, family, or media. The findings seem to indicate that if parents don't do the talking, the child will find the conversation and model elsewhere. With divorce rates where they are today in the U.S., it seems that most marriages are fraught with high levels of conflict. This conflict needs some sort of explanation or

context in order for children to properly understand the reality of the complex marriage relationship.

Although conflict is present in all marriages, some parents may engage in parenting behaviors that buffer the child against the negative effects of marital conflict (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). Gottman et al. discovered that when parents were more aware of their children's emotions, despite high levels of marital conflict, children were buffered against negative effects on the child's academic achievement. Though there may be ways to shield children against the negative effects of marital conflict, Gottman et al. are not saying that there is a global fix, or buffer, for children who grow up in high-marital-conflict homes. Parental awareness of the child's emotions, and possibly the child's level of interaction with the marital conflict, could result in parenting actions that help create a mental buffer for the child. We see, once again, that parents have the ability to greatly affect the way their children think about a subject. As noted earlier, the study by Kellas (2010) examining recollection of a mother's romantic relationship stories illustrates the power that parent-communication can have over a child's thoughts and actions. It is important to point out that "these findings[...] highlight, at least in a modest way, the relationship between communication content and the development of relationship worldviews" (p. 474). Of course, Kellas's study was limited to communication between mothers and their daughters about past romantic relationships; it did not extend into the broader scope of parent-child communication.

Scholars must now design studies to encompass communication from either parent, and to daughters or sons, instead of being limited to just mother-daughter interactions. Existing studies demonstrate that parents are an important model for the child's development of marital ideals and expectations (Gottman et al., 1997; Greenberg & Nay,

1982; Jones & Nelson, 1997; Kellas, 2010; Larson, 1988); however, there is no research examining what is being communicated between the parents and children about marriage. A focus on what messages are being sent and received would be vital to discovering what, if any, messages children are retaining and using when they formulate their own ideals and expectations of marriage. Also, it is important to determine whether there is a connection between the messages children receive from their parents, and the degree to which these children believe in marital myths. If the belief in marital myths is a contributing factor to the decline in marital happiness, and this decline in happiness leads to divorce, it is important to find a way to dispel these marital myths.

RQ1: How do parents depict marriage and marital relationships in conversations with their children?

RQ2: How do newlyweds describe the accuracy of their parents' communication about marriage?

RQ3: How does parental communication about marriage reinforce or contradict common marital myths?

Method

This study qualitatively examines the communication that has occurred in the past between parents and their children on the topic of marriage. A total of 36 interviews were conducted in order to gather responses from newlyweds about conversations they had with their parents about marriage before they were ever wed. As noted above, little communication research has been conducted with a focus on parent-child communication and marriage. As such, qualitative inquiry was considered the appropriate methodological approach, because it is widely used in exploratory work (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Data was analyzed using inductive analysis.

Participants

Participants were recruited through available personal and social networks, such as Facebook, as well as through network sampling. Qualified participants were males ($n = 16$) and females ($n = 20$) who had recently gotten married for the first time, and had been married for at least one year, but no more than four years. Respondents ranged in age from 22-34 years old ($M = 28.08$, $SD = 3.29$) and were married for an average of 2.14 years ($SD = 0.97$). It is posited that having been recently married will bring thoughts of the “reality of marriage” versus the “myths about marriage” to the forefront of participants’ minds.

Interviewees were predominantly Caucasian ($n = 33$, 92%), but the sample also included individuals identifying as African American ($n = 1$), Mexican ($n = 1$), and biracial (African American and Caucasian, $n = 1$). All respondents were heterosexual. With respect to their parental marital status, interviewees largely reported that their parents were still married ($n = 25$, 69%), although some had divorced parents ($n = 6$; 17%), widowed parents ($n = 4$; 11%), or never-married parents ($n = 1$; 3%). The average age of participants if/when their parents divorced was 13.1 years ($SD = 8.4$, range 1-28 years). Participants were also asked to share how many years their parents had been married, if the marriage was still currently intact; the average was 32.76 years ($SD = 6.82$, range 20-42 years). All respondents were given a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality; descriptive information about participants can be found in Table 3.

It was not necessary to interview both spouses in order to be eligible for the study; one individual from a couple would suffice because the shared belief in marital myths between spouses was not being explored in this study. Additionally, parents of the participants were not interviewed; responses only came from each individual participant’s recollection and were not compared with their parents’ recollections on the topic.

Procedure

Participants were asked to make the initial contact to set up a time for an interview. Generally, respondents either sent an email or a Facebook message, and from there the interview was scheduled. Interviews took place over the phone ($n = 35$), or face-to-face ($n = 1$), depending on the location and availability of the participant. The average length of a single interview was 32 minutes, but ranged from 19 minutes to 54 minutes. Participants were asked a series of 20 interview questions, with additional probing questions that were asked when it was necessary to elicit further explanation from the participant. (Please see Appendix for the complete interview protocol.)

To begin the interview, participants were asked to talk about their relationship with their parents. This information was gathered in order to help the participant feel comfortable talking freely with the interviewer, but also to aid in giving a sense of the flow of information from parent to child in each participant's case. The questions that followed were focused on the discussion of marriage that each participant had with their parents. If a participant was not raised by their biological parents, but discussed the topic of marriage other with legal guardians, these were the relationships and conversations that were focused on for the interview. However, there were no participants who were raised solely by legal guardians, so all interviews focused on conversations between the participant and either their biological parents, and/or their residential step-parent.

The initial interview questions regarding conversations about marriage were meant to encourage the participants to reveal, in great detail, what messages they received about marriage as they were growing up. The interview questions were largely open-ended in order to encourage participants provide as much of the "story" surrounding each of the conversations about marriage that they could recall. Details, such as who they were talking

with (one, or both parents), pertinent memories about the conversation(s), actual discourse used, and so forth were gathered from each participant. Additionally, participants were asked to determine how the information from these conversations measured up, in terms of accuracy, with what they have experienced in their own marriages. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed using the talk-to-type software Dragon Speaking Naturally, and analyzed.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using inductive analysis to obtain themes from the transcribed interviews. Qualitative analysis has been widely used in exploratory work, and consists of the creation of emergent themes from data that is obtained and systematically analyzed in social research (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Units of analysis were inductively obtained from the collected data, which then led to the major and repeated themes from the open-ended responses (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Initial analysis was conducted independently by a single coder. Typed transcriptions were read over in their entirety once in order to get a general sense of the data. Then the transcriptions were read through a second time and the messages that participants reported receiving from their parents about marriage were written out on note cards. Each note card contained a single message and the participant number (for reference purposes). It was possible for a single participant number to appear on multiple “marital message” note cards. This process was executed again with participant responses to the question, “if you had to give advice to someone about what makes marriage successful, what would you say?” in order to create data cards for analysis of RQ3. After reading through all of the transcriptions again, each piece of advice was written down on a note card and marked with the participant number. Multiple “marriage advice” cards could be attributed to a single participant, if they offered more than one piece of advice.

Once all of the note cards had been created, the researcher went through the process of grouping similar messages into themes. Themes emerged as a result of seeing the repeated use of similar language and phrases, and also if the message contained a similar idea to other messages despite the use of different language. Once these preliminary themes were determined, the researcher went back to the transcriptions and through the participant response in order to verify the context and meaning of the reported message, to ensure that the researcher hadn't misinterpreted the message on the card. Themes were expanded and condensed several times through this process of transcript-checking. Once a set of themes and sub-themes seemed "settled" the researcher wrote memos for each of the research questions that expanded on the details of each theme, the sub-themes, and the criteria that was developed for a message to fall into any given theme or sub-theme. Additionally, ideas for connections between themes were written out in each memo.

As coding progressed and themes were established, an additional coder was asked to review the data in order to confirm or dispute the emergent themes. This additional coder was told how the initial coder had gone about developing the themes and sub-themes (although not what they were) and then was asked to take the note cards and group messages into themes in a similar fashion. Next, both coders met to discuss the emergent themes and their sub-themes, as well as the intricacies of each theme and sub-theme. Discussion ensued until all themes and sub-themes were agreed upon. The only differences that were found to exist during the discussion between coders was the name of each theme and sub-theme, however each theme/sub-theme were addressing the same idea. As a result, names were agreed upon that both coders felt appropriately addressed each emergent theme of messages. Additionally, during discussion it was determined that two note cards containing marital advice should be discarded, as they did not address the research question directly. All other

messages recorded on the cards were able to be sorted into a theme or sub-theme that the coders agreed upon.

Results

RQ1: How do parents depict marriage and marital relationships in conversations with their children?

When analyzing the data regarding RQ1, 95 messages were coded and grouped into five emergent themes and, in some cases, additional sub-themes. Themes that emerged were *working at marriage*, *marriage preparation messages*, *marriage is a lifelong commitment*, *traditional values of marriage*, and *did not discuss marriage*. Two of these themes (*working at marriage* and *marriage preparation messages*) were further broken into sub-themes. The major theme of *working at marriage* included the sub-themes of: *communicate openly with your spouse*, *how to treat your spouse*, *how to handle conflict with your spouse*, *how to spend time with your spouse*, and *non-specific work*. Sub-themes that emerged within the major theme of *marriage preparation messages* were *marry the “right” person*, and *marry at the “right” time*. (See Table 4 for a full listing of themes and sub-themes, along with message and participant *ns* within each.) These themes will now be explained and further illustrated by examples from participant responses. In the sections that follow, *ns* will refer to the total number of messages in a given category; percentages will refer to how many respondents are represented in a given category.

Working at marriage. The theme of *working at marriage* ($n = 46$; 67%) consisted of messages that address the idea that marriage requires work. Sub-themes that emerged within the theme of *working at marriage* showcased not only that parents told their children to expect to work throughout the duration of their marital relationship, but also the particular ways in which they should perform this “marital work” in order to make their marriages last.

Messages fell into the sub-theme of *communicate openly with your spouse* ($n = 17$; 42%) most

often. These messages consisted of advising the children to communicate with openness and honesty, with caring and compassion, and also to listen to their spouse in order to maintain a positive relationship. An example that showcases this sub-theme can be seen in the following response from John:

I think one thing that I've heard from both my parents before I got married was acknowledging both the positive and negative things that are going on. So if your spouse is doing something that you enjoy, you want to reinforce that behavior... so say that you enjoy it, drop them a hint, leave them a note.

Separately, Erica recalls that her parents stressed the importance of listening within a marriage as a key component for maintaining open communication: "Actively listen and make sure that the other person feels validated. Validating that the other person has been heard and kind of sharing your point of view." And finally, Andrew recalls that his parents illustrated the importance of communicating openly with your spouse about what you are thinking and feeling: "Having an open relationship and talking about things, not hiding things, stating when you're upset and why."

Within these excerpts the attention that parents pay to the communication that goes on within a marriage is evident. Parents explained that openness and the ability and desire to share things with your spouse are important to the success of marriage. There is certainly a plethora of ways to communicate with a loved one; the emphasis within this sub-theme was that this communication should be open. This way of communicating may not always be something that individuals inherently do, or do consistently. These conversations may be the tools that parents were using to teach their children how to "do" successful marital communication.

Communicating openly with your spouse isn't the end of the line when it comes to having a successful marriage; parents also talked to their children about *how to treat your spouse* ($n = 9$; 25%). Messages coming from Mom and Dad that fell into this sub-theme typically revolved around possessing and illustrating a level of understanding of, and patience with, your spouse as well as understanding that your spouse is now a top priority in life. Children were asked to recognize that in order to successfully work at the relationship, they would need to be willing to negotiate their own perspective with some flexibility and begin to consider their spouse before themselves. Laurie recalls a conversation with her father, “[During the father-daughter dance] he was telling me about being patient and understanding.” Ben recounts a similar conversation, “he [dad] would explain to me... about growing out of that post-college, selfish mentality and putting your wife first and thinking about her, and making her a priority.” Parents pointing out the importance of possessing patience would seem to indicate that there are times that spouses are not “on the same page” in their marriage. Again, this sub-theme speaks to the major theme of working at marriage; it seemed that an underlying message of the entire *working at marriage* theme is that conflict does and will happen in marriage.

Some of the messages that parents communicated to their children about marriage specifically addressed *how to handle conflict with your spouse* ($n = 9$; 19%). Suggestions of how to deal properly with conflict ranged from compromising and not holding grudges, to addressing issues as they came up (instead of ignoring them), or not bothering with conflicts that seemed “small” or “petty” because it would hurt the relationship more than help. Andrew recalls hearing his parents talk about some of the reasons their neighbor's marriage failed:

When I was a kid, parents of a kid I knew got divorced, so I remember them [mom and dad] talking to me about it. I remember my dad said something to the effect that “they worried too much about little things. They were probably fighting too much over stupid stuff that didn’t matter.”

It also seems that parents were trying to showcase that managing conflict is not simple and may require a bit of decision making, as John illustrates in his recollection of marital messages he received from his parents: “The age-old advice of ‘don’t sweat the small stuff,’ but they would also tell me that you can’t ignore the small stuff because eventually it will build up and turn into major issues.”

This sub-theme of messages seems at odds with itself at times. It was never made clear what conflicts are considered to be “too small” and therefore unworthy of being addressed. It was also never made clear how many little problems it took to make a major issue. However, despite the lack of specificity about conflict size or amount, it was made clear that conflict does occur and if you want your marriage to last, you cannot sweep it under the proverbial rug. This sub-theme is comprised of messages that urge participants to monitor conflict, and to handle it by compromising and moving on.

Another sub-theme that emerged in this category was *how to spend time with your spouse* ($n = 6$; 14%). This theme stressed that married couples need to make time for each other—this time will not just magically appear; it needs to be mindfully created. Once you’ve made time to spend with your spouse, you need to make this time special in order to maintain a close relationship with your spouse and avoid the monotony that can creep into a marriage if one is not careful. This sub-theme is illustrated well by two excerpts:

Making sure that you have time for your individual interests, but also finding things that we can do together was one of the things that really sticks out in my mind as something we talked about a lot. Just finding those things that we could do together versus doing it just because the other person wanted to. (Laura)

Once I was actually engaged, then my dad started talking about, specifically, making sure we were investing in each other, making sure we spent plenty of time with one another, making sure we focus on the other person as much as we possibly can.

(Thomas)

From this sub-theme it would appear that parents are trying to educate their children about the danger of growing apart from your spouse and letting the “magic” die in the relationship. Parents did not always offer specific ideas of exactly how or what to do to make things remain special in the relationship, but the general idea was clear—if you make time, and you make it special, then you will make the marriage last.

The sub-theme of *non-specific work* ($n = 5$; 11%) contained messages that referred to marital work in a general and ambiguous sense. The following excerpt from Donald illustrates this sub-theme well:

Love doesn't just happen... it's like a car. If you just let it sit there, the wheels will get all cruddy because they don't move around and stuff. That's a weird analogy about marriage... but just the talk about working at it [was remembered].

Though the messages in this sub-theme did not address any specific kind of marital work that the participant would need to engage in, they still shed light on the idea that marriage is not always easy and it is something that requires effort in order to be properly maintained.

The work of marriage is not done alone—each spouse is expected to do their share. The next theme addresses messages that parents sent to their children about the partner one selects to help do this marital work.

Marriage preparation messages. In many cases, participants recalled receiving messages from their parents that didn't actually address marriage per se, but rather were about what should be done, or how one should behave while trying to find a marital partner. When participants discussed these messages, they spoke of them as if they actually were messages about marriage. It would seem that there is a slight disconnect between talking about marriage, and talking about the romantic relationship that may lead to marriage. These messages were determined to be *marriage preparation messages* ($n = 23$; 36%) and were divided into two sub-themes: *marry the "right" person* and *marry at the "right" time*.

Parental communication about *marrying the "right" person* ($n = 15$; 28%) revolved around the idea that their children should marry someone who possessed certain character traits. These desirable traits varied, but included seeking spouses who were intelligent, helpful, respectful, and/or caring. Tim had a difficult time recalling specific messages about marriage, but he clearly recalled his parents discussing spousal traits: "They did say the person should be kind and caring and thoughtful about your emotions and well-being and things like that." Other participants, like Mary, remembered their parents talking about them marrying someone who would be around (and willing) to help with chores, "...kind of saying 'make sure you pick someone that will be around and be able to help you [with kids and housework]' and that kind of thing."

It would seem that in order to know you are going to marry the "right" person, one may need to take their time during the dating process in order to ensure that they can be

happy with a certain person in marriage. The timing of marriage and making sure one would be happy in marriage seemed to be closely tied. Messages in the sub-theme of *marry at the "right" time* ($n = 8$; 19%) discussed the speed at which one should move toward marriage. Mostly, parents were encouraging their children to take their time, date a lot of different people, and not get married young, as illustrated by this conversation Bev recalls: "He [dad] would tell me that 'you have to kiss a lot of toads before you find the prince.' Those little anecdotes were things that he would say when my heart was broken." A second example of parents encouraging their child to take their time when deciding to get married can be seen in Randy's response:

My dad always had this joking catchphrase with me which was, "Randy, break my record." That basically meant that he was with my mom for just over six years before they got married... there is no point in rushing into something that you might regret later.

However, the opposite sentiment was also occasionally expressed, when parents suggested that their child not be so picky in their search for a partner, and encouraged them to settle down with their (past) boyfriend or girlfriend, as illustrated by Jodi:

My dad would joke that he should take an ad out in the newspaper to find me a husband. I thought it was funny—sort of. But then it started to really hurt my feelings eventually. They were wondering why I would be so picky.

Whether parents were suggesting that their child should approach marriage slowly and cautiously, or move more quickly towards it, the message still remains that the timing of marriage is an important element in the success of a marriage. It also seemed the element of marital timing was usually linked with ensuring that the participant would be happy in their

marriage (because they took their time) and therefore they would marry the “right” partner. The next category of parental messages focuses on the idea that marriage is for life. It is logical to think that the themes of *working at marriage* and *marriage preparation messages* support the notion that marriage is something that one enters into with the idea that it will be forever.

Marriage is a lifelong commitment. Participants heard messages about marriage from their parents that communicated to them *marriage is a lifelong commitment* ($n = 12$; 28%). This theme contained messages that showcased the assumed longevity of marriage. Marriage was depicted by parents as something not to be entered into lightly, and certainly not something that one gets out of whenever they feel like it. This major theme is exemplified by Jenny’s response:

She [mom] just said, “well, I said this is for better or for worse and I guess this is the ‘for worse’ part, and I guess this is just what my life is going to look like forever because I made this commitment.” So I guess that overwhelming, “it’s forever,” it’s a commitment, for better for worse, it’s your vows, and that’s what it [marriage] is all about.

In this example, Jenny was explaining a time that her mother had divulged information about her own marriage. In this instance the mother had been telling her daughter of times that were difficult in the relationship, but also illustrating her unwillingness to walk away from the relationship—because it was marriage. As a result, the participant was given a very clear understanding that once married, no matter the difficulties that come, you stay married.

Another example of a very specific conversation about the lifelong commitment of marriage came from Bev:

I can think of one example of talking with my mom about marriage when I was getting ready to get married. We were actually driving in the car, going somewhere to do something for the wedding... She started asking me if I was really sure, if this was really what I wanted to do, and if I really wanted to get married because it was such a big commitment and this needs to be a one-time thing; you do it, and you do it right. And she put the—I don't want to say fear of divorce in me—but she definitely made me feel like this is something you do not enter into lightly. This isn't something you go into thinking, "hey, I can just get a divorce if I feel like this isn't working out very well."

A final example of this theme also illustrates that the messages didn't need to be a specific, one-time event, but could be much more general and repetitious in nature, as this excerpt from Aubrie exemplifies: "They have always instilled values that marriage is a full-on commitment. Not to be taken lightly; you need to take it seriously. Be fully-committed to that person." Participants reportedly came away with the understanding that marriage is for life, and though divorce may be seen as more socially acceptable today than in past decades (Cherlin, 2004), it would seem that parents try to impress upon their children that one should not enter into marriage with the idea that divorce is acceptable if times are tough. Instead of divorce, parents told their child that they need to work at their marriage in order to make it last for a lifetime. The indication that divorce is not exactly an acceptable option to end a marriage may also support the idea that some parents upheld rather traditional values of marriage. This leads us to the next theme that emerged from the data.

Traditional values of marriage. The fourth theme that emerged from the data was one that communicated *traditional values of marriage* ($n = 9$; 19%) to the participants. For

instance, some parents indicated that husbands and wives should play specific roles within their marriages. These marital roles were typically gender specific, as we see in these excerpts:

[My mom] was pretty much of this whole old-school, 1950s mindset where the guy would work and come home to a home-cooked meal and a clean house and his clothes organized and folded up neatly. And that's kind of what she wanted me to do. She would say that that's the best way for marriage to work—if you just dedicate your life completely to your husband, and your kids, and your home. (Anne)

Almost everything was when my mom and dad were telling me to do something. It can be little things like cleaning the house, or little things like doing lawn care, or other things like finishing school or going to school, or what to look for when looking for a job. There would always be a “your wife is going to ask to you do this,” or “you’re going to want to know how to do this when you’re married,” or something like that. (James)

Within this theme it appears that parents were trying to prepare their children for the potential roles and responsibilities that they would have to take on within their marriages. The roles and responsibilities were rather traditional and “old-school” as Anne indicates, however it may be that parents were simply trying to educate their children about the *other* work that will need to be done in addition to the relationship-centered work. Some of these tasks fall to specific people within the marital relationship and as such, you’ll play your role by cooking, cleaning, doing house or lawn care, and holding down a job to pay the bills.

Additionally, this theme included messages focused on upholding certain traditional values in one’s marriage. Typically these values revolved around religious beliefs and seemed

to stress that in order for marriage to be truly successful, God needed to be involved in the relationship, as illustrated by Kelly, "...talking about the relationship being not just you and your husband, but a three-person relationship; it's you, your spouse, and God." It was of particular note that God and religion were specifically mentioned to participants as something that was going to be, or should be, part of marriage.

Did not discuss marriage. The final major theme that existed within the data about messages received from parents about marriage was that of "no messages." Over one-third of participants initially stated that they did not recall receiving any messages specifically about marriage from their parents ($n = 13$). However, with some further discussion, some of those participants did eventually recall a message or two that pertained to marriage ($n = 6$). Some messages also fell into the themes that didn't actually describe/explain marriage, but rather were about what to do in preparation for marriage ($n = 2$). Ultimately, five participants (14%) could not recall any discussion of marriage with their parents.

RQ2: What is the perceived accuracy of the marital messages received from parents?

Several responses and combinations of responses emerged during data analysis for RQ2. Participants were asked to reflect upon the messages they received from their parents about marriage and determine how accurate they felt those messages were before they were married, and then determine how accurate they feel the messages are now that they are married. Participants indicated that they believed their parents had gotten it right, that they had gotten it partially right and partially wrong (i.e., parents were right about some things, wrong about others), or that they had gotten it wrong. (See Table 5.) The perception of accuracy changed over time for several participants; some indicated that they felt the messages were inaccurate before they were married, but now believe them to be accurate,

whereas other participants discussed moving from a perception of complete accuracy to mixed accuracy. None of the participants indicated that they moved from fully accurate to fully inaccurate.

Parents got it right. Nearly two-thirds of participants stated they believed what they were told about marriage by their parents was accurate ($n = 23$; 64%). Despite believing the messages to be accurate, 16 individuals talked about arriving at a higher level of understanding about the accuracy of the marital messages once they had experienced marriage for themselves, as shown in the following responses:

I guess you just understand things differently when you can relate it to your own experience. And now, thinking back on those conversations, I understand it differently because I have more—I just have more experience, you know? So as parents, you can say as much as you want, but until they [the children] experience it, they may not understand it fully. (Erica)

Obviously it was the right kind of thing [marital advice]. It just takes a level of maturity in yourself to actually realize that they're actually telling you the truth. To a certain extent I started to realize they were accurate, but you don't really go "Ah-ha! Yes, that makes sense!" until you actually find the person you're going to marry. (Anne)

Excerpts from this category illustrate that participants were listening, remembering, and believing what their parents had told them of marriage. However, as the years passed and the participants acquired more romantic relationship experience, they recognized just how accurate the messages had been.

Several participants indicated that their perception of the marital message accuracy changed over time and moved from inaccurate to accurate ($n = 7$). Participants admitted that prior to being married they did not have a realistic sense of what marriage would be like. As a result of this, participants initially felt like their parents were somehow getting it wrong when they talked about marriage. Growing up and experiencing romantic relationships and/or marriage led these participants to later realize the wisdom and accuracy of their previous conversations with their parents, as James exemplifies:

As I grew up and started to be in different relationships, and started to watch and observe other relationships outside of my parents', I began to realize that there was actually something to what they were saying. Until getting married there are always some things that I was like, "well yeah that's just them, that's not us, we're too in love to let that stuff actually happen to us." But now that I've been married for two years, I realize that "well, maybe this just a regular part of marriage."

Resoundingly, participants felt like their parents knew what they were talking about when it came to marriage. This perception of accuracy exists now, as participants reflected back on the messages they received from their parents and compared it to the experience of their own marriages. However, there were participants who felt that their parents didn't quite get it right all of the time.

Parents got it partially right, partially wrong. Participants responded that they perceived the messages they received from their parents about marriage as a mix between accurate and inaccurate ($n = 10$; 28%). Certain aspects of what Mom and Dad said had proven to be accurate through experience, and yet other aspects had proven to be inaccurate compared to their current marriage. Typically, this was a result of the participant feeling as

though their own individual needs and wants in marriage were different from their parents'. Jodi and Anne illustrate this well:

I kind of figured that's not my personality; that's probably not how it would work, just because she had raised me to be more independent and have opinions about things. But some things I feel were accurate. Just in that maybe... it's good for me hear that marriage is about compromise, and that is probably a good lesson for me to learn because sometimes you have to do that. (Jodi)

I have always completely agreed with everything that my father said. I looked at what mom said and it's like, "okay, this is all she knows, she's always been a housewife, she's always been a stay-at-home-mom." So I look at it like, "I understand what you're saying and where you're coming from, but I feel like not having experienced anything besides the housewife or staying at home, that you don't really know what it's like as far as having a job, or not just being home all the time." (Anne)

Participants also indicated that they believed the messages they received prior to being married were highly accurate, but now (after being married) they feel that the messages are more mixed in their accuracy ($n = 4$). This change in accuracy, again, typically had something to do with the fact that participants' own experience of marriage didn't always completely match up with what they were told marriage would be like.

Parents got it wrong. Other participants said that they always believed the conversations they had with their parents about marriage were an inaccurate reflection of marriage ($n = 3$; 8%). Generally, this feeling of inaccuracy was due to the fact that the participant's parents had experienced one or more failed marriages, and/or had an intact yet

unhealthy marital relationship. Molly illustrates that this perception of marital message inaccuracy is not necessarily a bad thing:

It wasn't until I was older, looking back on it, when I realized that they were pretty screwed up and didn't have the best marriage in the world. I think looking at that helps me now, and when we have children it will help me figure out what *not* to do. You know, you see what didn't work firsthand, and I think that will definitely come in handy down the road.

Other participants simply felt that they were different enough from their parents to want/need different things in marriage, as expressed by Laurie, "I thought that it [marriage] would've been better, or it wouldn't have been like that at all, it would be different for me. I think a lot of people think that way."

Even though these participants didn't believe the messages about marriage they were getting from their parents were accurate, they still recalled the messages. These participants simply didn't assign the messages as high a level of importance when compared to participants who found the messages about marriage to be accurate.

RQ3: How does parental communication about marriage reinforce or contradict common marital myths?

In order to try and get participants to divulge if they believed in marital myths, they were asked to give advice about what they think makes a marriage successful. A total of 98 separate pieces of advice were offered. These 98 messages were grouped and re-grouped into themes according to the existence of recurring words/phrases, as well as similarities within general message ideas, and two separate themes emerged. The two themes were *work*

on your marriage with your partner, and *premarital advice: know your partner*. The theme of *work on your marriage with your partner* was comprised of the following sub-themes: *communicate openly with your partner*, *treat your partner with love and respect*, *manage conflict with your partner*, *non-specific marital work*, and *spend time with your partner*. (See Table 6 for a full listing of themes and sub-themes, along with message and participant *ns* for each.) These themes and sub-themes will now be explained and illustrated through participant excerpts from their respective interviews.

Work on your marriage with your partner. The theme of *work on your marriage with your partner* ($n = 87$; 97%) consisted of five sub-themes. The advice for how to have a successful marriage most often fell into the sub-theme of *communicate openly with your partner* ($n = 32$; 64%). This sub-theme contained advice that recommended individuals should not lie, cheat, keep secrets, or be untrustworthy when communicating with a spouse. Communication should occur daily and should provide details about one's thoughts and emotions. Laura and Jodi discuss these ideas in the following excerpts:

It all boils down to the trust and the communication. Just that you have to make sure that you're both on the same page, that there's not something that you're keeping from the other person. That you are open, and once you're open with them, then we can have trust. (Laura)

I would say that you have to be willing to talk about everything, even if it's something that makes you uncomfortable because that person really has to be your better half. So if that means that if you have a health issue and you have to talk about constipation or something weird... you just have to do it [talk]. (Jodi)

This theme may be connected to the myth of mind-reading (G3, L8). Participants suggest talking openly and often with one's partner—behaviors that could seemingly prevent individuals from believing in the existence of spousal mind-reading abilities. If you are always talking to your spouse about what is on your mind, there is no need for mind-reading. However, there was some indication of sub-text that this level of communication creates an environment that could encourage the expectation for mind-reading. If you and your spouse communicate about “everything” with one another, in situations when you aren't communicating everything, your spouse could have the background information necessary to read your mind because of the history of conversations that have already taken place. None of the participants directly stated that mind-reading was necessary for a successful marriage, but having a history of disclosing so much, so regularly, with such detail may feed the flames of mind-reading between marital partners during times when communication is at a lower level of openness.

This theme may also indicate that people understand poor communication can be a source of marital strife, which puts an end to myth L12. But this theme could also point to belief in the myth that “the more a spouse discloses positive and negative information to his/her partner, the greater the marital satisfaction of both partners” (L18). It is important to know where to draw the line when communicating *everything* to one's partner. Research has shown that the honesty of disclosure, not the amount or depth, is linked to marital satisfaction (Dickson-Markman, 1984). Additionally, constantly disclosing all of one's thoughts and feelings to one's spouse could be exhausting and unmanageable. Participants may be alluding to what Dickson-Markman found—as a relationship becomes more committed and established, day-to-day disclosures are important but the profound, soul-bearing kind of disclosure on a daily basis is not necessary to make a marriage happy.

The second most common advice sub-theme under *work on your marriage with your partner* was *treat your partner with love and respect*. The theme of *treat your partner with love and respect* ($n = 22$; 50%) discusses how one needs to try to understand one's partner, have patience with them, and love them for their flaws instead of trying to change them. Additionally, the idea of putting one's spouse first and recognizing the priority of the relationship is also important, as James points out:

Marriage is a battle, not so much between you and your spouse, but between your marriage and everything else. It seems like every time I turn around something is competing for my marriage. The attention, there is something competing for it. And for some reason it becomes easy to put your marriage on the back burner, when really, if your marriage isn't right it's going to be the only thing that throws it off—that throws everything else off.

This theme also stresses that respect and understanding should be extended to the spouse. Ryan discusses this idea: "Respect. You have to respect people. Human beings are human beings, everybody's who they are for a reason, some people aren't perfect; you have to love people for their flaws. You have to respect people regardless of anything." Treating your spouse with patience was also a large component of this theme, as Laurie illustrates: "I think that my mom and dad's advice really does stick. You really do have to practice a lot of patience [with your spouse]."

For the most part this theme indicates the displacement of the myth that deals with trying to change a partner (L15), as well as myth L11 that states "no matter what I do, my spouse will love me because they are my spouse." The myth that your spouse can do anything and those actions won't affect the love felt in the relationship seems a slippery

slope and this theme runs counter to this myth. Participants indicated that loving a partner for their shortcomings was necessary, and trying to see and respect their partner's perspective is important; however, the advice did not reflect that respecting and loving your partner should occur under every possible circumstance—specifically, infidelity. Though you should respect your partner, you should also receive respect in return and participants did state that infidelity is a blatant display of disrespect that does not need to be accepted.

The third sub-theme under *work at your marriage with your spouse* was *manage conflict with your partner* ($n = 12$; 28%). This sub-theme was full of recommendations that individuals must have the ability to compromise with and admit fault to their spouse, as well as recognize that conflict will occur and that it will need to be dealt with rather than ignored. Some advice from Andrew suggests working through small issues before they result in a big fight: “I think it is important to deal with issues, before they become huge issues. Deal with them at a lower level before it turns into a big argument or one thing that leads into another sort of thing.” Additionally, this excerpt from Beau nicely illustrates advice that was offered about the importance of dealing with conflicts as they arise in order to avoid experiencing more stress from the conflict later:

Don't go to bed mad. I don't know how many times I have tried to go to bed mad and it doesn't work out. It doesn't pay because all you do is put more stress on you, which in turns puts more stress on the relationship.

This theme puts to rest the marital myths that portray marriage as a magically conflict-free relationship (G1, G8, L11, and L17). Participants seemed well aware that disagreements and conflict happen—but you need to deal with that conflict instead of ignoring it and hoping it will simply go away. It may be that this theme of advice was

offered because individuals want to ensure that other married couples are aware of this reality of marriage. This would help future couples feel prepared and therefore have better chances at maintaining a successful marital relationship.

The advice sub-theme of *non-specific marital work* ($n = 11$; 22%) revolves around the idea that in order to have a successful marriage, one must expect to work, in a general sense, throughout the marriage. You cannot simply fall in love with someone and then expect that love to exist indefinitely without engaging in the work of relational maintenance. These messages were broadly discussing work, and not giving specific ideas on how to do the work of marriage, as illustrated by Donald: “Love is cultivated, it’s worked on, and you can’t just expect to wake up and feel that awesome love every morning. Work on things. If you don’t work at it, where’s the fun in that anyway?” In another example of this sub-theme, John showcases the idea that there will be challenges in marriage, but only general information is provided about how to work through challenges:

There are some things that you’re really going to need to work through. There are going to be challenges and difficulties that you’ve never fathomed or thought could get that big. You’ll face them, sometimes sooner than you’d expect. And to get through them it will really show what your marriage is made of.

This theme flies in the face of several marital myths that would seem to represent marriage as a pre-destined, unbreakable, easy, and effortless relationship (G1, G8, G10, L11, and L17). To the contrary, this advice indicates that marriage will not always be easy; tough times and conflict will come and you will need to “work through” those tough times with your partner. Love and marriage take time, energy, and devoted effort according to these

participants. This theme of advice seems to say that if you tend to your garden of love accordingly, you will reap the benefits of a lasting, successful relationship.

Participants advised that married couples expect to handle conflict and work at their marriages but one should also plan to *spend time with your partner* ($n = 10$; 22%) as a way of doing the work of marriage. This theme stresses the importance of creating time with your spouse and doing things together that you both enjoy—sometimes work can feel like play. You need to have time to enjoy your partner; you need to make a point to do special things for/with each other. Two respondents advise that you need to make the marital relationship a priority over all others and in order to show that it is a priority, you should make time for it in your busy schedule:

I would say that people have to spend lots of time having fun together... Not thinking, “I got to know that person, I married them, and now we spend most of our time going about our separate activities...” We [Susan and her spouse] find activities that we enjoy together so we’re having fun together. (Susan)

If you can’t be physical with this person for a month, would you still want to be around that person? If you can answer that, if you can say yes to that because you have fun doing things together, I think that’s great. (Randy)

The myth of sex being a core component to successful marriages (G4, L4) seems to “get the axe” in this theme as participants talk about doing activities (outside of the bedroom) together and enjoying their partners by spending time with them. On the other hand, the myth of romance being the key to marital bliss is potentially being upheld here (L20); if the romance dies so, too, will the marriage. Even though participants did not specifically say the word “romance” in their advice, they did point out that one should be

sure to spend quality time with their spouse and find something to do together to have fun and/or special, which is potentially closely akin to romance.

Premarital advice: Know your partner. The theme of *premarital advice: know your partner* ($n = 11$; 28%) was comprised of advice given in order to have a successful marriage; however the messages in this category refer to the time and activities that occur prior to getting married. This theme encompasses the idea that one shouldn't rush into marriage because if you do rush, you won't properly know your future spouse. Individuals should live together before they marry, and they should get to know their potential spouse as well as they can to establish that they share similar views and values. All of this should be done in order to ensure that individuals are marrying the "right" person for them. This theme mirrors many of the sentiments expressed by parents, discussed earlier within the theme of *marriage preparation messages*. These messages aren't necessarily addressing what should be done within a marriage to make it successful, but rather what should be done prior to entering into marriage to make it prosperous, as illustrated by Lizzy, "...try living with them [future spouse] or spending a lot of time with them before getting married to make sure that is really what you want to do."

One of the major points raised as to why it is important to get to know your future spouse so well, is because not knowing if you share points of view on important topics will undoubtedly cause problems down the road in your marriage. James provides a good example of this:

Everyone has a core set of values that they have decided is right and is wrong, and you have to find a mate that shares those core values or there is going to be instant conflict [in your marriage] from the get-go.

One marital myth that this may partially reinforce is the myth of cohabitation improving marital quality. Cohabitation is a complicated topic within relationship research and recent studies have shed new light on the practice. Myth L14 states: “Couples who cohabitated before marriage usually report greater marital satisfaction than couples who did not.” This could be an example of a myth that is becoming outdated and inaccurate. Studies have shown that couples who cohabit are sometimes more likely to divorce, but typically that is the case only when one individual in the relationship does not begin to cohabit with the same intentions as their partner (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). In order to avoid relational demise, the cohabiting couple needs to discuss their commitment and what cohabitation means for their relationship (Stanley et al.). Simply believing that cohabitation is best for a relationship may not be accurate. However, participants went on to say that communication within the relationship is also very important to having a successful marriage.

Supplemental RQ3 finding: Sources of marital advice. Overall, it appears that more myths were refuted rather than reinforced when looking at the marital advice offered by participants. But did respondents seem to disbelieve these myths because of the messages about marriage they received from their parents, or because of something else? Participants were asked to explain where they thought their marital advice originated from (several origins could be listed by a single participant). Parental advice was the second most cited origin ($n = 20$; 56%), with personal experience being the only source cited more often ($n = 26$; 72%). Additional sources included: observing the parental marriage as an example of what (or what not) to do ($n = 10$; 28%), observing non-parental relationships ($n = 8$; 22%), getting non-parental advice ($n = 5$; 14%), premarital counseling classes ($n = 3$; 8%), common sense ($n = 1$), and church ($n = 1$).

Based on this representation, it appears that not only what the parents told their children, but also the example that the parents set within their own marriage had an impact on the child's perception of and understanding of what it takes to have a successful marriage. When considering that all participants had been married for at least one year at the time of the interview, it is interesting that so many cited their parents as the source of their advice rather than their own relationships. Even with their own marital experience unfolding in front of them daily, they still went back to what they had been told by their parents about marriage. Perhaps this accounts for why the emergent themes for RQ3 are resoundingly similar to what the participants recalled hearing from their parents about what marriage is like. This finding also seems to be in support of what Greenberg and Nay (1982) found to be true in their study—children learn by observing their parents.

Discussion

It was discovered that parents are, in fact, talking to their children about marriage but also about the premarital activities that can often lead to marriage. Additionally, it was found that participants were listening to—and for the most part believing—what their parents told them about marriage. Largely, respondents offered marital advice that would refute marital myths for others. It seems important for parents to plan on having marriage talks with their children, but the timing (and level of detail) of these conversations may be crucial. These ideas will be further discussed in the following pages. Limitations of this study and future research directions will also be detailed.

Parent-Child Communication about Marriage

The representation of tight-knit parent-child relationships was abundant in the sample, as the vast majority reported a good/close relationship with their parents ($n = 30$;

83%). The remaining participants said they had a mix of a good/close and bad/not close ($n = 4$; 11%) or a bad/not close ($n = 2$; 6%) relationship with their parents. With a sample that by-and-large feels they are close and open with their parents, it would seem more likely that the conversation of marriage would come up—as chances are higher that the parents and children covered numerous and more intimate conversation topics over time.

In this sample, children of divorced families reported that there was parent-child communication about marriage. In some cases, divorce acted as a catalyst to create conversation about marriage; several participants disclosed that once a divorce was initiated, that was when their parents began talking about marriage with them. Additionally, divorce did not always make the participants in this sample disregard their parent's discussion of marriage. The three participants who found their parents' messages about marriage to be inaccurate noted that it was due to observing the *repeated* failure of their parent's relationships. This inability to maintain successful relationships made participants doubt the validity of the discussions, or advice, about marriage they were receiving from their parents. Parents may want to take this into consideration when embarking on a conversation with their child about marriage and romantic relationships. Parents who have experienced several divorces may want to consider framing their conversations about marriage in a way that uses their past relationships as learning experiences for their children, rather than simply providing a list of “dos and don'ts” without any background explanation or information.

Though talking about marriage may not obviously appear like a fruitful activity when a child is young, it seems that it is still productive. Only two participants (5.5%) stated that if they had gotten more information about marriage when they were younger, they weren't positive that they would have actually listened to their parents. Generally the participants in

this study did not forget information that they deemed to be important, and they often easily recalled messages that were repeated throughout their lives. Timing conversations about marriage to occur at a time when the child is involved in a romantic relationship may be the key to allowing children to process the information, decide whether or not to follow the advice/information, and then apply it to their own romantic relationships in a meaningful way.

Messages about Marriage

When parents talked to their children about marriage, they spoke of marriage as being a lifelong commitment that required work in order to be successfully maintained. In addition, the actions that take place prior to marriage are also important, like selecting the right mate and timing marriage properly. It is important to think about the underlying premise of marriage being “forever” in order to get a greater sense of the other sub-themes discovered in the data analysis for RQ1. Ten participants (28%) recalled messages that were placed into the theme of *lifelong commitment*. That may not seem like an overwhelming amount of participants who received that specific type of message about marriage, however, regardless of whether or not participants reported messages that explicitly addressed *lifelong commitment*, their parents talked about marriage in terms of working through it, dealing with conflict, spending time with their spouse, and talking things through in order to make their marriages last. What parents didn’t talk about was getting out of their marriage at the first sign of trouble.

If marriage wasn’t thought to be for life, perhaps getting married at the “right” time, selecting the “right” person to marry, and working through the ups and downs of a marital relationship wouldn’t have been offered by parents as information of what marriage is like.

If parents viewed marriage as more transient and fleeting, what would the purpose be of enlightening their children about the challenges they will inevitably encounter in their marriage? And further, why would parents stress that these ups and downs will require work to successfully navigate through them? It would seem that because marriage is believed to be a lifelong commitment (from the parental point of view) that messages about timing, spousal selection, and marital work are sent to children. There may also be a connection between the believed “forever-ness” of marriage and the similar themes discovered in the data for RQ3. It would seem that the lifelong nature of marriage is not simply believed by the parent generation, but also by the child generation. As a result, the marital advice provided by participants indicated the importance of truly knowing your partner before you marry and being prepared to constantly work at, and invest in, the marital relationship.

The interconnectedness of the messages about marriage and the importance of marital preparation may account for the confusion that participants expressed when they talked about receiving messages about marriage from Mom and Dad. Occasionally messages that participants cited as being about marriage weren't about marriage at all, but rather were about dating, mate selection, and the preparation for marriage. This result seems to indicate that it may not be possible to draw a distinct line between parent-child communication about dating and communication about marriage because one sets the foundation for the other.

One-third of participants stated that one can only truly come to understand marriage by experiencing it ($n = 12$). Based on this, it may be that when parents talk to their children about marriage, it will not be seen as helpful in the eyes of every single child. However, the participants are slightly at odds with their own ideas on whether or not talking about marriage is productive. Participants said that they *did* believe what they were hearing from

their parents about marriage and they were listening. As they grew up, these participants simply came to understand what their parents had told them about marriage on a deeper level. Based on the dichotomous nature of this finding, it may be wise to be “safe rather than sorry”—parents should talk to their children about marriage and try to provide as many details as they can in order to paint a realistic and accurate picture of the marital relationship. Parents should also be prepared to understand that their children may not listen, or may not believe what is being told to them until they are older and have experienced their own long-term romantic relationships. Whether or not parents actually talk to their children about marriage, the children are still learning about marriage simply by watching their parents interact.

Participants often reported that observing their parents’ marriage contributed to their understanding of marriage ($n = 13$; 36%), and some even admitted that the observations were more impactful than actual messages received ($n = 9$; 25%). It was made clear by several participants that trying to think of what their parents had said to them about marriage, versus what they learned on their own by observing their parents’ marriage, was a challenge. Even when specifically asked if they learned about marriage via communication with Mom and Dad or instead by watching their parents “do” marriage, many expressed that they just did not know. It may be impossible to draw a definitive line between parent-child communication about marriage and observation of the parental marriage in order to understand how children are prepared for this relationship. However, the importance of discussing marriage should not be downplayed. Just because children can observe a parental marriage (intact or otherwise) does not mean that they are getting all of the necessary information to understand the reality of what is involved in a successful marriage. Learning

about marriage by observation alone may leave out important details that the child will need or will want to know later.

Several participants reported that they felt it would have been helpful to have gotten more details about marriage from Mom and Dad ($n = 20$; 56%) prior to getting married. The details they wished to hear about most often involved the work required to make marriage a success ($n = 6$), precisely how to work through the ups and downs of marriage ($n = 4$), as well as details about the specific challenges that their parents encountered in their own marriages ($n = 4$), and how to manage finances as a married couple ($n = 3$). Some participants explained that they did not receive very many (or any) messages about marriage from their parents, and that they wished they had. They felt that perhaps they had missed out on something by not discussing marriage with their parents, and that hearing more of these details may have helped them have a smoother first few years of marriage. These participants didn't blame their parents for not talking about these specific details; however, there was a general sense that being better informed would have made their spousal relationships a little easier at one point or another in their (still) young marriage.

Messages about Marriage: Displacement of Myths

The majority of participants ($n = 31$; 86%) indicated that they listened to their parents when they talked about marriage—as was proven when they could recall conversations that took place years ago. This indicates that if parents do the talking about marriage, and if they communicate about how things can go right and/or wrong in a marital relationship, the child will most likely listen. Further, participants often gave marital advice that echoed what they had heard from their parents about marriage. This may lend support to past research that shows parents can have a profound impact on the lives of their children

if they discuss certain topics explicitly with them (Kellas, 2010; Miller-Day & Kam, 2010; Mollburn & Everett, 2010).

Marital myths were more often displaced than reinforced through parent-child communication about marriage. Through the course of the interviews, the similarities between the information that the participants had heard from their parents about marriage and the advice that they themselves would offer to others was striking. Over 40% of the participants ($n = 15$) directly echoed their parents' messages in their advice. Clearly their conversations with Mom and Dad had resonated with them. It is promising to hear participants acknowledge that they were prepared, in at least some small way, for marriage because of the discussions they had with their parents about it. It was also interesting to hear participants talk about marriage, not as something you just check off your to-do list and then forget about, but rather as something that will require time and attention every day if you wish to make it last. However, participants occasionally noted that at some point in their lives they did believe in some marital myths—largely, that marriage would somehow just be “easy.”

Several of the participants talked about possessing the belief, when they were younger, that marriage wasn't really that much work and that the marital relationship just sort of “magically happened” all by itself after you found the right person. Though participants often admitted that their parents had informed them that marriage did require work, they didn't *fully* believe this information until later in life. After maturing a bit and experiencing several serious relationships, participants talked about how they realized that their parents were telling the truth about the work aspect of marriage (and romantic relationships in general). There is not one specific marital myth about marriage being easy,

but it is inherently implied in many (G1, G3, G4, G9, G10, L8, L11, L12, L17). Such a strong belief in the mythical idea that “marriage is effortless,” despite parental conversation about marriage, could be an indicator that the reality of marriage needs to be communicated more explicitly, and more often, to young people.

Many participants who were told that “marriage is work” discussed their own marriages in ways that illustrated they felt better prepared for the reality of the relationship. Of the 36 total participants, 24 of them recalled messages that were categorized under the sub-themes of *working at marriage*. Of that group of 24, 15 (62.5%) participants spoke of how they felt adequately prepared for marriage. When these 15 participants were asked if they felt anything critical was left out of their parents’ conversations about marriage, they claimed that they didn’t think so, and that they felt adequately prepared for marriage. The nine participants out of the 24 who claimed they did want to hear more about marriage from their parents, most commonly reported hearing messages from Mom and Dad that fell into the sub-theme of *non-specific work* ($n = 4$). It would seem that parents who discussed the work aspect of marriage in greater depth and detail were giving their children the ability to navigate marriage more smoothly than those who missed out on those conversations. These conversations about marriage ultimately provided a foundation of truth that helped them displace marital myth more easily in their futures.

In order to compare messages that participants received about marriage from their parents with the advice that the participants gave for how to have a successful marriage, all of the message note cards recalled from conversations with parents were laid out. Then the note cards that contained marital advice from participants were laid out, and participant numbers were written down for each theme when advice mirrored the parental message

about marriage. Of the 36 participants, 15 (42%) offered advice about how to have a successful marriage that was similar to messages they reported hearing from their parents. These 15 participants offered advice that fell into the advice themes of *communicate openly with your partner* ($n = 7$), *spend time with your partner* ($n = 6$), *treat your partner with love and respect* ($n = 4$), *non-specific marital work* ($n = 2$), *manage conflict with your partner* ($n = 1$), *know your partner* ($n = 1$). The same participant could have echoed multiple messages from their parents, which is why the number of participants that represented similar messages across the advice themes sums to more than 15. The advice offered by these participants reflected what they heard from their parents and displaced marital myths rather than reinforced them, as discussed above.

It should be noted that past research examining marital myths focused on college students, and compared one group of students who took a family/marriage class to another group who did not. Those who took the class believed in marital myths less often than those who did not take the class (Larson, 1988). The current study asked newlywed adults what they believed makes marriage successful—a meaningful difference from unwed college students. It may be that this group of individuals was so good at displacing marital myth because of their own experiences in marriage, not because they had parents who talked to them about marriage. However, it should be pointed out that some myths did turn up as being partially (and sometimes fully) supported, which may indicate that some marital myths are so deeply entrenched in our society that nothing can displace them—no matter who talks to you, or what you experience for yourself.

In Larson's (1988) study the myths that were most commonly believed were: "in most marriages having a child improves marital satisfaction for both spouses" (L3), "for

most couples marital satisfaction gradually increases from the first year of marriage through the child-bearing years, the teen years, the empty nest period, and retirement” (L10), “the more a spouse discloses positive and negative information to his/her partner, the greater the marital satisfaction of both partners” (L8), and “maintaining romantic love is the key to marital happiness over the lifespan for most couples”(L20). Myths L3 and L10 weren’t addressed by any of the participants of this study. Participants neither recalled their parents talking to them about these mythical aspects of marriage, nor did they offer advice that would perpetuate these myths. It may be that these myths have been fully debunked since 1988. Or, on the other hand, they could be just as firmly entrenched as ever and therefore not require any conversation because they are simply held up as simple truths about marriage.

As for myths L8 and L20, there were some indications that these myths still linger in our society. Participants frequently offered their own advice, as well as recalled hearing from Mom and Dad, that spouses should be prepared to “share it all” with one another, and to spend quality time with one another. It isn’t perfectly clear exactly what participants meant when they were giving advice to continuously share and communicate openly with one’s spouse. It could be that participants’ main emphasis was on being honest and therefore creating trust within the relationship. On the other hand, it could be that the participants believe the more information they disclose to their partner, the happier the marriage will be. Is it clear that 64% of the participants felt that open communication in a marriage is crucial to its success.

Nearly one-quarter (22%) of participants felt that spending time with their spouse was another key to the success of the relationship. The way participants talked about

spending time typically revolved around planning time to spend with your spouse: when you spend time together, make sure you something special and/or have something fun to do.

This advice could be filled with a hint of romance, thus perpetuating myth L20. However, participants never actually said the word “romance” during their interviews. The eight participants who spoke of the importance of spending time with one’s spouse simply stressed that it is something that needs to happen, and it’s probably a good idea if this time spent together isn’t filled with idle boredom, but rather an activity of some kind. Perhaps that activity would involve a candlelit dinner for some couples, but it was not a requirement stated by participants.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations, and some may be rather important to note in light of the findings. The interviews were all conducted to gather self-reported data about conversations that occurred between (now adult) children and their parents. These recollections were only from the adult child’s perspective, and not verified by the parents of these children in any way. Due to this limitation, some of the memories could be inaccurate, or certain conversations could have been forgotten entirely and therefore never mentioned. This has the potential to provide an incomplete or inaccurate picture of the messages that children receive from their parents about marriage. In light of this, it must also be considered that the conversations the participants did recall having with their parents about marriage were the ones that they deemed as noteworthy, important in some way, or had been often repeated. These memorable conversations stuck with them and became important touchstones of marital information for their future marriage. Despite the limitation of not verifying conversations about marriage between parents and their children,

this study is at least gathering the recollections of the “important” conversations from the child’s point of view.

Another limitation of this study may be the strong focus on parent-child communication during the interview. This focus may have created an environment in which participants were unable to mentally “get away from” conversations with their parents about marriage. As a result it may have been difficult for participants to think about other influencing factors (e.g., friends, media, other family members) that impacted their understanding of marriage. Once participants started talking about their own marital advice and the origin of that advice, they may have offered up that the advice originated from their parents (over their own marital experience) because of the previous interview questions that focused on marriage-related conversations with their parents. However, it could also be possible that participants simply realized a message similarity for the first time and that is why they attributed the origin of the advice to their parents so often. Acknowledging the messages that the participant had received from their parents about marriage, and then offering their own advice about marriage may have been the first time that the individual saw the connection in their ideas about marriage with the ideas given to them from their parents.

A final limitation that deserves attention is that participants of this study had to be married in order to take part in an interview. This has the potential to directly interfere with the current belief in marital myths. All interview participants are currently living the reality of marriage and the myths of marriage may be displaced simply by “doing” marriage day in and day out for at least a year. Unmarried individuals may have different beliefs in marital myths because they would have yet to learn firsthand what marriage is like—this lack of experience may make believing in marital myth easier. Getting married may provide the

circumstance in which participants change their belief in myths; they may stop thinking marriage is like the myth and begin to understand it instead as the reality that they are living.

This was an exploratory study on the topic of parent-child communication and what children come to understand about marriage because of this communication. In order to understand this area of family communication more fully, future researchers should interview parents to find out what they recall telling their children about marriage. Do parental recollections match up with what the children of this study reported? To take it a step further, future work could also interview parents and children in a single study to see if what was communicated from parents to children is recalled similarly within the family. Additionally, future research should use communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002) as a lens to analyze what parents decide to disclose about their own marital relationships and why they disclose some things and not others to their children.

When participants were asked if there were details about marriage that they wished they had heard about, or heard more about from their parents, a few topics were raised and they were generally of a highly personal and specific nature. For instance, participants wanted to know about the specific conflicts that their parents had in their marriage, and the details of how these conflicts were worked out. Why would parents deny their children information about marriage that they desire to know? First, it may be that children aren't asking direct questions to get the detailed responses they desire. Second, it could be that parents are not comfortable discussing the personal and private details of their spousal relationship with their kids. It may be a matter of information privacy management for the parents. This aspect of parent-child communication about marriage needs to be explored further in future studies. As a result of this study certain foundational elements have been

discovered regarding what parents communicate to their children about marriage. Future research could begin to explore these conversations from a quantitative perspective, and use these findings as a starting point when developing new measures for surveys. In order to expand this line of research, larger samples and mixed method approaches would be warranted.

Future studies should also take a more direct approach to addressing marital myths and whether or not participants believe them. Perhaps directly asking participants if they feel certain marital myths are true or not would help sort belief from displacement of myth with more definitive clarity. Including a more diverse pool of participants may also improve the generalizability of results. It may also be fruitful to investigate the development of new marital myths and the disappearance of old ones. Times are changing. We have moved away from the days when cohabitation was practically unheard of (let alone endorsed), to current times when most young Americans accept cohabitation within dating relationships (Axinn & Thornton, 2000) and expect to cohabit prior to marriage (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2007). Due to some of these changes that have occurred, certain myths may have disappeared completely, while new ones may have been generated in their place. Scholars may want to take a closer and more contemporary look at what myths exist today in order to decide if parent-child communication can displace marital myths that have infiltrated our society.

Conclusion

These findings are important for parents (and future parents) to note. Children don't necessarily need their Mom and Dad to showcase a marital relationship completely free from ups and downs, but rather, parents should try to illustrate the reality of marriage

through their words and actions. Conflict arises. Disputes occur. Some days are good. Some months are bad. Instead of always fighting behind closed doors and never showing the children the reality of marriage, parents should consider discussing their marital relationship more openly with their children in order to provide them with a greater understanding of how one actually does make marriage work. This study has created a call for parents to talk to their children about marriage more, and in much greater detail and specificity. These conversations are helping young adults prepare for marriage appropriately and informing them how they should handle their marital relationships as they emerge and grow. Reflecting back, the participants of this study readily admit that they would have wanted more of this marital discussion and guidance from their parents. It seems wrong to deny these marriage-hopefuls the information they need in order to have a realistic understanding of marriage and therefore a better chance at having a happy and successful marital relationship.

These conversations about marriage may not be easy—especially if you need to recount a failed marriage (or two, or three). The talks with your children will most likely require a great deal of planning and forethought, and perhaps even some negotiation with your spouse on how much information you are willing to divulge to your child about your own marital relationship ups and downs. This study indicates that these conversations are worth the effort and they help to displace the marital myths that abound in our society and popular culture.

References

- Axinn, W. G., & Thornton, A. (2000). The transformation in the meaning of marriage. In L. J. Waite (Ed.), *The ties that bind: Perspectives on marriage and cohabitation* (pp. 147-65). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Cartwright, R. D., & Wood, E. (1991). Adjustment disorders of sleep: The sleep effects of a major stressful event and its resolution. *Psychiatry Research, 39*(3), 199-209.
DOI:10.1016/0165-1781(91)90088-7
- Cherlin, A. J. (2004). The deinstitutionalization of American marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 66*, 848-861.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology, 13*, 3-21.
- Demo, D. H., & Ganong, L. H. (1994). *Families and change: Coping with stressful events*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DePaulo, B. M., & Morris, W. L. (2005). Singles in society and in science. *Psychological Inquiry, 16*(2), 57-83.
- Dickson-Markman, F. (1984). How important is self disclosure in marriage? *Communication Research Reports 1*, 7-14.
- Eidelson, R. J., & Epstein, N. (1982). Cognition and relationship maladjustment: Development of a measure of dysfunctional relationship beliefs. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 50*, 715-720. DOI: 10.1037/0022-006X.50.5.715

- Elliott, D. B., & Simmons, T. (2011). Marital events of Americans: 2009. American Community Survey Report. U.S. Census Bureau
- Galician, M. (2004). *Sex, love, and romance in the mass media: Analysis and criticism of unrealistic portrayals and their influence*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Gelman, S. A., Taylor, M. G., Nguyen, S. P., Leaper, C., & Bigler, R. S. (2004). Mother-child conversations about gender: Understanding the acquisition of essentialist beliefs. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 69*, 1-142. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5834.2004.06901001.x
- Gottman, J. M., Katz, L. F., & Hooven, C. (1997). *Meta-emotion: How families communicate emotionally*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Greenberg, E. F., & Nay, R. W. (1982). The intergenerational transmission of marital instability reconsidered. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 44*, 335-347. DOI: 10.2307/351543
- Haber, J. (1990). A family systems model for divorce and the loss of self. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing, 4*, 228-234.
- Honeycutt, J. M. (1991). The endorsement of myths about marriage as a function of gender, age, religious denomination and educational level. *Communication Reports, 8*, 101-111.
- Jones, G. D., & Nelson, E. S. (1997). Expectations of marriage among college students from intact and non-intact homes. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 26*, 171–189. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J087v26n01_09

- Kellas, J. K. (2010). Transmitting relational worldviews: The relationship between mother-daughter memorable messages and adult daughters' romantic relational schemata. *Communication Quarterly*, 58, 458-479. DOI: 10.1080/01463373.2010.525700
- Larson, J. H. (1988). The marriage quiz: College students' beliefs in selected myths about marriage. *Family Relations*, 37, 3-11. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/584422>
- Lee, L. (2010, August). Interview: Rebecca L. Davis, marriage historian: How did Americans come to view marital bliss as synonymous with a stable democracy? *American History*, 12-13.
- Manning, W. D., Longmore, M. A., & Giordano, P. C. (2007). The changing institution of marriage: Adolescents expectations to cohabit and to marry. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, 559-575.
- Miller, P. J. E., Niehuis, S., & Huston, T. L. (2006). Positive illusions in marital relationships: A 13-year longitudinal study. *Personal Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32, 1579-1594. DOI: 10.1177/0146167206292691
- Miller-Day, M., & Kam, J. A. (2010). More than just openness: Developing and validating a measure of targeted parent-child communication about alcohol. *Health Communication*, 25, 293-302. DOI: 10.1080/10410231003698952
- Mollburn, S., & Everett, B. (2010). Correlates and consequences of parent-teen incongruence in reports of teens' sexual experience. *Journal of Sex Research*, 47, 314-329. DOI: 10.1080/00224490902954315

- Murray, S. L., Griffin, D. W., Derrick, J. L., Harris, B., Aloni, M., & Leder, S. (2011). Tempting fate or inviting happiness? Unrealistic idealization prevents the decline of marital satisfaction. *Psychological Science*, 22, 619-626. DOI: 10.1177/0956797611403155
- National Vital Statistics Service, (2010). Births, marriages, divorces and deaths: Provisional data for 2009. *National Vital Statistics Report*, 58(25). Retrieved from: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr58/nvsr58_25.htm
- Petronio, S. (2002). *Boundaries of privacy: Dialectics of disclosure*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Racine, T. P., Carpendale, J. I. M., & Turnbull, W. (2007). Parent-child talk and children's understanding of beliefs and emotions. *Cognition and Emotion*, 21, 480-494. DOI: 10.1080/02699930600717599
- Sbarra, D. A., Smith, H. L., & Mehl, M. R. (2012). When leaving your ex, love yourself: Observational ratings of self-compassion predict the course of emotional recovery following marital separation. *Psychological Science*, 23, 261-269. DOI:10.1177/0956797611429466
- Segrin, C., & Nabi, R. L. (2002). Does television viewing cultivate unrealistic expectations about marriage? *Journal of Communication*, 52, 247-263. DOI: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2002.tb02543.x
- Spanier, G. B. (1976). Measuring dyadic adjustment: New scales for assessing the quality of marriage and similar dyads. *Journal Of Marriage & The Family*, 38, 15-28. DOI: 10.2307/350547

Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding vs. deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*, 55, 499-509.

U.S. Census Bureau. 2009. *American Community Survey*. Internet release date, August, 2011.

Retrieved from: www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acs-13.pdf

Table 1

Marital Myths, *Larson, 1988*

#	Myth
L1.	A husband's marital satisfaction is usually lower if his wife is employed full time than if she is a full-time homemaker.
L2.	Today most young, single, never-married people will not get married.
L3.	In most marriages having a child improves marital satisfaction for both spouses.*
L4.	The best single predictor of overall marital satisfaction is the quality of a couple's sex life.*
L5.	The divorce rate in America did not increase from 1960 to 1980.
L6.	A greater percentage of wives are not in the work force today than in 1970.
L7.	Marital satisfaction for a wife is usually lower if she is employed full time than if she is a full-time homemaker.
L8.	If my spouse loves me, he/she should instinctively know what I want and need to be happy.*
L9.	In a marriage in which the wife is employed full time, the husband usually assumes an equal share of the housekeeping.
L10.	For most couples marital satisfaction gradually increases from the first year of marriage through the child-bearing years, the teen years, the empty nest period, and retirement.*
L11.	No matter how I behave, my spouse should love me simply because he/she is my spouse.
L12.	One of the most frequent marital problems is not poor communication.
L13.	Husbands usually make more life style adjustments in marriage than wives.*

- L14. Couples who cohabitated before marriage usually report greater marital satisfaction than couples who did not.
- L15. I can change my spouse by pointing out his/her inadequacies, errors, etc. *
- L16. Couples who marry when one or both partners are under the age of 18 have less chance of eventually divorcing than those who marry when they are older.
- L17. Either my spouse loves me or does not love me; nothing I do will affect the way my spouse feels about me. *
- L18. The more a spouse discloses positive and negative information to his/her partner, the greater the marital satisfaction of both partners. *
- L19. I must feel better about my partner before I can change my behavior toward him/her.
- L20. Maintaining romantic love is the key to marital happiness over the lifespan for most couples. *

Note. Myths marked with * are the most commonly believed marital myths, according to Larson (1988).

Table 2

Mass Media Marital Myths, *Galician, 2004*

#	Myth
G1.	Your perfect partner is cosmically predestined, nobody can separate you.
G2.	There is such a thing as “love at first sight.”
G3.	Your true soul mate should know what you are thinking or feeling (without you having to say anything).
G4.	If your partner is truly meant for you, sex will be easy and wonderful.
G5.	To attract and keep a man, a woman should look like a model or a centerfold.
G6.	The man should not be shorter, weaker, younger, poorer, or less successful than the woman.
G7.	The love of a good and faithful true woman can change a man from a “beast” into a “prince.”
G8.	Bickering and fighting a lot mean that a man and a woman really love each other passionately.
G9.	All you really need is love, so it doesn’t matter if you and your lover have different values.
G10.	The right mate “completes you” – filling your needs and making your dreams come true.
G11.	In real life, actors and actresses are often very much like the romantic characters they portray.
G12.	Since mass media portrayals of romance aren’t “real” they don’t really affect you.

Table 3

Participant Information

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Participant #</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Yrs. married</u>	<u>Parental marital status</u>
Peggy	1	F	27	1	d
Kelly	2	F	23	1	m
Jenny	3	F	30	2	m
Ryan	4	M	32	2	d
Aubrie	5	F	32	2	m
Candice	6	F	30	1	m
Tim	7	M	32	3	m
Penny	8	F	28	3	m
Laurie	9	F	32	4	w
Brian	10	M	27	1	m
Beau	11	M	32	4	m
Lizzy	12	F	29	4	d
Jodi	13	F	30	1	m
Mary	14	F	29	1	m
Dan	15	M	34	2	w
Thomas	16	M	26	3	d
Susan	17	F	26	3	m
Lucy	18	F	23	2	m
Andrew	19	M	25	1	m
Laura	20	F	25	1	m
Alice	21	F	23	3	n
Bev	22	F	32	2	m

Table 3 (continued)

Participant Information

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Participant #</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Yrs. married</u>	<u>Parental marital status</u>
Rose	23	F	28	1	w
Kyle	24	M	27	1	d
Dave	25	M	29	1	m
Donald	26	M	28	1	m
Harry	27	M	28	2	d
Anne	28	F	22	2	m
James	29	M	23	2	m
Ben	30	M	30	1	m
Erica	31	F	29	1	m
Sally	32	F	23	2	m
Molly	33	F	28	1	w
Steven	34	M	34	4	m
John	35	M	28	2	m
Randy	36	M	27	1	m

Note: Parental marital status is abbreviated: married (m), divorced (d), widowed (w), and never-married (n).

Table 4

Parental Message Codes (RQ1)

<u>Theme</u>	<u># of messages</u>	<u># of participants</u>
Working at marriage	46	24
Communicate openly with your spouse	17	15
How to treat your spouse	9	9
How to handle conflict with your spouse	9	7
How to spend time with your spouse	6	5
Non-specific work	5	4
Marriage preparation messages	23	13
Marry the “right” person	15	10
Marry at the “right” time	8	7
Lifelong commitment	12	10
Traditional values of marriage	9	7
None	5	5
TOTAL	95	36

Note: Participants might have more than one message in a category, and the same participant could be represented in more than one category.

Table 5

Accuracy Codes (RQ2)

<u>Theme</u>	<u># of participants</u>
Parents got it right	23
Parents got it partially right, partially wrong	10
Parents got it wrong	3
TOTAL	36

Table 6

Advice Codes (RQ3)

<u>Theme</u>	<u># of messages</u>	<u># of participants</u>
Work on your marriage with your partner	87	35
Communicate openly with your partner	32	23
Treat your partner with love and respect	22	18
Manage conflict with your partner	12	10
Non-specific marital work	11	8
Spend time with your partner	10	8
Premarital advice: Know your partner	11	10
TOTAL	98	36

Note: Participants might have more than one message in a category, and the same participant could be represented in more than one category.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

Interview Participant #: _____

Date: _____

Instructions: I will be asking you a series of questions about times you have talked to one, or both, of your parents about marriage. All I would like is that you provide as much information as possible, and be as honest with me as possible. Sometimes, when we think information isn't relevant, it really is! So I encourage you to open up with me during this interview. Please remember that this survey is voluntary and you can stop participating at any time. Everything you share with me will be confidential. If you would like a copy of the findings from this research project upon its completion, please let me know.

1. Describe your relationship with your parents/legal guardians for me. (Clarify any vague descriptions and subjective adjectives “weird,” “great,” “OK”: how so, why do you say that, can you explain that further?)
 1. How open is your relationship with your parents/legal guardians?
 1. Why do you say that? (For example, describe the kinds of topics you feel comfortable discussing with them.)
2. Do you feel that you are equally close with both parents/legal guardians? Or do you feel closer with one or the other?
 2. Please describe this relationship difference, if there is one (do you talk to one about certain things, and not the other, etc.).
3. If your parents had to answer the question: “what makes marriage, in general, successful” what do you think they would say?
4. Do you agree with what they would say?
 4. Why/Why not?
5. Let's talk about specific conversations you had/messages you received from your parents about marriage **PRIOR** to you being married. Try to give me as many details of the conversations, topics, actual words used, pointed things you recall as you can. This can pertain to their ideas of marriage, their opinions about their own, or other marriages, or advice they had for you, or anything!

6. In what ways did these conversations about marriage change as you got older, if at all?
7. Describe for me, how do you think these conversations affected your path towards marriage? (for example, you were hesitant to get married, or you selected your partner based on certain criteria because of these conversations)
8. Describe for me how you think these conversations about marriage affect the way you function in your marriage now.
9. Now, I would like you to think about your own marriage/committed partnership and tell me how accurate you feel these conversations about marriage with your parents/legal guardians were. (How was it accurate/how was it inaccurate?)
 9. **Before** you were married/committed to your partner, how did you perceive the accuracy of these conversations with your parents/legal guardians?
10. Looking back on these conversations about marriage, now that you are married, do you feel that anything was left out? (for example, were there time you thought to yourself “Gosh, no one tells you about this part of marriage...”) What, if anything, was left out?
11. Would taking about these items you just described with your parents/legal guardians have changed your approach to, or way of thinking about, marriage?
 11. If yes, how so?
12. If you had to give advice to someone about what makes marriage successful, what would you say?
 12. Can you tell me where these ideas originated from? (For example, your own marital experience, talks with friends/family, media, books, etc.)
13. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me today that you didn't get a chance to mention?

Demographic Info:

Age: _____

Race: _____

Gender: _____

Sexual orientation: _____

Number of years married: _____

Parents are divorced: _____

Age of participant when divorce occurred: _____

Parents are married: _____