

THE RELEVANCE OF MARRIAGE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN EMERGING
ADULTS: THE DEVELOPMENT AND INFLUENCE OF MARITAL PERSPECTIVES
ACROSS THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

by

ASHLEY BROOKE BARR

(Under the Direction of Ronald L. Simons)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses conflicting representations of the import of marriage in the lives of African Americans during the transition to adulthood. Larger demographic trends and racialized rhetoric about the declining significance of marriage suggest that marriage matters very little to young Blacks. Scholars of inequality suggest, however, that marriage is a central organizing principle in the lives and relationships of young Blacks, a proposition that is shared by marital horizon theorists.

The four studies of this dissertation attend to these divergent claims by examining how African Americans come to view marriage as they embark on the transition to adulthood and how these marital perspectives shape their experiences across this transition. More specifically, these studies address four specific aims: (1) to explore the multiple contexts that give rise to young Blacks' varied perspectives on marriage, (2) to test the extent to which these early marital perspectives predict relationship formation experiences, educational outcomes, and risk-taking behaviors across the transition to adulthood, (3) to assess the extent to which marital perspectives change throughout

young adulthood in response to relationship experiences, and (4) to investigate the role that marital perspectives play in shaping experiences within non-marital relationships.

The study of marriage has been increasingly detached from the study of young adulthood, particularly among Blacks. Given racialized debates surrounding marriage and its presumed declining significance, along with the extensive efforts by the U.S. government to target African Americans in its marriage promotion efforts, this development is lamentable. This dissertation integrates and expands two seemingly disparate literatures, that of critical race and gender scholars and that of marital horizon theorists, via a life course framework to address the construction and implications of marital perspectives in the lives of African Americans during the transition to adulthood. In doing so, this work attends to broad theoretical questions and omnipresent concerns among sociologists about the link between structure and agency. Further, it contextualizes young African Americans lives and relationships in a way that sharpens our understanding of intersecting gender and racial inequalities. In doing so, it challenges common misconceptions about the importance of marriage among young African Americans today.

INDEX WORDS: Marriage, marital attitudes, marital perspectives, transition to adulthood, emerging adulthood, African Americans, marital horizon theory

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ASHLEY BROOKE BARR

B.S., The Pennsylvania State University, 2007

M.A., The University of Georgia, 2010

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2014

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ASHLEY BROOKE BARR

Major Professor: Ronald L. Simons

Committee: Jeremy Reynolds
Leslie Gordon Simons
Kandauda (KAS) Wickrama

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2014

DEDICATION

To my family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Ronald Simons for your support, mentorship, and guidance over the past six years. Your trust in me has been invaluable and has allowed me to grow as a scholar in ways I had not foreseen. Thank you to Dr. Jeremy Reynolds, Dr. Leslie Gordon Simons, and Dr. K.A.S. Wickrama for your support and feedback on my work. Thank you to Dr. Man Kit (Karlo) Lei for your humbling intelligence and your generosity. Thank you to Dr. Linda Renzulli for your mentorship, for your conviction, and for ensuring that I never went hungry in Baldwin Hall. Lastly, thank you to Dr. Maria Paino and Rebecca Boylan for all of the welcome distractions along the way and for making 214A the most fun place in Baldwin Hall.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

*“The retreat from marriage in Middle America cuts
deeply into the nation’s hopes and dreams”*
(The National Marriage Project 2010:15).

Rapidly changing family formation patterns in the United States have (re)kindled debate among sociologists (Cherlin 2009; Cherlin 2013; Wilcox and Cherlin 2011) regarding the value, meaning, and institutionalization of marriage in the U.S. today. Recent findings from the Pew Research Center (Cohn, Passel, Wang, and Livingston 2011) indicate that the percentage of Americans currently married is at its lowest point on record and that roughly four out of every ten Americans agree that marriage is becoming “obsolete.” Such findings have been accompanied by recent headlines in popular media outlets that question or express concern about the relevance of marriage in American lives. For example, a recent *Time Magazine* cover read “Who Needs Marriage? A Changing Institution” (Luscombe 2010), while NPR called attention to declining marriage rates in a segment entitled “When It Comes to Marriage, Many More Say ‘I Don’t’” (Ludden 2011). Policy makers have also taken notice of changing marriage trends and have taken efforts to counter the presumed declining value of marriage

through ongoing marriage promotion efforts (Administration for Children and Families 2011; 2012b).

This link between marital values and marital behavior is one that has captured the attention of sociologists, demographers, and policy makers for decades. Theoretically, the primary goal of such work has been to understand the intersections of structure and agency in explaining human action and social change (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011; Johnson-Hanks, Morgan, Bachrach, and Kohler 2006; Sewell 1992; Sewell 2005; Smock, Casper, and Wyse 2008). Practically, however, it was assumed that such work would provide an explanation for race and class differences in marriage, divorce, and childbearing trends (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Furstenberg Jr. 2009; Moynihan 1965; Raley and Sweeney 2007; Trail and Karney 2012; Wilcox and Cherlin 2011). For the demographic trends that have caused concern about changing family values, like the rising age at first marriage (Payne 2012), increasing rates of nonmarriage (United States Census Bureau 2010), and increased rates of nonmarital childbearing (United States Census Bureau 2011b; Ventura 2009), began among African Americans (Elliott, Krivickas, Brault, and Kreider 2012; Furstenberg Jr. 2009; Moynihan 1965). Such trends, however, have recently become evident among Whites and other racial and ethnic groups in what Wilcox and his colleagues (National Marriage Project 2010; Wilcox and Cherlin 2011) refer to as moderately educated “Middle America.”

Although both the structure/agency debate and efforts to explain group differences in behavior via group differences in marriage and family values are still central, and certainly not mutually exclusive, issues in family sociology and demography, other efforts to understand the role of family-oriented values in shaping behaviors have

taken a more developmentally-sensitive and contextualized approach. For example, Carroll and colleagues (2007) have articulated marital horizon theory, the central tenet of this theory being that the salience of marriage among unmarried young people helps to structure the transition to adulthood and helps to explain individual variation across this period. In others words, despite the general absence of marriage in the late teens through the mid-twenties (Cherlin 2010b), marital horizon theory suggests that marriage is highly relevant during this period in the life course. Of primary importance in this theory are not the generalized, abstract attitudes toward marriage that are of interest in much of the literature to date, attitudes referred to by Hakim (2003) as “public morality” attitudes, but the more specialized, life-course specific marital attitudes indicating the extent to which marriage is a central focus of the transition to adulthood. Such developmentally-sensitive work forces us to sharpen our theoretical and practical understanding of the attitudes-behavior link across the life course by clarifying the types of attitudes that may be most predictive of behavior and by expanding the domains of behavior to which marital attitudes might be important. That is, marital horizon theory implores us to extend our understanding of marital attitudes and values beyond their connection to marital behavior to other life course domains, like work, education, nonmarital relationships, and risk-taking behavior.

Marital horizon theory, like the more generalized work operating alongside it, however, suffers from two interrelated flaws. First, it fails to situate marital salience and its potential implications for the transition to adulthood within broader, macro-level contexts of gender and racial inequalities. Given the pervasiveness of such inequalities, particularly as they relate to family formation processes and experiences (Broman 2005;

Carlson and Furstenberg Jr 2006; Clarke 2011; Dixon 2009; Elliott, Krivickas, Brault, and Kreider 2012; United States Census Bureau 2011b), this general absence is lamentable. Second, and likely the basis for the first, marital horizon theory overlook key insights from a life-course perspective (Elder Jr. 1998), insights that demand new questions and more nuanced methods of addressing existing ones. The four studies comprising this dissertation attempt to overcome these broad limitations by imbedding the claims of marital horizon theory, and the study of marital attitudes in general, in a life course framework. In doing so, these studies examine the importance of marital attitudes within the developmental context of the transition to adulthood, as intended by marital horizon theory, while taking seriously both the interdependence of life course domains (Elder Jr. 1985; Guzzo 2006) and sociohistorical contexts of intersecting inequalities (Collins 1998; Collins 2005).

The first study in this dissertation explores the family, relationship, and community-level predictors of varied perspectives on marriage on the cusp of transitioning to adulthood. Both abstract attitudes about the general costs, benefits, and importance of marriage and more specific, proximate attitudes about the salience of marriage at this point in the life course are assessed not only in an effort to bridge the two paradigms outlined above but also because these paradigms suggest that generalized and life-course specific dimensions of marital perspectives may have different precursors and effects throughout the life course.

Given that varied perspectives on marriage are thought to account for varied experiences of the transition to adulthood (Carroll et al. 2007) and, perhaps more importantly, that experiences during this transition are thought to influence outcomes

across the remainder of the life course (Raley, Crissey, and Muller 2007; Settersten and Ray 2010a; Shanahan 2000), it is essential that we understand how such perspectives come about. According to more recent social theories (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011; Johnson-Hanks, Morgan, Bachrach, and Kohler 2006; Smock, Casper, and Wyse 2008), the development of marital perspectives, or “schemas,” is actually representative of the interplay between structure and agency, as differential access to resources entails differential access to schematic systems through which people interact with the world. Hence, understanding the multiple contexts that give rise to various marital perspectives not only allows for better model specification and is consistent with the developmental and ecological tradition of life course theory but also enables a better understanding of the extent to which material and “virtual” structure embeds itself within cognitive frameworks (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011).

The second study in this dissertation tests the core tenet of marital horizon theory by assessing the extent to which marital perspectives, both general and life-course specific, structure the transition to adulthood. Work in this area so far has focused its attention mostly on young people’s involvement in risk behaviors (Carroll, Badger, Willoughby, Nelson, Madsen, and Barry 2009; Carroll et al. 2007; Willoughby and Dworkin 2009) and has suggested, although by way of cross-sectional data, that marital perspectives shape risk-taking patterns and help to account for individual differences in the experience of the transition to adulthood. Using more appropriate longitudinal data and a better specified set of control variables, this second study focuses not only on individual risk behaviors, particularly health-risk behaviors, across this transition but also

education and cohabitation experiences. Such a shift in focus is warranted given theoretical and empirical support for the interdependence of life course domains (Elder Jr. 1985; Guzzo 2006), evidence that educational attainment and relationship exploration are two central endeavors of an extended transition to adulthood (Arnett 2000; Arnett 2004), and suggestions that educational and relationship experiences in this period help to lay the foundation for future outcomes across many domains and, hence, hold the potential to exacerbate or alleviate existing inequalities (Furstenberg Jr. 2010; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth 2005; Settersten and Ray 2010a; Settersten and Ray 2010b; Shanahan 2000).

The third study in this dissertation explores the degree to which marital perspectives change across the transition to adulthood and the experiences that predict such change. Given the causal role afforded to marital perspectives in marital horizon theory and in public policy efforts to enhance the value of marriage, such perspectives are implicitly assumed to be somewhat stable or foundational. Other work, however, suggests that marital perspectives may be more malleable than is often thought (Willoughby 2010). Given the increased prominence of cohabitation (Cherlin 2010b) and ongoing interest in what cohabitation means for individual marriage trajectories (Manning and Cohen 2012) and, more broadly, for the future of marriage as an institution (Cherlin 2004; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; 2011; The National Marriage Project 2010), of particular importance in this chapter is the extent to which cohabitation changes young people's marital perspectives.

Informed by the life course notion of "linked lives" (Elder Jr. 1985; Elder Jr. 1998), the fourth and final study in this dissertation introduces a relational approach to

the study of how marital perspectives shape the transition to adulthood by assessing the role that marital salience plays in predicting couples' marriage expectations and relationship stability. Recent evidence suggests that gendered power relations continue to play a part in the progression and maintenance of romantic relationships (Brown 2000; Sassler and Miller 2011), making couple-level analyses crucial in this arena. Further, given that both the quality of intimate relationships and the gendered power relations within them are often uniquely affected by race-related stressors and inequities, the individual-level and decontextualized focus of much of the literature thus far may be giving rise to an incomplete, at best, and erroneous, at worst, understanding of how marital perspectives shape young people's lives and relationships.

Importantly, as expanded upon later, all of the studies in this dissertation utilize an all-African American sample of young people as they embark on adulthood. Blacks' experiences of the transition to adulthood and of patterns of family formation have been shown to differ substantially from that of other racial and ethnic groups, particularly Whites (Elliott, Krivickas, Brault, and Kreider 2012; Payne 2012; Settersten and Ray 2010b; Shanahan 2000; Ventura 2009). Work to date on marital horizon theory that challenges assumptions about the irrelevance of marriage during the transition to adulthood has focused primarily on Whites, however (e.g. Willoughby and Dworkin 2009). This work leads one to question the relevance of marriage to other racial groups during the transition to adulthood, just as Moynihan (1965) questioned its relevance to African Americans, in general, half a century ago. Utilizing a heterogeneous sample of young African Americans, a sample that falls squarely within the moderately educated "Middle America" whose marriage- and family-related behaviors have caused concern

amongst family scholars and policy makers (Administration for Children and Families 2012b; The National Marriage Project 2010; Wilcox and Cherlin 2011), helps to address broader questions of the relevance of marriage in the United States today.

In addition, as hinted at above, the period of the transition to adulthood has become increasingly important in its implications for the remainder of the life course. In fact, Settersten and Ray (2010a) argue that:

“The stakes [of the transition to adulthood] on all fronts are much higher.

Poor judgments and small mistakes on the road to adulthood are all substantially more perilous than they were just a decade ago. In an increasing winner-takes-all society, there is little room for missteps” (xxi).

Given the growing stakes of the transition to adulthood for the remainder of the life course, it is vital that we understand better the experiences of those young people already shown to be underprivileged during this period. A better understanding of from where their marital perspectives arise, how they change, and the implications of these perspectives for relationships, risk-taking, and education may yield insight into inequalities in these domains across the life course.

In the following literature review, I hope to provide the proper demographic, political, and investigative context in which to place the four studies constituting this dissertation. Hence, I begin with an overview of demographic trends related both to union formation and the transition to adulthood. I follow this with a review of the three national policies, the Defense of Marriage Act, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and the Health Marriage Initiative, that are most closely implicated in the current research. With

a solid understanding of the current demographic and policy context, I then articulate the theoretical framework and pose the main research questions that are addressed in the four studies presented in the remaining chapters of this dissertation. It is also in this section that I provide a much-abbreviated literature review for each empirical study. Finally, I offer an overview of the Family and Community Health Study, the project from which data for all four of the empirical studies were drawn, to prepare the reader for the chapters to come.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Family Formation Behaviors

Over the past few decades, the United States has undergone what scholars have referred to as the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe 2010). This demographic transition consists of several interrelated trends, including increased maternal employment, cohabitation, divorce, and nonmarital childbearing, as well as delays in the timing of marriage. It is with these demographic transitions, and the marked racial and class inequalities among them (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006; McLanahan 2004; Raley and Sweeney 2007), that scholarly and popular interest in marital and other family-related attitudes boomed. Hence, I take the following few paragraphs to quantify such trends.

Although all of these trends are taking place concurrently, and each trend arises from and gives rise to the others, the rise in women's employment, and in particular, maternal employment, is most often claimed to be the foundation of the second demographic transition (Oppenheimer 1994). In 1950, women's labor force participation stood at 34% (Toossi 2002); by 2000, this rate grew to 60%, which is roughly where it

stands today (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011). This growth in labor force participation is even more dramatic among mothers, as roughly three-quarters of mothers with children under the age of 18 are active in the labor force today versus fewer than half (47%) in 1975 (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

The increase in women's labor force participation has been accompanied by educational gains, delays in fertility, and an overall rise in the divorce rate that appears to have plateaued since the 1980s at about 40-50% (Lesthaeghe 2010; Raley and Bumpass 2003). The age at first marriage, along with the percentage of people never marrying, has also risen steadily over the past several decades. Men's median age at first marriage has risen from 22.5 in 1956 to 28.7 in 2010, while women's has risen from 20.1 to 26.7 during the same timespan (Payne 2012). Correspondingly, both nonmarital childbearing and nonmarital cohabitation have become more common. In 1970, roughly 10% of children were born outside of a marital union. By 2007, nearly 4 in 10 births were outside of marriage (Ventura 2009), with this growth in nonmarital childbearing accounted for births in cohabiting unions (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). As Smock (2000; Smock and Manning 2010) notes, cohabitation is now the modal route to marriage and is a common coresidential union in the United States. Roughly 40% of these cohabiting unions contain children (Smock and Manning 2010).

Importantly, these demographic trends are not evenly distributed among subgroups of the United States population. As McLanahan (2004) points out, those that bring with them a gain in resources (e.g. the delay of marriage and childbearing) are taking place among the most highly educated, while those that bring with them a reduction in resources (e.g. nonmarital childbearing, forgone marriage, and divorce) are

taking place among the least educated. Further, these latter trends began with and progressed more quickly among African Americans as compared to all other racial groups (Elliott, Krivickas, Brault, and Kreider 2012; Furstenberg Jr. 2009; Moynihan 1965).

For example, in 2010, 73 percent of births among non-Hispanic Blacks were nonmarital, while comparable percentages among non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics were 29 percent and 53 percent, respectively (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Osterman, and Mathews 2013). Likewise, although the large majority of both Black and White respondents over age 35 have been or currently are married, roughly 25 percent of Black men and women over age 35 have never been married, while roughly 10 percent of White men and women over age 35 report never having been married (Elliott, Krivickas, Brault, and Kreider 2012). Independent of economic status, Blacks are also less likely than Whites to transform cohabiting unions into marriage (Brown 2000; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006). For those who do marry, marriages among Blacks are more likely to end in divorce than those among Whites or Hispanics (Raley and Bumpass 2003), and, in 2010, the first divorce rate among Blacks (30.4 per 1,000 people) was nearly double that of their White (16.3 per 1,000 people), Hispanic (18.1 per 1,000 people), and Asian (10 per 1,000 people) counterparts (Gibbs and Payne 2011).

The Transition to Adulthood

The demographic changes that have occurred under the second demographic transition have resulted in an extended transition to adulthood (Settersten and Ray 2010a), or what Arnett refers to as the new developmental period of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2000; Arnett 2004). Importantly, this extended transition to adulthood

is marked by less social control and, hence, unprecedented uncertainty and instability than in the past (Shanahan 2000). Despite interdisciplinary disagreement about what to call this newly extended and unsteady transition to adulthood, both sociologists and psychologists agree not only that the transition to adulthood today is marked by more ambiguity than in decades past but also that there are both race and class differences in the experience of this transition (Furstenberg Jr. 2010; Shanahan 2000; Silva 2012). Conventional life pathways are not easily accessible to minorities and the working class, and as was the case with demographic changes related to family life, African Americans seem to stand out with regards to their experiences of the transition to the adulthood (Settersten and Ray 2010b).

Young Blacks are more likely than any other racial/ethnic group to be disengaged from the traditional social institutions of school, work, and military (Settersten and Ray 2010a; Settersten and Ray 2010b), to experience inconsistent employment (Danziger and Ratner 2010), and to have been imprisoned or involved in the juvenile justice system (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth 2005; Pettit and Western 2004; Raphael 2007). These patterns have led some to argue that African Americans, despite having earlier onset of adult identity (Benson and Elder 2011; Benson and Johnson 2009; Johnson, Berg, and Sirotzki 2007), experience a much more prolonged period of uncertainty and instability during the transition to adulthood compared to their White counterparts (Benson and Furstenberg Jr. 2007; Settersten and Ray 2010b). This aggravated ambiguity during the transition to adulthood among African Americans combined with the racial inequities in larger demographic trends discussed above suggests that if marriage is becoming increasingly irrelevant for young people, as Carroll and colleagues (Carroll et

al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007) argue it is often assumed to be in the broader family literature, it may be particularly irrelevant in the lives of young African Americans. In fact, McCabe and Barnett's (2000) work suggests that romantic relationship endeavors are less relevant than employment and career endeavors to African American adolescents. As I show below, however, qualitative work from critical family and race scholars offers a different picture of the relevancy of marriage (or at least the prospect of it) in the lives of young African Americans. Prior to offering this contrast, however, I provide a review of the policy context of marriage in the United States today.

UNITED STATES POLICY CONTEXT

It is within this changing demographic context that widespread concern over changing marital attitudes and values, particularly among young people, grew in the United States. Grounded in the basic tenets of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969), researchers turned to the changing meanings of marriage and family life to try to explain such demographic trends. Given that racial disparities in both the experience of transitioning to adulthood and in larger demographic trends have not been fully accounted for by socioeconomic factors (Raley and Sweeney 2007; Sweeney and Phillips 2004), this concern was both general, as illustrated by efforts to map Americans' attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and nonmarital childbearing over time (e.g. Axinn and Thornton 2000; Thornton 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), and race-specific, as evidenced by efforts to identify and explain race and ethnic differences in marriage- and family-oriented values (e.g. Browning and Burrington 2006; Moynihan 1965; Tucker 2000).

The general consensus among these researchers is that marriage is still highly valued and desired among Americans of all races and all socioeconomic statuses (Axinn and Thornton 2000; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Trail and Karney 2012) and that the vast majority of adolescents expect to get married as adults (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007). Despite this, others have argued that the normative imperative to marry has declined over time, as marriage has become viewed in more individualistic terms (Cherlin 2004; Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993; Thornton 1989). Much of the work deeming the marriage imperative to be relatively dead, however, was conducted prior to massive efforts by the United States government to define and promote marriage. Given that marriage was deemed to be “the foundation of a successful society” (Public Law 104-193, Section 101) and the breakdown of the nuclear family a root cause of poverty (Administration for Children and Families 2011; Moynihan 1965), “the engineering of marriage has been a central concern” (Moon and Whitehead 2006:23) for the United States government in the past decade and a half. Currently, three national policies, the Defense of Marriage Act, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and the Healthy Marriage Initiative, illustrate such efforts and make evident the symbolic value of marriage in the United States today (Cherlin 2009). I briefly describe these policies below.

Defense of Marriage Act

The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), enacted in 1996 under President Bill Clinton, was intended “to define and protect the institution of marriage” (Public Law 104-199). When it was enacted, DOMA contained two key provisions, the first of which defined marriage, as recognized by the federal government, as “a legal union between

one man and one woman as husband and wife” and, hence, defined spouse as “a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife” (PL 104-199, Section 3). The second provision maintained that “No State, territory, or possession of the United States, or Indian tribe” is required to recognize “a relationship between persons of the same sex that is treated as a marriage under the laws of such other State, territory, possession, or tribe, or a right or claim arising from such relationship” (PL 104-199, Section 2). In other words, same-sex marriages performed and legalized in one state are not required to be recognized by any other state.

In February of 2011, Attorney General Eric Holder announced that President Barack Obama had instructed the Department of Justice to cease its defense of Section 3, that defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman, of DOMA in current, pending, and future litigations (Holder 2011). Since this time, Section 3 of DOMA was taken up by the Supreme Court in the case of *Windsor v. The United States*. In its ruling, the Supreme Court declared Section 3 of DOMA unconstitutional (Liptak 2012; Supreme Court of the United States States 2013), and Section 2 was left intact. This ruling meant that same-sex couples married in the states in which their marriages are considered legal will have their marriages recognized by the federal government. More recently, however, Holder has ordered the Justice Department to recognize the marriages of same-sex couples even if those marriages are not recognized in the state where the couple resides¹ (Apuzzo 2014). With the repeal of Section 3 of DOMA and the Attorney General’s new orders, the institution of marriage has been opened up to same-sex

¹ At the time of this writing, however, 17 states recognize same-sex marriages, and 33 states explicitly ban same-sex marriages via a constitutional amendment and/or state law.

couples, at least for most federal benefits. Unlike other countries like the Netherlands, France, Sweden, and Germany (Badgett 2009), marriage in the United States remains the only nationally legitimated union status.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

At the same time DOMA was passed, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the “welfare” program in place since 1935, was replaced by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). The component of PRWORA that provided states with block grants to assist low-income families was referred to as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF, unlike AFDC, included time limits on welfare receipt and more stringent work rate requirements that states must meet (Greenberg, Levin-Epstein, Hutson, Ooms, Schumacher, Turetsky, and Engstrom 2002). In addition to these changes, TANF legislation asserted the promotion of marriage, the prevention and reduction of “out-of-wedlock pregnancies” and “the formation and maintenance of two-parent families” as explicit goals (Public Law 104-193, Section 401). With PRWORA, states were given wide latitude on how to spend TANF funds to meet such goals, meaning that funds were not required to be spent on providing direct cash assistance to families or indirect cash assistance via job training or promotion programs (Public Law 104-193, Section 404). Together with DOMA, the marriage-promotion goals of TANF “positioned the promotion of heterosexual marriage as a building block of antipoverty policy” (Gallo 2012:64).

Healthy Marriage Initiative

In 2001-2002, as an extension of such anti-poverty efforts, the federal government launched its Healthy Marriage Initiative (Administration for Children and Families 2011; 2012b) under the authority of President George W. Bush and under the auspices of the Administration for Children and Families at the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Through “support, information, and education” (Dion 2005:140), marriage promotion programs, funded by the federal initiative but enacted at the state and local level, aimed to increase the number of healthy marriages. Since 2005, governmental efforts to promote healthy marriages have been accompanied by efforts to promote responsible fatherhood and have been fully subsumed under TANF and its reauthorizations via the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (Public Law 109-171, Sections 7101-7103) and the Claims Resolution Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-291, Section 811). This latest reauthorization grants \$150 million to states per year “for the purpose of carrying out healthy marriage promotion activities” and “activities promoting responsible fatherhood” (Public Law 111-291, Section 811). Such promotion activities can include advertising and education campaigns on the value of healthy marriages, skills-based training, and marriage preparation programs, among others (Administration for Children and Families 2012b).

Although there is widespread debate among scholars regarding the utility of promoting marriage (e.g. Avishai, Heath, and Randles 2012; Cherlin 2003; Coontz and Folbre 2010), there is little debate that such marriage promotion efforts, in conjunction with DOMA and the marriage-related goals of TANF, venerate “marriage as *the* normative intimate relation for human beings” (Jenkins 2007:189). Contrary to those

scholars who argue that the normative imperative to marry has declined (e.g. King 1999; Oropesa and Gorman 2000; Thornton 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), however, others argue that this imperative is now encoded in our public policies, marking marriage not as voluntary but as “a demand of the normative order” (Moon and Whitehead 2006:26). That is, such scholars argue that the normative imperative to marry is not only existent but also relatively impactful throughout people’s lives, particularly those people living along intersecting axes of inequality. In the next section, I examine the intersecting politics of gender, race, class, and nation within U.S. marriage politics.

THE U.S. MARRIAGE IMPERATIVE: INTERSECTIONS OF CLASS, GENDER, RACE, AND NATION

With continued integration with welfare policy, U.S. marriage promotion efforts are steeped in politics of social class (Trail and Karney 2012). With the exception of DOMA, however, for which the gender of marriage partners was an explicit component, the language used in U.S. marriage promotion legislation is relatively neutral with regards to gender and race. Instead, the rhetoric is one of “health and social capital” (Heath 2009:44). As noted by several scholars (Cherlin 2003; Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Crooms 2005; Gallo 2012; Heath 2009; Jenkins 2007; Moon and Whitehead 2006; Onwuachi-Wilig 2005), however, the historical and political context of marriage legislation and rhetoric deems it highly gendered and racialized not only in terms of its underlying assumptions about whose behavior and values are in need of modification but also how marriage promotion efforts are implemented “on the ground.” As Crooms (2005) argues, “although [current marriage promotion] rhetoric has apparently abandoned

the explicit language about black women, the socially-constructed meaning of that earlier rhetoric remains intact” (627), making the “use of explicit language unnecessary” (613).

Heath (2009) observes, for instance, that marriage promotion programs funded by federal grants and enacted by respected marriage and family scholars appear to have become “a tool to teach self-monitoring gender practices within the confines of [middle-class] heterosexual marriage” (44) . According to Heath (2009), the healthy marriages that such programs aim to encourage are those based on stereotypical gender norms and are premised on the notion that they must teach men and women how to accept and live with “natural” gender differences. As many family and race scholars have been pointing out for decades, these heterosexual gender norms implicit in visions of the American family (Smith 1993) have been historically constructed around Whiteness and are deeply connected to notions of citizenship and nationhood (Collins 1998; Jenkins 2007; Moon and Whitehead 2006; Moore 2011; Onwuachi-Wilig 2005).

As Onwuachi-Wilig (2005) reveals, intersections between gender, race, and nation played a prominent role in marriage promotion efforts and their underlying motivations throughout U.S. history. She does so by tracing the roots of current marriage promotion efforts to the post-bellum U.S., during which the “the question looming over the heads of many white policymakers upon the emancipation of Blacks was exactly what to do with all these black women and children in need” (1658). The solution, thought the Freedmen’s Bureau, to encouraging ex-slaves to care for themselves rather than draw upon governmental resources was to associate respectable citizenship with economic self-sufficiency and to declare marriage as a means of achieving both, even if only to a limited extent (Onwuachi-Wilig 2005). Similar efforts are underway today, as evidenced

not only by the coupling of welfare and marriage legislation in the U.S. but also by the government's explicit declaration that marriage creates "healthy," more "educated citizens" who engage in less crime and have "less need for social services" (Administration for Children and Families 2011). Further, the Administration for Children and Families is explicitly targeting the Black family via the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (Administration for Children and Families 2012a). As justification for doing so, the Administration for Children and Families cites "alarming" and "crisis-level" differences between African Americans and Whites in terms of marriage rates, the proportion of African American children not living in two-married-parent households, and the percent of children born to single mothers (Administration for Children and Families 2003; 2012a). In current U.S. marriage legislation and promotion efforts, then, "the poor Black family remains an invisible standard of deviancy" (Heath 2009:35), and the behavior of "poor black women in impoverished, ghetto communities" (Crooms 2005:613) becomes the implied contrast for healthy ways of creating and maintaining families, on which the nation's economic and social health depends. For some scholars, then, "the law of marriage has been and is still being used in the United States as a tool for 'civilizing' unruly outsiders" (Onwuachi-Wilig 2005:1653), outsiders who are both implicitly and explicitly Black.

These persistent intersections between race, class, gender, and nation across time have led Onwuachi-Wilig (2005) to claim that marriage promotion efforts today are simply a "reversion to an earlier phase of colonialism in the United States" (1653). She is not alone in these assessments, as other scholars have highlighted the persistent pathologization of Black intimacies, particularly those of Black women (Collins 1990;

Jenkins 2007), the linking of these deviant intimacies to the health of the nation (Jenkins 2007; Moon and Whitehead 2006), and the effects of this pathologization on the lived experiences of Black people across the economic spectrum . For instance, Collins (2005) argues that love “is profoundly affected by the political, economic, and social conditions of the new racism” (249). She points out that following the rules implicit in marriage promotion efforts often leads to Black men and women “feeling stuck with one another” (253) and to Black women maintaining relationships that they believe not to be ideal (256-257; Sterk-Elifson 1994) in order to “claim the mantle of Black respectability” (253).

Likewise, Clarke (2011) argues that Black women, having learned undesirability in heterosexual dating contexts (Collins 1990; Collins 2005; Guttentag and Secord 1983), often become involved in “in and out” relationships, in which women continuously leave and return to admittedly incompatible partners, and/or “sleeper” relationships, those involving sexual intimacy but little companionship or commitment. To onlookers, such relationships may appear irrational given that the women involved in them often value and want marriage. As Clarke (2011) contends, however, “rationality is of little use when weighing the costs and benefits of the various ways of remaining unfulfilled” (150). That is, when singlehood is contrasted with being partnered, even in an unsatisfactory relationship, the Black women Clarke writes of often choose partnership, as partnership affords them some sense of desirability and the hope that their “calculations [about the relationship not leading anywhere] are wrong” (2011:150).

This emphasis on being partnered is not limited to Black women. For instance, both Chasteen (1994) and Sharp (2007) have shown that women in their samples, most of

whom were White, problematize singlehood and that marriage, or at least the prospect of it, afforded women with a sense of normalcy. Chasteen (1994) argues that this is the case because men provide women not only economic and social capital but also symbolic capital of simply “looking less out of place to others” (322), of “appear[ing] ‘normal’ and appropriate” in their everyday environments. This notion that women gain symbolic status from being partnered, and particularly from being married, is tangentially supported in national survey data. For instance, although women are more likely than men to disagree that marriage brings happiness and more likely to agree that there are few good marriages, they rate marriage as being more important than do men, are more likely to prefer to be married than are men, and are more likely to be certain about getting married than are men (Thornton 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). These patterns are evident even among younger cohorts, as Wood, Avellar, and Goesling (2008) report that even though teen girls have more negative attitudes toward marriage in general, they expect marriage and are less likely than boys to want to delay it.

Gendered and racialized “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham 1993) are problematic not only for those pursuing heterosexual relationships, as pointed out by Clarke (2011), Collins (1998; 2005), and Sharp (2007), but also for those pursuing relationships with same-sex partners, particular African Americans. Moore (2011) and Jenkins (2007) argue that the pathologization of Black intimacies has contributed to extensive heterosexism within the Black community. That is, as Jenkins (2007) states, given constant pressure to combat “a hegemonic narrative of black sexual and familial pathology” (10) and, hence, to gain communal respectability, African Americans “invest heterosexuality in general, and the heterosexual marriage relation in particular, with an

even greater power than does the majority culture” (189). In a 21-city study of marital values, Tucker (2000) provides some support for this notion in that, when there emerged any differences in the importance or value of [heterosexual] marriage between Blacks and Whites, Blacks tended to hold it in higher esteem. Further, as Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman (2010) report, African Americans are more likely than Whites to oppose same-sex marriage. As Moore (ibid.) reveals, even those in same-sex relationships, like the middle-class, lesbian women in her study, hold a general interest not in challenging existing relations but in practicing assimilationism, such that “they seek social change that will facilitate their integration into existing social structures” and “see their success as rooted in how well they are able to conform to the expectations created by those structures” (150). Hence, according to Moore (ibid) and Jenkins (ibid), general opposition to same-sex relationships among heterosexual Blacks as well as the assimilation efforts of gay and lesbian Blacks are a product of shared interest in achieving communal respectability, what Jenkins (ibid.) refers to as the “salvific wish.”

Jenkins’ (2007) argues further that this salvific wish not only leads to intraracial tension regarding issues of sexuality and same-sex marriage but also contributes to intraracial class-based hostilities. For example, Jenkins (ibid.) and Onwuachi-Wilig (2005) highlight instances when well-known, upper-class Blacks, like Bill Cosby (and, perhaps now, President Barack Obama) invoke narratives of respectability to encourage Blacks to adopt more responsible ways of creating and maintaining families. In fact, the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative is predominantly headed by African Americans within the U.S. government and engages with prominent leaders in the African American community (Administration for Children and Families 2003; 2012a).

Hence, whereas marriage and its associated “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham 1993) were and continue to be wielded as a weapon against Blacks by Whites, Jenkins (ibid.) argues that they have become “a kind of intraracial weapon that [B]lack elites...can wield against the [B]lack poor” (192) and, as suggested by Moore (2011), that Black heterosexuals can wield against Blacks seeking or pursuing same-sex relationships.

Such work provides a stark contrast to that which suggests the absence of a normative imperative to marry in the U.S. These conflicting findings may be the product of several factors, the first being that much of this attitudinal research suggesting a declining imperative to marry was conducted prior to the government’s widespread promotion of marriage and did not attend to intersecting inequalities. Moon and Whitehead (2006), however, offer an alternative explanation. They argue that the marriage imperative inherent in U.S. public policy and discourse today actually *employs* a narrative of free choice in order to be effective. That is, rather than challenging cultural schemas of individualism, U.S. marriage policy and its surrounding discourse draws upon such schemas, thus allowing “marriage [to enter] the American imagination as a personal choice” when really acting as a “demand of the normative order,” (Moon & Whitehead 2006:26). Hence, as Cherlin (2009; 2013) writes, although the practical value of marriage has declines, the symbolic value of marriage has remained strong or has even increased, perhaps particularly for those existing along the intersections of gender, race, and class inequalities. Such an explanation is consistent with evidence that, although Americans report that being unmarried is an acceptable choice, the vast majority would not choose

that status for themselves (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Wood, Avellar, and Goesling 2008).

CONFLICTING REALITIES

The above review of demographic trends, public policy initiatives, and socio-historical context provides two contrasting depictions about the place and importance of marriage in the lives of African Americans. General demographic trends indicating a declining normative imperative to marry, racialized demographic trends on declining marriage rates, and the widespread marriage promotion efforts aimed at “correcting” such trends imply a devaluing of and/or general lack of importance placed upon marriage among African Americans, particularly young African Americans. Work by critical scholars of inequality, on the other hand, suggests otherwise. Rather than marriage being irrelevant or generally unimportant to African Americans, this work suggests not only that African Americans value marriage just as much as, if not more than, do Whites, but also that, even in the absence of marriage, the lives and relationships of Blacks, particularly Black women, are highly structured by marriage, or at least by the prospect of it.

Collectively, the four studies in this dissertation address these conflicting realities by examining, in a broad sense, the import of marriage in the lives of African Americans during the transition to adulthood. Given that marriage is indeed generally absent from this developmental period, particularly for the population under investigation, however, the proposed research explores not the implications of the state of being married but the origins and implications of how young Blacks think and feel about marriage and the importance they place upon it in the life course. In other words, I am interested in

understanding how, in the context of political narratives touting “marriage as *the* normative intimate relation for human beings” (Jenkins 2007:189), individual marital perspectives are constructed and the ways in which they help to structure the transition to adulthood. To attend to these issues, I draw upon the core arguments within marital horizon theory (Carroll et al. 2007). I embed these arguments, however, within a much broader life course perspective (Elder Jr. 1974; Elder Jr. 1998).

MARITAL HORIZON THEORY

With increasing delays in the age at first marriage, marriage is growing ever more absent among young people in their late teens through their mid-twenties (Cherlin 2010b). Rather than marriage being undertaken as part of the transition to adulthood, then, marriage has largely become “the culminating event” (Furstenberg Jr. 2010:75) of such a transition, initiated only after other markers of adulthood (e.g. financial independence, completion of education, etc.) have been reached. Given the general lack of marriage among young people, Carroll and colleagues (2007) argue that “scholars have largely disregarded the role of marriage during the transition to adulthood” (220). In one of the first explications of marital horizon theory (Carroll et al. 2007), they suggest, however, that this disregard is the result of the mistaken assumption that the absence of marriage deems it largely irrelevant. Marital horizon theory asserts that, rather than being irrelevant during the transition to adulthood, marriage actually helps to guide this transition. Hence, although far removed from work by critical scholars of family who contend that marriage often looms large over the lives of the unmarried, marital horizon theory shares in this foundational assertion.

Marital horizon theory places the transition to adulthood within a family life cycle perspective in that this transition is viewed as one in which young people prepare for the shift from the family of origin to the family of formation. Because marriage is central to Americans' notion of family (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, and Steelman 2010), this transition away from one's family of origin toward an eventual family of formation engages what Carroll and colleagues (2007) refer to as "marriage philosophies," or one's general "outlook or approach to marriage in relation to his or her current situation" (224). According to marital horizon theory, these marital philosophies, what I refer to in the remainder of the proposal as marital perspectives or marital schemas (Amato 2009; Fitzpatrick 1990; Smock, Casper, and Wyse 2008), determine the extent to which young people use the transition to adulthood as a period of anticipatory socialization (Merton 1957) for marriage.

Marital horizon theory highlights three distinct components of marital perspectives that are important during the transition to adulthood: the relative importance of marriage, the desired placement/timing of marriage in the life course, and the criteria that individuals view as important for marriage readiness. Together, these three dimensions form a marital horizon that helps to differentiate young people with regard to the salience of marriage during the transition to adulthood. Marital horizon theory suggests that those who view marriage as more salient, indicated by greater relative importance, a more proximate desired timing of marriage, and internally-defined (e.g. personal maturation) criteria for marriage readiness would be more likely than their peers to view the transition to adulthood as a period of marriage preparation and, hence, to behave more conventionally in line with normative role expectations for spouse (Carroll

et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007). Ultimately, then, marital horizon theory asserts that the salience of marriage (or lack thereof) becomes central to the experience of transitioning to adulthood and that different marital perspectives help to explain the large degree of heterogeneity among young people's experience of this transition (Arnett 2004; Settersten and Ray 2010a).

LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

Marital horizon theory, although sharing many concerns relevant to life course theorists, was developed largely outside of a life course framework. Hence, the testing of its arguments has also tended to fall outside of this framework. The core premise of marital horizon theory, that the salience of marriage matters in structuring the transition to adulthood, however, seems to demand a life course approach. Hence, I embed this dissertation research within a broader life course perspective (Elder Jr. 1974; Elder Jr. 1998).

The life course perspective grew out of Glen Elder's foundational work on children of the Great Depression (Elder Jr. 1974). Based on this work, Elder (1998) identified four principles that are central to a life course approach. The first principle is the importance of sociohistorical context. More specifically, Elder (1998) states that "the life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime" (3). In a life course framework, then, social, political, historical, and local context becomes an essential backdrop if not an explicit variable for study. Although this backdrop may seem somewhat extraneous to a study on the development and influence of marital perspectives, seemingly intraindividual processes,

sociologically-oriented (rather than psychologically-oriented) work on cognitive schemas suggests otherwise.

Expanding upon the work of Sewell (1992), Johnson-Hanks and colleagues' (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011; Johnson-Hanks, Morgan, Bachrach, and Kohler 2006) articulate a theory of conjunctural action in which they identify schemas as operating at two different yet interrelated levels, the societal (or cultural) and the individual (or cognitive). At the individual level, schemas are mental representations, or "taken-for-granted ways of classifying, interpreting, and engaging the world" (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011:22). Stated more eloquently, "like the cognitive processing necessary for vision, [schemas enable us to] interpret an unordered array of dark and light into trees, vistas and faces" (Johnson-Hanks 2007:14). Such individual schemas, however, comprise and flow from culturally-prevailing schemas, what Johnson-Hanks et al. (2006) refer to as "symbolic" or "virtual" structure. From this perspective, the respectability politics surrounding marriage and marriage-centered public policies discussed in the preceding section, as well as more localized community contexts, are the "material constituents" (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011:8) of this virtual structure. From a life course perspective, then, it is this sociohistorical setting within which the study of marital perspectives must be placed because such a setting makes up the virtual structure within which these perspectives are constructed and deployed.

The second principle of a life course perspective relates to the timing and interdependence of periods and domains across the life course. A life course framework "insists that development is lifelong" (Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder 2011:273) and that

transitions and events in one domain are “embedded in a life of transitions and events in other domains” (Guzzo 2006:390). That is, experiences in one period and/or domain of development help to shape experiences in others. This developmental interdependence, however, does not negate the role of human agency throughout the life course, however. In fact, a third in a life course framework concerns the role of human agency in shaping life outcomes. More specifically, Elder (1998) notes that “individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances” (4). Hence, development across the life course is not something that merely happens to individuals but something which individuals help to construct and reconstruct.

The fourth and final principle of a life course perspective reveals new avenues of inquiry with regards to the construction and deployment of marital perspectives during the transition to adulthood. This principle, like the second, is concerned with interdependence but of that between people not life stages or domains. This “linked lives” principle suggests that development is not merely an intraindividual process, as it has been treated thus far. Rather, “lives are lived interdependently” (Elder Jr. 1998:4) and must be studied as such.

Many of these life course principles are attended to somewhat in the explication of marital horizon theory. For instance, Carroll and colleagues place the transition to adulthood within the context of the family life cycle and within the sociohistorical context of the “emergence of ‘emerging adulthood’” (Tanner and Arnett 2009). Further, the notion of interdependency between periods in the life course is evident in the theory’s contention that the salience of marriage at the beginning of the transition to adulthood

affects the course of this transition. The interdependence of life course domains is apparent in marital horizon theory's attention to anticipatory socialization behaviors, like risk-taking, rather than only marital behavior as products of particular marital perspectives. The importance of human agency is also central to the theory, as it views young people as actively constructing the transition to adulthood in preparation for future life transitions, particularly marriage.

Although implicitly drawing upon key tenets of a life course framework, marital horizon theory neglects others either in its empirical assessment or its theoretical framing. For instance, marital horizon theory neglects the sociohistorical context of race and gender inequalities. Further, absent from marital horizon theory is the period of the life course preceding the transition to adulthood. From a life course perspective, this period should be central to the formation of marital perspectives, and, hence, testing the causal impact of such perspectives requires attention to the environment in which they are constructed. In addition, not overlooked in marital horizon theory itself but missing from empirical assessments of the theory is the applicability of marital perspectives to life course domains other than risk-taking behavior. Finally, both in its explication and its empirical assessment, marital horizon theory neglects the life course principle of linked lives, a principle that compels the study of marital perspectives to expand beyond one of individual effects. Collectively, the four studies of this dissertation draw upon the principles of a life course framework overlooked by marital horizon theory in order to offer a more holistic evaluation of the theory's core proposition and to extend the implications of the theory beyond those gleaned thus far.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

Study 1 draws upon life course principles of developmental continuity and the importance of setting by contextualizing marital perspectives both with regards to social location and developmental context. More specifically, this study asks the extent to which relationship, family, and community experiences throughout childhood and adolescence contribute to the development of such perspectives. These three contexts of development—romantic relationships, family background, and community context—have been implicated in past work on generalized attitudes towards marriage (Axinn and Thornton 1996; Barber 2004; Larson, Benson, Wilson, and Medora 1998; Tasker and Richards 1994; Trent and South 1992; Tucker 2000), other family-formation-related attitudes (Browning and Burrington 2006; Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman 2008), marital expectations (Crissey 2005; Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007; Tucker 2000), and/or relationship behavior and experiences (Bryant and Wickrama 2005; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry 1992; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006). With few exceptions, this work has tended to examine each of these contexts in the absence of the others, leaving us with an unclear understanding of the unique contribution of each of these separate yet interdependent contexts on the development of marital perspectives. Study 1 utilizes a multilevel modeling approach to explore how relationship, family, and community factors help to account for variation in young African Americans' marital perspectives.

In this study, as well as Study 2 and Study 3, I attend to four dimensions of young people's marital perspectives: marital benefits, marital costs, general importance of marriage, and marital salience. In doing so, I utilize both life-course specific and more

generalized indicators of marital meaning. The more generalized marital perspectives of costs and benefits utilized here were selected based not only on their availability but also because of the cultural changes in the meaning of marriage over time. As both Cherlin (2004; 2009) and Amato (2009) point out, culturally prevailing schemas about marriage have shifted from the institutional to the companionate to the individualized, in which marriage is viewed as a means of personal fulfillment rather than mutual or social obligation. By and large, measures of attitudes towards marriage have been unaffected by this insight over time, as they continue to focus on perceptions of proper gender roles within marriage, the extent to which divorce is acceptable, and the extent to which children are central within marriage.

Study 2 tests further attends to the principle of developmental continuity, interdependence, and agency across the life course by testing the core argument of marital horizon theory, that marital perspectives at the beginning of the transition to adulthood help to structure this transition. Work to date on marital horizon theory has been largely cross-sectional, however, and is thus limited its ability to test the central claim of the theory. Further, this work appears to be guided by the assumption that perspectives favorable to marriage are nothing but beneficial for young people and, hence, has focused on the association between marital horizons and risk-taking behaviors. It has largely failed to consider the impact of marital perspectives on educational and union formation experiences during the transition to adulthood despite explicit claims that the meaning of marriage for young people becomes central to their experience of the transition to adulthood, “impacting trajectories of individual development (e.g., identity development, adult status, career directedness, etc.) and family formation patterns (e.g.,

sexuality, cohabitation, fertility rates, etc.)” (Carroll et al. 2009:350). Study 2 more fully employs the life course principle of the interdependence of life course domains (Guzzo 2006) by testing the extent to which marital perspectives, particularly the salience of marriage, help to structure not only risk-taking but also education and relationship experiences across the transition to adulthood. In doing so, it also forces us to consider the extent to which discussions of agency regarding marriage may be expanded to include anticipatory socialization behaviors, like those attended to in Study 2.

Study 3 takes a different approach to the notion of lifelong development by reassessing implicit assumptions of the foundational nature marital perspectives found in much work to date. Marital horizon theory leaves little room for examining a potentially bidirectional relationship between marital perspectives and experiences throughout the transition to adulthood. The life course principle of lifelong development (as well as that of agency) implies the possibility of change and redirection, however. In fact, although much work on family formation perspectives treats them as foundational, Johnson-Hanks et al. (2011) argue that the social nature of schema acquisition, the fact that schemas “are shaped through interaction with the material world” (6), suggests that they are not foundational but continuously renegotiated. Recent work suggests that this may indeed be the case. Willoughby (2010), for instance, finds significant within-individual change in general marital importance, relative marital importance, marital expectations, and expected age at marriage across adolescence. Further, these changes were not constant between individuals, as gender, race, family structure, and educational aspirations helped predict the nature and degree of change. In addition, other work suggests that relationship

experiences in young adulthood can predict changes in how people view marriage (Simons, Simons, Lei, and Landor 2012).

Perhaps of most interest to both academics and the general public is the potential role that cohabitation may play in changing marital perspectives. Given increased rates of cohabitation in the United States, there is ongoing concern about what cohabitation means not only for individual marital behavior/trajectories (Manning and Cohen 2012) but also for the meaning and importance of marriage, in general (Cherlin 2004; Coontz 2004; Coontz and Folbre 2010; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Wilcox and Cherlin 2011). In her oft-cited study, McGinnis (2003) finds that cohabiters, relative to their dating peers, tend to perceive both fewer benefits and fewer costs to marriage, leading her to conclude that “cohabitation appears to significantly change the context in which decisions about marriage are made” (105). This conclusion, however, one that has been reiterated throughout the literature, may very well be unfounded given two interrelated limitations of the McGinnis (*ibid.*) study. First, both cohabitation status and the expressed costs and benefits of marriage were measured at only one time point and at the same time point. Given this first limitation, fixed effects or propensity score models that could better isolate the causal effect of cohabitation were incompatible with the data. Taken together, these limitations suggest that change in the perceived costs and benefits of marriage was not actually assessed and, further, that selection into cohabitation was not seriously accounted for.

In addition to addressing these limitations, Study 3 expands the cohabitation discussion in two ways. First, it explores the ways in which the quality of cohabiting unions might condition their effects. Work by Simons et al. (2012) showing that the

quality of nonmarital relationships is an important predictor of marital perspectives suggests that relationship quality may be an essential element in this line of research. Second, it attends to the potentially gendered effects of cohabitation on marital perspectives. Recent work suggests that men and women may attribute different meaning to cohabitation in terms of how it relates to marriage, such that “men linked cohabitation far less strongly to marriage than women,” and women actually viewed cohabitation as potentially detrimental to their marriage goals (Huang, Smock, Manning, and Bergstrom-Lynch 2011:897). To the extent to which this is the case, cohabitation may be differentially associated with men’s and women’s marital perspectives.

The final study of this dissertation, Study 4, attends to the life course principle of “linked lives.” Although this principle is somewhat apparent in Study 1 in that individuals are considered embedded within and affected by their families of origin, their communities, and their relationships, this principle compels the study of marital perspectives to expand beyond one of individual effects. Hence, Study 4 concerns the relational impact of marital salience during the transition to adulthood. More specifically, utilizing dyadic data analysis, Study 4 addresses the gendered ways in which the salience of marriage for unmarried partners affects their expectations to marry one another and the likelihood of relationship dissolution.

OVERVIEW OF THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY HEALTH STUDY

Data for all of the studies in this dissertation are drawn from the Family and Community Health Study (FACHS). The FACHS is a multi-site, longitudinal research study of over 800 African American youth (the target respondents) and their family members. At the latest two waves of data (Waves V and VI), respondents’ romantic

partners were also invited to participate in the study. Because I rely heavily on the FACHS, it is important to describe the study design and to clarify briefly the strengths and limitations of the FACHS data.

Unlike more commonly used studies focused on African Americans (e.g. *Fragile Families*, Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, and McLanahan 2001), the FACHS was designed to capture the diversity of African American families and the variety of communities in which they live. Hence, block groups (BGs) were used to identify neighborhoods in Iowa and Georgia that varied on demographic characteristics, particularly racial composition (percent African-American) and economic level (percent of families living below the poverty line). These BGs (259 in total) were identified using 1990 Census data. Families living within the chosen BGs were randomly selected and recruited by telephone from rosters of all African-American families who had a fifth grader (the target child) in the public school system. Upon recruitment, the first wave of data collection began in 1997, and follow-up interviews were conducted every 2-3 years thereafter, with the latest wave of data (Wave VI) collected in 2011. Hence, FACHS captures the experiences of African American youth from late childhood through the transition to adulthood.

The FACHS is the most appropriate dataset to answer the research questions addressed in each of the following studies for several reasons, the most important of which is that FACHS is uniquely focused on African Americans. Although such a sample prevents interracial comparisons, it allows for a nuanced investigation of marital perspectives among a population that is disadvantaged both in romantic relationships (Broman 2005; Gibbs and Payne 2011; Kposowa 1998; Payne 2012; United States Census Bureau 2010; Ventura 2009) and with respect to the experience of the transition

to adulthood (Settersten and Ray 2010b). Hence this population of young people is often front and center in popular and academic debates over marital attitudes and behaviors (Raley and Sweeney 2007). Importantly, the current sample captures heterogeneity among African American young people not only in marital perspectives and behaviors but also in community context, family background, relationship experiences, and personal resources. Such heterogeneity is often obscured in popular discourses about cultural values (King 1999; Raley and Sweeney 2007) but, as Smock, Casper, and Wyse (2008) argue, must be attended to if we are to begin to understand broader links between resources and culture.

A second advantage of the FACHS is that it assesses both general and life-course specific marital perspectives. With regard to general marital perspectives, the FACHS contains items assessing both perceived costs and benefits. Such measures are consistent with Cherlin (2004; 2009) and Amato's (2009) claims about the predominant marital schema today being one in which personal fulfillment takes precedence. The life-course specific measure attended to in the FACHS and in the following four studies differs from those used in marital horizon theory in that it is only one item tapping the relative salience of marriage. Although this item—which asks respondents the degree to which getting married is the most important part of their lives—cannot capture separately the multiple dimensions of marital horizons, it captures the latent construct of marital horizons by directly assessing the extent to which marriage is a central focus at present. That is, rather than inferring a prioritization of marriage during the transition to adulthood from respondents' desired timing, marriage readiness criteria, and relative importance of marriage, the single-item measure used in the following four studies asks respondents

about their prioritization of marriage directly, thereby streamlining the theory and its empirical evaluation.

In addition to containing both general and life-course specific marital perspectives, the FACHS contains more general measures of conventionality, including religious involvement, educational aspirations, conventional values, and gender role beliefs. The ability to include these variables as controls is vital given recent suggestions that marital perspectives, and marital horizons in particular, may simply be a proxy for conventionality (Johnson, Anderson, and Stith 2011).

Additional advantages of the FACHS are related to its research design. The FACHS waves collected thus far begin in childhood and follow respondents through their mid-twenties. The latter three waves map almost directly onto the ages that researchers have marked as the newly extended transition to adulthood (roughly ages 18 to 25). Further, because of its longitudinal design, contextual and family background variables are measured prospectively and not subject to recall bias. Relatedly, questions about marital perspectives are available at each of the latest three waves of FACHS (Waves IV through VI), affording the opportunity to examine both the causal effect of such perspectives on the transition to adulthood (the core argument of marital horizon theory) and changes in these perspectives across the transition to adulthood. Other longitudinal studies containing large numbers of African American respondents (e.g. Add Health, Harris, Halpern, Whitsel, Hussey, Tabor, Entzel, and Udry 2009) lack measures of both general and life-course specific marital beliefs over time. Lastly, at the latest two waves of data collection, FACHS includes dyadic data from both target respondents and their

romantic partners. Hence, it allows for a “truly relational” (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006:147) approach toward the study of marital perspectives.

SUMMARY

Taken together, the studies of this dissertation suggest that embedding marital horizon theory within a life-course framework opens up new and exciting avenues of inquiry. Study 1 points to expanded contexts that might help to explain variation in young African Americans’ marital perspectives and the limitations of existing research in understanding those perspectives relevant to marital horizon theory. Study 2 provides a more rigid test of the core premise of marital horizon theory and offers support for this premise across multiple life course domains. Study 3 questions the implied foundational nature of marital perspectives by providing evidence that such perspectives are responsive to relationship experiences throughout the transition to adulthood. Study 4 problematizes individualistic understandings of marital perspectives by revealing the relational nature of their effects. The lines of inquiry pursued in these studies not only offer a fuller evaluation of marital horizon theory in the context of African Americans’ transition to adulthood but also provide insight into age-old sociological debates on the link between family-formation attitudes and behavior and, more broadly, between structure and agency.

CHAPTER 2

STUDY 1: MARITAL PERSPECTIVES AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS ENTERING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD: THE ROLES OF COMMUNITY CONTEXT, FAMILY BACKGROUND, AND RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCES²

² Barr, Ashley B. and Ronald L. Simons. To be submitted to the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

ABSTRACT

Trends toward later marriage and increasing rates of nonmarriage have seemingly spawned renewed interest in marital attitudes, their development and their implications across the life course, among family scholars. The current study extends this literature by exploring the multiple contexts of development—community, family, and relationship—that help to account for variation in African American’s marital perspectives on the cusp of the transition to adulthood. Findings suggest that nonmarital relationship experiences and childhood community contexts are robust predictors of marital perspectives. The important role of community context found here suggests that communities may not only be indicative of the opportunity structure of local marriage markets, as others have posited (Becker 1981; Kiecolt and Fossett 1997; Lloyd and South 1996; Oppenheimer 1988), but may also be indicative of the “virtual” structure (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011) from which young people adopt particular perspectives about the general benefits, costs, and importance of marriage. Marital perspectives at this point in the life course have recently been utilized to explain the wide variation in young people’s experiences during the transition to adulthood (Carroll et al. 2007; Willoughby 2012). In helping to specify the contexts that produce varied perspectives on marriage among young people, the current findings may prove important to future work attempting to parse out the causal implications of such perspectives during the transition to adulthood and across the remainder of the life course.

INTRODUCTION

The rising median age at first marriage, now 29 for men and 27 for women (Payne 2012), as well as increased rates of nonmarriage (Cohn, Passel, Wang, and Livingston 2011), cohabitation (Smock 2000; Smock and Manning 2010), and nonmarital childbearing (Ventura 2009), have led some to question the relevance of marriage in the United States today (Cherlin 2009; Wilcox and Cherlin 2011) and promote its value and importance (Administration for Children and Families 2011; 2012b; Avishai, Heath, and Randles 2012). These demographic and presumed cultural changes have brought renewed interest among family scholars in marital attitudes and their implications for behavior across the life course. For example, recent work has documented group differences (or lack thereof) in marital attitudes (e.g. Trail and Karney 2012). Further, new life-course informed theories, like marital horizon theory (Carroll et al. 2007), have emerged to explain how and what types of marital attitudes are linked to relationship and other behaviors across the transition to adulthood. Proper specification of models to test promising theories linking marital attitudes to behavior, however, rests upon a solid understanding of the contextual factors that give rise to varied perspectives on marriage. This study serves as a multilevel investigation into the community, family, and relationship influences on African American marital perspectives as they embark on the transition to adulthood.

BACKGROUND

Plenty of research over the past several decades has addressed predictors of marital and, more broadly, family formation perspectives (Axinn and Thornton 1996; Browning and Burrington 2006; Cunningham and Thornton 2006; King 1999; Larson,

Benson, Wilson, and Medora 1998; Merz and Liefbroer 2012; Trent and South 1992).

This study extends this work in several ways. Perhaps most importantly, it focuses exclusively on young African Americans, and it does so for two primary reasons. First, demographic patterns in the family formation behaviors that have sparked concern and debate about the value of marriage are much more pronounced among African Americans when compared to other racial groups. For instance, while the median age at first marriage for White men and women is 28.3 and 26.4, respectively, it is 30.8 and 30.3 among Black men and women, respectively (Payne 2012). Further, while only about 8% of Whites aged 40 and older have never been married, nearly a quarter (21.6%) of Blacks in the same age group have never been married (author calculations based on U.S. Census data (author calculations; United States Census Bureau 2010). Not surprisingly, then, the proportion of nonmarital births is highest among Blacks, as roughly three-quarters (72%) of Black children, versus 29% of White children and 53% of Hispanic children, were born outside of marriage in 2011 (Martin et al. 2013).

Given these racialized patterns in marital behavior, much academic and popular debate has been centered around potential race differences in attitudes toward marriage (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993; South 1993; Tucker 2000). Much of this research has failed to substantiate claims of sizeable race differences in the importance and value of marriage, yet other work suggests that young African Americans are more focused on future careers than relationships (McCabe and Barnett 2000), hold more liberal sexual attitudes than Whites (Browning and Burrington 2006), and are less likely than Whites to expect marriage by age 25 (Crissey 2005). Although fruitful, scholarship and debate on potential racial differences in marriage- and family-related attitudes has largely obscured

heterogeneity in the experiences and perspectives of African Americans (Bryant, Taylor, Lincoln, Chatters, and Jackson 2008; King 1999; Raley and Sweeney 2007). The current study offers a nuanced examination of the community, familial, and relationship contexts that give rise to variation in marital perspectives among young Blacks. In doing so, it both captures and explains heterogeneity among a population often implicitly or explicitly (Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Crooms 2005) at the center of popular and academic debates about marital attitudes and behaviors.

In addition to its focus on young African Americans, this study attends to the multidimensionality of marital perspectives by assessing not only more general perspectives, like the costs and benefits of marriage and the importance of having a good marriage, but also the salience of marriage, a much more life-course specific measure of the significance of marriage. Many studies of marital attitudes attend only to general attitudes toward marriage and, within this category, typically fail to assess perceptions of marital costs (see McGinnis 2003 for an exception). Given the deinstitutionalization of American marriage and cultural shifts toward individualized marriage (Amato 2009; Cherlin 2004; Cherlin 2009), the perceived costs and benefits of marriage may be becoming particularly important in predicting marital behavior. In fact, although lacking in other marital attitudes, McGinnis (2003) found that perceived costs of marriage reduced respondents' likelihood of entering marriage in the near future.

In addition to these generalized attitudes toward marriage, life-course specific attitudes toward marriage appear to be of increasing theoretical and empirical importance to family scholars. For instance, Hakim (2003) finds fault with many studies testing the link between family-related attitudes and behavior for their failure to make distinctions

between more generalized, or “public morality,” attitudes, and more life-course specific, or “personal choice,” attitudes. Similarly, of importance to the recently articulated marital horizon theory (Carroll et al. 2007) are not the general value that young people assign to marriage, but the extent to which young people are focused on marriage during the transition to adulthood. Hence, for both Hakim (2003) and Carroll and colleagues (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007), life-course specific attitudes are expected to vary more than generalized attitudes between individuals and throughout the life course and, hence, to hold greater explanatory power. Much of the research on marital perspectives to date, however, concerns the development and implications of “public morality” rather than “personal choice” attitudes. Theoretical distinctions between these dimensions of marital perspectives imply that they should not only have unique behavioral implications but also unique predictors. By taking a multidimensional approach to the study of marital perspectives, this study examines these potential differences in the contextual factors that give rise to varied perspectives on marriage.

This study further expands past research on the formation of marital perspectives by utilizing a multilevel modeling approach, which allows for the simultaneous investigation of multiple contexts of development. Community context has proven to be an important indicator of local marriage markets and hence a significant factor in predicting marital behavior (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry 1992; South and Lloyd 1992). Community context, however, may be indicative not only of the material structure in which young people and their families are embedded but also of the local cultural schemas, or “virtual” structure (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011), surrounding marriage that are available to young people. As Johnson-Hanks et al.

(2011) and Smock, Casper, and Wyse (2008) point out, differential access to both cultural and material resources entails differential access to schematic systems that young people can adopt for themselves. Perhaps due to data limitations, however, much work has ignored potential community-level influences on marital and other family-related attitudes (for expectations, see Barber 2004; Browning and Burrington 2006; Tucker 2000), opting instead for an analysis of family- and individual-level explanations for variation in such perspectives (e.g. Axinn and Thornton 1996; Cunningham and Thornton 2006). Well-specified models, however, require simultaneous attention to the distinct yet interdependent contexts, including community, family, and relationship contexts, which may shape young people's perspectives on marriage.

Finally, this study draws upon insights from a life course perspective by examining not only multiple contexts of development but also the interplay between developmental periods. A life course perspective “insists that development is lifelong” (Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder 2011:273) and stresses that experiences in one period of development help to shape experiences in another. Efforts to understand the formation of marital perspectives and their subsequent effects across other periods in the life course, then, would benefit from attending not only to multiple contexts of development but also to multiple periods of development. This study does so by utilizing prospective measures of childhood family and community contexts, as well as current indicators of relationship and educational experiences, domains central to the life course periods of adolescence and the transition to adulthood (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, and Haggart 2006; Mikulincer and Shaver 2009). By contextualizing marital perspectives both with regards to social location and developmental context, the current study provides a much more

nuanced understanding of the multiple contexts that help to shape young African Americans marital perspectives. Work to date provides insight into several factors across community, family, and relationship contexts that may be central in shaping the availability and adoption of certain perspectives on marriage. I review these factors below.

MULTIPLE CONTEXTS OF MARITAL MEANING

Community Context

Although the ways in which young people's perspectives on marriage may be shaped from the communities in which they live has received little empirical examination, research has demonstrated the important role of community context in predicting other relationship-related attitudes, as well as expectations for marriage and marital behaviors and experiences. For example, Tucker (2000) showed substantial city-level variation in adults' general expectations to marry. More specifically, she found that, independent of personal characteristics, city-level divorce and unemployment rates were important predictors in explaining Blacks' marriage expectations. Browning and Burrington (2006) further showed that neighborhood disadvantage was associated with more liberal attitudes regarding early sexual activity among adolescents. Likewise, South's (South and Crowder 2010; South and Crowder 2000; South 1993; South 2001) work indicated that neighborhood disadvantage positively predicted nonmarital childbearing, positively (although indirectly) predicted divorce, and, for African Americans, negatively predicted marriage. Although neighborhood disadvantage has been the focus of much community-oriented work, Bryant (2005) identified percent minority in the community to be an important predictor of marital happiness among

African Americans. That is, she showed that the negative effects of community disadvantage on Blacks' marital well-being were countered somewhat by the positive effects of living in a community with other people of color.

In addition to community divorce rates, disadvantage, and racial composition, community sex ratios, indicative of the availability of partners in the marriage market, have also garnered interest among family scholars in predicting relationship-related behavior, especially among African Americans. More specifically, some scholars have argued that the relatively high rates of incarceration, unemployment, and death among Black men have led to a dearth of marriageable men, and hence, have uniquely affected the family formation behaviors among African Americans (Dixon 2009; Guttentag and Secord 1983; Lane, Keefe, Rubinstein, Levandowski, Freedman, Rosenthal, Chula, and Czerwinski 2004; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry 1992). In support of this proposition, lower male-to-female ratios in a community have been linked to lower marriage rates at the community-level (Albrecht 2001) and a lower likelihood of marriage entry for individual women (Lichter, Leclerc, and McLaughlin 1991; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry 1992). Further, sex ratios have helped to explain race differences in marriage entry rates (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry 1992). More recently, Warner, Manning, Giordano, and Longmore (2011) have linked sex ratio imbalances to the nonmarital relationship experiences of young adults. They found support for the imbalanced sex ratio perspective (Kiecolt and Fossett 1997) in that young men were less committed to any one relationship when women were more plentiful. Their findings suggest that the availability of potential partners influences not only marital

behavior “but also the process through which individuals search for and evaluate partners prior to marriage” (Warner, Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2011:269).

The above work indicates that community context clearly shapes the availability of marital partners and the marital search process. It is less clear regarding the extent to which this context is important for shaping the meanings and importance that young people attach to marriage. Nonetheless, sociological theory suggests that this context may be an important one not only for structuring the opportunity for marriage but also for socialization toward marriage, as it may help to dictate not only the material but also the schematic components of social structure (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011). Such components help to make up the generalized sources (Thornton and Nardi 1975) through which young people begin to anticipate what certain roles, like that of spouse, entail. Hence, the communities within which young people grow up help to determine not only the material resources but also the cultural schemas surrounding marriage that are available to individuals. To the extent to which communities operate as both material and virtual structure, then, community context should be an important one in shaping young African Americans’ perspectives on marriage.

Family Background

Perhaps the most-often considered context within which young people are thought to develop perspectives on marriage is that of the family of origin. Researchers have identified several unique aspects of the family of origin that have proven important predictors of how adolescents and young adults think and feel about marriage. These aspects include family socioeconomic status, family structure, parenting behavior, and parental relationship quality.

Using the National Survey of Family Households, Trent and South (1992) showed that, even controlling for adult relationship status and socioeconomic status, family-of-origin factors predicted attitudes toward marriage. In particular, maternal education and employment, as well as the experience of living with a single mother, were associated with more liberal marital attitudes. Likewise, Axinn and Thornton (1996) found that children who experienced a parental divorce held more negative attitudes toward marriage and more positive attitudes toward cohabitation and divorce at the age of 18 than those who did not experience a parental divorce. Among a sample of engaged women, Whitton and colleagues (2008) similarly reported that those who experienced a parental divorce as children entered marriage with lower commitment and confidence. Besides family SES and family structure, processes that occur within families have also been shown to predict attitudes toward marriage. In particular, harsh or inconsistent parenting practices (Larson, Benson, Wilson, and Medora 1998; Simons, Simons, Lei, and Landor 2012) as well as poor marital quality among parents (Cunningham and Thornton 2006) have been linked not only to hostile views of relationships in general (Simons and Burt 2011) but also to less positive views of marriage, in particular (Simons, Simons, Lei, and Landor 2012).

With the exception of Simons and colleagues (2012), however, much of the research concerning family-of-origin impact on marital perspectives has neglected the community context within which families live. Given that community context has been consistently linked to family SES and family structure/divorce (Peterson and Krivo 2010; South 2001; Wilson 1996), parenting quality (Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, and Jones 2001), and marital quality (Bryant and Wickrama 2005; Bryant, Wickrama, Bollard,

Bryant, Cutrona, and Stank 2010), or in other words, all of the family-level factors deemed important in producing variation in marital perspectives, it is essential that such family predictors be studied within the larger context of communities to parse out their independent effects. Further, much of the research linking the family of origin to perspectives on marriage has utilized retrospective, cross-sectional, and/or single-reporter accounts of experiences in the family of origin. The present study avoids same-reporter and recall bias by utilizing prospective reports of childhood family experiences from the primary caregivers of our young adult respondents.

Relationship Experiences

The final context that is typically considered to help cultivate perspectives on marriage is that of romantic relationships. It is a well-known phenomenon in the developmental literature that, as children mature through adolescence, their primary attachments (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, and Haggart 2006) and social supports (Mikulincer and Shaver 2009) shift away from the family of origin to those of romantic partners. This change also represents movement from the anticipatory stage of role acquisition to the later stages in which individuals progress “from viewing [relationships] from an outside perspective to viewing [them] from inside” (Thornton and Nardi 1975:876). In line with this perspective, Crissey (2005) reported that the presence of a serious romantic partner was associated with adolescents’ perceived likelihood of marriage. Likewise, Carroll and colleagues (2007) found that marriage appeared to be more salient to young people who were currently dating, as those involved in dating relationships had a lower ideal age at marriage and reported greater marital importance relative to their peers who were not dating. In addition to relationship status, the focus of

much research to date, Simons et al. (2012) found that, among African American young adults involved in romantic relationships, the quality of these relationships helped to explain variation in their attitudes toward marriage. In particular, troubled romantic relationships were associated with more negative views of marriage. Importantly, this latter work also found that the quality of young adult relationships accounted for the effects of community and family-level predictors on marital attitudes, offering additional justification for the need to examine predictors across multiple contexts.

Gender, Relationships, and Perspectives on Marriage

In addition to the contexts of development attended to thus far, gender plays a central role in the marriage and family literature and cannot be ignored in an examination of marital attitudes. Work to date indicates that gender plays a direct role in shaping young people's perspectives on marriage. The gendered and racialized respectability politics (Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Higginbotham 1993) surrounding marriage are thought to imbue marriage with more symbolic value for women than for men (Chasteen 1994; Sharp and Ganong 2007; Sharp and Ganong 2011). Such claims, largely drawn from qualitative research (Chasteen 1994; Clarke 2011; Jenkins 2007; Sharp and Ganong 2007; Sharp and Ganong 2011), have been tangentially supported in more generalizable studies utilizing national survey data. For instance, Thornton's (1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001) work indicated that, despite being more likely than men to disagree that marriage brings happiness and more likely to agree that there are few good marriages, women rated marriage as being more important than did men, were more likely to prefer to be married than were men, and were more likely to be certain about getting married than were men. These gendered patterns were evident among younger

cohorts, the focus of the current study, as well. A recent report commissioned by the Department of Health and Human Services (Wood, Avellar, and Goesling 2008), for example, found that high school girls viewed marriage less favorably than did high school boys but expected to marry at similar rates. Further, despite holding less positive general attitudes toward marriage, girls wanted to marry earlier than did boys and were more likely to enter marital or cohabiting unions in early adulthood. Work such as this suggests that the perceived costs and benefits of marriage, as well as the salience of marriage, may be gendered but that the general importance of marriage may not.

In addition to the direct effect of gender on marital perspectives, the above work suggests that gender may condition the effects of relationship experiences. If the symbolic value of marriage is indeed stronger for young women than for young men, women's perspectives on marriage may be less affected than men's by their individual relationship experiences. In other words, if it is marriage itself and not marriage to a particular partner that is more valuable to women than to men, women's orientation toward marriage should remain more impervious than men's to the influences of particular relationship partners.

CURRENT STUDY

Demographic changes have brought renewed interest in the meaning and importance of marriage in the United States today, particularly for African Americans (Browning and Burrington 2006; Bryant and Wickrama 2005; Dixon 2009; King 1999; South 1993; Tucker 2000) and for young people (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007; Hall 2006; Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007; Willoughby 2010; Willoughby 2012; Wood, Avellar, and Goesling 2008). Drawing from a broader life course

framework, the current study broadens our understanding of the multiple contexts that help shape both general and life-course specific attitudes toward marriage among African Americans upon the cusp of transitioning to adulthood. New theoretical developments (Carroll et al. 2007) highlight the unique and important role that marital perspectives during this developmental period may play in structuring the transition to adulthood and, potentially, the remainder of the life course. Proper tests of these propositions, however, require a more nuanced understanding of the contexts and experiences that engender variation among young people, especially young Blacks, in their marital perspectives. In assessing the extent to which community context, family background, and relationship experiences help to explain variation in the perceived costs and benefits, importance, and salience of marriage, this study expands our understanding of the interplay between multiple contexts of development and multiple dimensions, both “public morality” and “personal choice” (Hakim 2003), of marital perspectives among young African Americans.

METHOD

Sample

The current study utilizes data from the Family and Community Health Study (FACHS). The FACHS began in 1997 as a longitudinal investigation of health and wellbeing among African American youth and their families. At the initiation of the study, 889 African American families living in Iowa (IA) and Georgia (GA) took part. These families were recruited through a two-step process. First, because the FACHS was designed to capture heterogeneity among African Americans and the variety of community contexts in which they live, block groups (BGs) from the 1990 U.S. Census

were used to identify neighborhoods in IA and GA that varied on several characteristics, including racial composition and socioeconomic status. Upon identifying BGs that contained a sufficient number of African Americans (259 BGs in total), rosters of all African American families who had a fifth grader (the target child) in the public school system were obtained. Families were then randomly selected and recruited by telephone. Participating families were surveyed in their homes first in 1997/1998 and then again every two to three years thereafter, resulting in a total of six full waves of data by 2011. In addition to data from target children, now in their mid-twenties, the FACHS contains data from the primary caregiver, secondary caregiver, and a sibling, when applicable, at earlier waves, and a romantic partner and best friend, when applicable, at later waves.

Because the current study focuses upon marital perspectives among young Blacks upon the cusp of transitioning to adulthood, the primary data are drawn from target respondent surveys at Wave IV of the FACHS (collected in 2007), when target respondents averaged 18.8 years of age. By this wave, 714 target respondents (80.31% of the total sample) remained in the study. In all analyses, I excluded the 5 respondents (<1%) who reported being married by Wave IV and, hence, our analytic sample was drawn from the 709 unmarried target respondents (396 young women, and 313 young men) at Wave IV, when these respondents were beginning the transition to adulthood (Arnett 2000; Tanner and Arnett 2009). As others have noted (Simons, Lei, Beach, Brody, Philibert, and Gibbons 2011; Simons, Simons, Lei, and Landor 2012), there has been little evidence of selective attrition across study waves. For example, respondents who remained in the study by Wave IV did not differ from respondents who left the study

by this wave on measures of family structure, household income, primary caregiver education, parent-child relationship quality, or community disadvantage at Wave I.

In addition to target data from Wave IV, I draw upon Wave I primary caregiver and target reports of family characteristics to assess family background and 1990 Census data for childhood community-level characteristics. Because most block group areas from which the sample was initially drawn contained fewer than five participating families, block group areas were combined into larger clusters of community groups in order to make them suitable for multilevel modeling. To do so, cluster analysis was performed using five socioeconomic variables: average per capita income, proportion of households headed by females, proportion of persons receiving public assistance, proportion of households below the poverty level, and proportion of males unemployed. This strategy, as described in detail in Simons et al. (2002a), resulted in 46 community clusters, each of which contained roughly 15 families. Although the block group areas within any given cluster were not required to be geographic neighbors, they were internally homogenous on the five demographic indicators described above and tended to share geographic locales within each state.

Although the FACHS data are not without limitations, they have several features that make them ideal for the current study. First, they contain multiple dimensions of marital perspectives, including measures of generalized costs and benefits, which may be increasingly important for predicting marital behavior in an age of individualistic marriage (Amato 2009), and a measure of marital salience, which taps into the life-course specific dimensions of marital attitudes important in marital horizon theory (Carroll et al. 2007). Second, the FACHS contains prospective measures of childhood community and

family characteristics, allowing us to explore the influence of multiple life course domains on the formation of marital perspectives with less bias than single-reporter, cross-sectional studies have allowed. The use of childhood measures of community context may help to provide insight into the extent to which communities help to provide the virtual structure from which young people adopt marital perspectives. Third, the FACHS contains more general measures of conventionality, including religious involvement, educational aspirations, conventional values, and gender role beliefs. The ability to include these variables as individual-level controls is vital given recent suggestions that marital perspectives, particularly those relevant to marital horizon theory, may simply be a proxy for conventionality (Johnson, Anderson, and Stith 2011).

Finally, the FACHS allows for an intricate examination of African Americans' marital perspectives on the cusp of transitioning to adulthood. As was the case with demographic changes related to family life, African Americans seem to stand out with regards to the degree of instability and nonlinearity experienced during the transition to the adulthood (Settersten and Ray 2010b). Hence, the nuance offered by the FACHS allows us to examine and explain heterogeneity among African Americans during a particular developmental period that has been posited to affect relationship and other experiences across the remainder of the life course (Carroll et al. 2007; Raley, Crissey, and Muller 2007). As others have pointed out (Bryant et al. 2008; King 1999), this intragroup heterogeneity is often obscured by research examining intergroup differences but is crucial to understand given African Americans' much more varied experiences of the transition to adulthood (Settersten and Ray 2010b). Further, because the FACHS was designed to capture this heterogeneity, FACHS respondents at Waves V and VI are

similar to a national sample of Black respondents aged 18 to 24 on measures of fertility (United States Census Bureau 2011b), school enrollment (United States Census Bureau 2011c), and educational attainment (United States Census Bureau 2011a).

Dependent Variables

All dependent variables, four in total, were measured at Wave IV of the FACHS, the first wave at which they were available. Three variables—perceived benefits, perceived costs, and marital importance—tap “public morality” (Hakim 2003), or generalized, marital perspective, and one variable—marital salience—taps “personal choice” (Hakim 2003), or life-course specific, perspectives. Perceived *marital costs* were assessed via four questions that asked respondents the extent to which they agreed that marriage was associated with a loss of friends, a loss of freedom, a worse sex life, and a harder life. Perceived *marital benefits* were assessed via two questions that asked respondents the extent to which they agreed that “marriage leads to a happier life” and “marriage leads to a fuller life.” For both costs and benefits, response categories ranged from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”), and items were averaged to form respective indices. Cronbach’s alpha was .69 for marital benefits and .67 for marital costs.

In addition to the perceived costs and benefits of marriage, the *general importance of marriage* was assessed with one question that was prefaced with “We now have a few questions about your goals and values” and asked “How important is it to you to have a good marriage?” Response categories ranged from 1 (“not at all important”) to 5 (“extremely important”). Given that almost two-thirds (57.12%) of the sample responded that having a good marriage was “extremely important” and that less than

three percent (2.68%) of the sample responded that having a good marriage was “not at all important,” this variable was dichotomized such that 1 indicated that having a good marriage was “extremely important”, and 0 indicated that it was not.

The fourth and final dependent variable, *marital salience*, was assessed with one question asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed that “getting married is the most important part of my life.” This measure of marital salience is more in line with what Hakim (Hakim 2003) calls “personal choice” attitudes and arguably taps all three dimensions—relative importance, desired timing, and readiness—relevant to marital horizon theory, as it assesses the extent to which marriage was the central focus of the unmarried FACHS respondents at the beginning of the transition to adulthood. Potential responses ranged from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Although variation in response categories was not as skewed as it was with general marital importance, the measure of marital salience was also dichotomized for several reasons. First, the most common response category (38.69% of respondents) was category 3 (“neutral or mixed”). Second, preliminary ordinal models using all response categories revealed that the cumulative effect of the examined predictors on marital salience was non-linear, or that the parallel regression assumption (Long and Freese 2006) had been violated. Given that cell sizes across all response categories were not large enough to make multinomial models tenable, response categories 4 (“agree”) and 5 (“strongly agree”) were collapsed to indicate the salience of marriage, and response categories 1 (“strongly disagree”) through 3 (“neutral or mixed”) were collapsed to indicate a lack of marital salience. This dummy coding not only produced a more statistically viable

variable but also made the coding and interpretation of marital salience more consistent with the coding of general marital importance.

Independent Variables

Community context. For each of our 46 community clusters, four indicators of community context, all of which have been previously associated with family formation behavior or attitudes, were drawn from the 1990 Census. These characteristics included the percent population that is Black (% *Black*), percent population that is female (% *female*), the *female divorce rate* (# divorced females per 1,000 females), and a *community disadvantage* index. Community disadvantage was comprised of six indicators: % males unemployed, percent households below the poverty line, percent households receiving public assistance, per capita income (reverse-coded), percent population with less than high school education, and percent single mother households. These variables were standardized and averaged to form an index of community disadvantage. Cronbach's alpha was .88.

Family background. Family-of-origin characteristics were assessed at Wave I via, with one exception, primary caregiver reports. Primary caregivers reported on their highest level of *education* (in years) and their total *household income* (dollar values were multiplied by 10,000 so that a one-unit change in household income indicated a \$10,000 change in income). Primary caregivers were also asked about their relation to others living in the household. Those who indicated that there was a secondary caregiver to whom they were married and that both caregivers were the biological or adoptive parents of the target respondent were coded 1 to indicate that the childhood family structure consisted of a *married, two-parent family*. For these families, marital quality was

assessed via two questions addressing primary caregiver relationship satisfaction, nine questions addressing partner warmth and supportiveness, and twelve questions addressing partner hostility (reverse-coded). These three subscales were standardized and summed to form an index of *parents' marital quality*. The reliability of this composite measure based on Nunnally's (1978) formula for calculating the reliability of a linear combination of measures was .94. Because not all primary caregivers were married, this variable was coded as an internal moderator (Frech and Williams 2007; Mirowsky 1999), meaning that it was standardized prior to assigning unmarried parents a score of 0. The resulting variable varied for target respondents with married parents and did not vary for target respondents without married parents and allows us to assess the extent to which the effect of having married parents varied by the quality of that marital relationship.

In addition to primary caregiver reports of family socioeconomic status, structure, and relationship quality, *parent-child relationship quality* was assessed at Wave I via target respondent reports. Youth were asked a series of questions about their relationship with their primary caregiver. As with marital quality, these questions tapped overall satisfaction (e.g. "How happy are you with the way things are between you and your [primary caregiver]?"; 2 questions), as well as expressions of warmth (e.g. "During the past 12 months... how often did your [primary caregiver] help you do something that was important to you?" and "...let you know [s/he] really cares about you?"; 9 questions) and hostility (e.g. "During the past 12 months... how often did your [primary caregiver] get angry at you?" and "...threaten to hurt you physically?"; 12 questions). The satisfaction, warmth, and hostility (reverse-coded) subscales were standardized and

summed to form an overall index of parent-child relationship quality. The reliability of this composite measure was .83 (Nunnally 1978).

Romantic relationships. Target respondents' relationship status and relationship quality were assessed via target reports at Wave IV. Targets were asked to indicate their current relationship status, and those who reported having a steady romantic partner were coded 1 for being in a *romantic relationship*. Those involved in a romantic relationship with a steady partner were then asked a series of questions about the quality of their relationship. These questions addressed overall relationship satisfaction (e.g. "How happy are you, all things considered, with your relationship?"; 3 questions), partner warmth (e.g. "During the past month, how often did [partner name] let you know s/he really cares about you?"; 4 questions), and partner hostility (e.g. "During the past month, how often did [partner name] criticize you or your ideas?"; 5 questions). The satisfaction, warmth, and hostility (reverse-coded) indices were standardized and summed to form an index of overall *relationship quality*. The reliability of this composite measure was .85 (Nunnally 1978).

Controls. Along with community, family, and relationship context variables, I included several individual-level control variables so as to reduce the risk of spurious associations between our primary variables of interest and marital perspectives. Perhaps most importantly, I included several indicators of general conventionality, including traditional gender role attitudes, conventional goals, educational aspirations, and religious involvement. Traditional gender role attitudes were assessed with seven items that asked respondents the extent to which they agreed, for instance, that "women are much happier if they stay home and take care of their children" and "women should be concerned with

their duties of child-rearing and house tending, rather than with their careers.” Response categories ranged from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”), and items were averaged to form an index of *traditional gender role ideology* (Cronbach’s alpha = .72). Conventional goals were assessed with seven questions that asked about the degree to which respondents viewed it as important to achieve conventional goals (e.g. have children, secure income & stable job, be a religious person, save money for the future, etc.). Response categories ranged from 1 (“not at all important”) to 5 (“extremely important”), and items were averaged to form an index of *conventional goals* (Cronbach’s alpha = .77). No items about marriage were included in the conventional goals index. Religious involvement was assessed via four questions asking about the frequency with which respondents attended church, participated in a discussion or class on religion, attended social events at a church, and spent time with friends from church. Response categories ranged from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“daily”), and items were averaged to form an index of *religious involvement* (Cronbach’s alpha = .87). Finally, educational aspirations were assessed with a single item that asked how far respondents would like to go in school. Those who indicated that they did not want a college education were coded 1 for not aspiring toward a 4-year college degree (*no college*). In addition to these measures of conventionality, I controlled for whether or not the respondent was currently enrolled in school (1 = *in school*) and whether or not the respondent reported having any biological children (1 = *parent*).

Plan of Analysis

An exploration of the ways in which community, family, and relationship contexts influence marital perspectives demands the use of multilevel models. The

structure of the FACHS data, individuals nested within community contexts, allows for this multilevel modeling. I utilized HLM 7.0 (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, Congdon, and du Toit 2011) to conduct hierarchical linear models (HLMs) for marital benefits and marital costs and Bernoulli models, a type of hierarchical generalized linear model (HGLM), for marital importance and marital salience. A standard HLM analysis is inappropriate when modeling binary outcomes because such outcomes necessarily entail nonlinearity and nonnormality of random effects. Further, the residuals associated with binary outcomes tend to be heteroskedastic. The presence of nonlinearity, nonnormality, and heteroskedasticity violate the assumptions of standard HLM (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). The Bernoulli model, along with other types of HGLMs, allows for non-linear associations and non-normally distributed errors, making it much more appropriate for analyzing the two binary dependent variables used here.

Both the HLMs and HGLMs were specified as having two levels, individuals (level 1) and communities (level 2). The level-1 model utilized individual, relationship, and family characteristics to explain within-community variation in marital perspectives, and the level-2 model used community characteristics to explain between-community variation in the mean level of marital perspectives. I began all analyses with an “empty” model, or a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with a random intercept. This model allowed us to partition the variance in marital perspectives into its within- and between-community components. It also provided us with the average community mean for each marital perspective. Following this empty model, predictors were entered into the conditional model in blocks, with individual-level (level-1) controls entered first, community (level-2) predictors entered second, family (level-1) predictors entered third,

and relationship (level-1) predictors entered last. After entering the set of community predictors, a cross-level interaction between *percent female*, a community-level characteristic, and *female*, an individual-level characteristic was examined to allow for the possibility that community sex ratios, coded as the percent female in a given community, have differential effects on the attitudes of men and women, as has been shown with marital and relationship behavior (Guttentag and Secord 1983; South and Lloyd 1992; Warner, Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2011). Further, upon entering relationship factors, level-1 relationship-by-gender interaction terms were also examined given the potentially gendered links between current relationship experiences and marital perspectives. Although models were built in this stepwise fashion, I preserve space by presenting only the final models in the table of results that follows.

RESULTS

Table 2.1 presents the pairwise correlations, means, standard deviations, and ranges for all study variables. Several patterns are noteworthy in these descriptive data. First, the means presented for general marital importance and marital salience provide empirical support for the theoretical distinction between “public morality” and “personal choice” attitudes made by Hakim (2003) and called attention to by Carroll and colleagues (2007). Whereas over half (57.3%) of respondents at Wave IV indicated that having a good marriage was extremely important, only about one quarter (25.9%) responded affirmatively when asked if “getting married is the most important part of my life.” Further, as shown in the bivariate correlations, marital salience and marital importance were only moderately but significantly correlated ($r = .22, p < .05$). Hence, respondents

Table 2.1: Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study 1 Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Marital benefits	1.00												
2 Marital costs	0.00	1.00											
3 General marital importance	0.30	-0.08	1.00										
4 Marital salience	0.33	0.11	0.22	1.00									
5 Female	-0.14	-0.11	0.02	0.00	1.00								
6 Age	0.00	0.01	-0.09	-0.01	0.05	1.00							
7 Religious involvement	0.15	-0.12	0.22	0.21	0.09	-0.27	1.00						
8 Traditional gender attitudes	0.08	0.31	-0.13	0.09	-0.21	0.03	-0.08	1.00					
9 Conventional goals	0.25	-0.05	0.61	0.17	0.06	-0.05	0.20	-0.13	1.00				
10 Educational aspirations (1 = no degree)	-0.05	0.11	-0.19	0.01	-0.13	-0.03	-0.04	0.19	-0.38	1.00			
11 In school	0.08	-0.08	0.16	-0.01	0.07	-0.22	0.15	-0.17	0.29	-0.28	1.00		
12 Parent	-0.09	0.02	-0.08	-0.01	0.16	0.22	-0.12	0.01	-0.02	-0.01	-0.18	1.00	
13 Married-parent family	0.05	-0.03	0.07	0.05	0.00	-0.01	0.11	-0.11	0.09	-0.08	0.12	-0.07	1.00
14 Parents' marital quality ^a	0.02	0.10	0.00	0.00	-0.03	-0.10	0.08	-0.04	0.20	0.08	0.08	-0.12	.
15 Relationship quality with PC	0.03	-0.05	0.07	-0.01	-0.03	-0.06	0.07	-0.15	0.14	-0.10	0.07	-0.06	0.03
16 Household income	0.04	-0.08	0.06	-0.03	0.05	-0.03	0.05	-0.16	0.06	-0.09	0.11	-0.10	0.36
17 PC education	0.01	0.00	-0.01	-0.09	-0.02	0.03	-0.05	-0.16	0.04	-0.09	0.16	-0.07	0.22
18 % population Black	0.03	-0.02	-0.01	0.07	-0.01	-0.15	0.15	0.01	0.07	0.08	0.04	-0.03	-0.05
19 % population female	0.02	-0.03	0.09	0.05	0.00	-0.07	0.07	0.01	0.11	-0.09	0.08	-0.01	-0.05
20 Community disadvantage	-0.09	-0.01	-0.08	0.00	-0.02	0.03	0.02	0.06	-0.02	0.06	-0.08	0.05	-0.17
21 Female divorce rate (#/1000)	-0.11	0.06	-0.01	-0.05	0.03	0.21	-0.13	0.03	0.01	-0.09	-0.03	-0.02	0.03
22 Romantic partner	0.09	-0.06	0.13	0.07	0.09	0.01	0.05	0.03	0.10	0.01	-0.06	0.12	-0.06
23 Relationship quality ^b	0.22	-0.20	0.22	0.15	0.09	-0.09	0.25	-0.09	0.21	-0.09	0.15	-0.09	-0.01

N = 644 respondents nested within 46 communities; Shaded cells indicate significance at $p < .05$.

^a Marital quality measured for those with married-parent families.

^b Relationship quality measured for those reporting a steady romantic partner.

Table 2.1: Continued

	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	Mean	Std	Min.	Max
1 Marital benefits									3.55	0.77	1.00	5.00
2 Marital costs									2.89	0.66	1.00	5.00
3 General marital importance									0.57	0.50	0.00	1.00
4 Marital salience									0.26	0.44	0.00	1.00
5 Female									0.56	0.50	0.00	1.00
6 Age									18.82	0.91	16.00	21.00
7 Religious involvement									1.73	0.80	1.00	5.00
8 Traditional gender attitudes									2.33	0.60	1.00	3.86
9 Conventional goals									4.39	0.53	2.57	5.00
10 Educational aspirations (1 = no degree)									0.18	0.39	0.00	1.00
11 In school									0.66	0.47	0.00	1.00
12 Parent									0.17	0.38	0.00	1.00
13 Married-parent family									0.22	0.41	0.00	1.00
14 Parents' marital quality ^a	1.00								0.00	2.37	-7.92	3.86
15 Relationship quality with PC	0.15	1.00							-0.07	2.27	-12.49	3.30
16 Household income	0.05	0.04	1.00						2.65	2.25	0.00	20.11
17 PC education	0.07	0.02	0.42	1.00					12.47	2.10	2.00	20.00
18 % population Black	0.00	-0.01	-0.14	-0.19	1.00				44.95	25.29	1.05	90.67
19 % population female	-0.12	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.41	1.00			53.65	2.66	48.58	61.63
20 Community disadvantage	0.04	0.00	-0.29	-0.26	0.58	0.24	1.00		0.01	0.79	-1.54	2.28
21 Female divorce rate (#/1000)	-0.12	-0.09	0.08	0.15	-0.02	0.27	0.12	1.00	89.01	32.74	29.49	194.19
22 Romantic partner	-0.01	0.01	-0.03	-0.06	0.04	-0.01	0.01	-0.05	0.53	0.50	0.00	1.00
23 Relationship quality ^b	0.30	0.12	-0.06	-0.02	0.09	0.08	0.02	-0.15	-0.05	2.27	-11.21	3.79

N = 644 respondents nested within 46 communities; Shaded cells indicate significance at $p < .05$.

^a Marital quality measured for those with married-parent families.

^b Relationship quality measured for those reporting a steady romantic partner.

seem to be making a distinction between the general value of marriage and the importance of getting married at the current point in the life course. That is, while marriage was important to most, it was the primary focus of the transition to adulthood for a minority.

Also of note is that the young African American respondents in the sample, on average, viewed marriage as being fairly beneficial ($\bar{x} = 3.55$, range = 1-5) and as having a moderate amount of costs ($\bar{x} = 2.89$, range = 1-5). Interestingly, perceived marital benefits and marital costs were not significantly correlated ($r = .00$, $p > .05$). Each was significantly correlated with general marital importance and marital salience, however. Perceived marital benefits, for instance, was positively associated with both marital importance ($r = .30$, $p < .05$) and marital salience ($r = .33$, $p < .05$). Marital costs, however, were negatively associated with marital importance ($r = -.08$, $p < .05$) and positively associated with marital salience ($r = .11$, $p < .05$). As shown in the correlation matrix, gender was significantly associated with marital benefits and costs but was not significantly associated with general marital importance or marital salience. Compared to the young men in the sample, the young women perceived fewer marital benefits ($r = -.14$, $p < .05$) and fewer marital costs ($r = -.11$, $p < .05$). Such bivariate correlations suggest a nuanced story of young African Americans' marital perspectives, as costs and benefits were not related in a zero-sum fashion, and the salience of marriage was not suggestive of perceived personal gain (reduced costs and increased benefits).

Other descriptive findings help provide context for the sample and the results that follow. On average, respondents' families earned \$26,500 per year, and primary caregivers had obtained 12.47 years of education by the time their target child was in the

5th grade. Less than one quarter (21.9%) of respondents was living in a married-parent family at the initiation of the study. At Wave IV, the beginning of the transition to adulthood, the majority of respondents aspired toward a 4-year college degree, with only 18.2% indicating that they did not want to graduate from college with a Bachelor's degree. Correspondingly, the majority (66.3%) of respondents was enrolled in school at this time. Nearly one-fifth (17.4%) of respondents indicated having already made the transition to parenthood. As shown in the bivariate correlations, the young parents in the sample viewed marriage as having fewer benefits ($r = -.09, p < .05$) and as being less important ($r = -.08, p < .05$) than their nonparenting peers.

Empty Multilevel Models

Results of the empty HLMs and HGLMs (not shown but available from the authors) provided us with the amount of variance in marital perspectives that was due to community clustering. These models revealed that for three out of the four marital perspectives, there was significant between-community variation. In the random effects ANOVA model for marital benefits, for instance, the level-1 variance (σ^2), or the variability in perceived marital benefits that lies between individuals within a given community context, was 0.57. The level-2 variance (τ_{00}), or the variability in marital benefits that lies between communities, was 0.01. With a total variance of 0.58, the intraclass correlation (ICC) for marital benefits, or the percentage of the total variance that lies between the level-2 units, was .02 [$ICC = \hat{\tau}_{00}/(\hat{\tau}_{00} + \sigma^2)$]. Hence, 2% of the variance in perceived marital benefits was located between communities. Although seemingly small, this variation in perceived marital benefits across communities was marginally significant ($X^2 = 61.44, p = 0.052$). Using the same approach for marital costs,

it was determined that 3% of the total variance in marital costs was attributable to community context and that this variation was statistically significant ($X^2 = 63.86$, $p < .05$). Likewise, there was substantial between-community variation in the general importance of marriage ($X^2 = 65.22$, $p < .05$), but not in marital salience ($X^2 = 52.07$, $p = .218$).

In addition to partitioning the variance in our outcomes, the empty models provided us with the average community-level mean of marital benefits and costs (HLMs) and the average probability of viewing marriage as importance and salient (HGLMs). As indicated by the estimate for the fixed effects (γ_{00}), the mean level of marital benefits and marital costs perceived across communities was 3.55 and 2.90, respectively. As for marital importance and marital salience, the fixed effects (γ_{00}) in these cases represented the average log-odds of importance and salience across communities. For marital importance, this fixed effect was 0.29, which corresponded to a probability of .57 [$1/(1+\exp(-0.29))$]. For marital salience, this fixed effect was -1.06, which corresponded to a probability of .26 [$1/(1+\exp(1.06))$]. Hence, these empty models allow us to conclude that the average probability of marital importance for a respondent in a typical community (a community with a random effect of 0) is 57%, while the average probability of marital salience for a respondent in a typical community is 26%.

Conditional Multilevel Models

Table 2.2 presents the results for the fully conditional models, with community, family, and relationship context effects on marital perspectives. Given that the purpose of the study was to explore the role of these different contexts in predicting variation in

Table 2.2: HLM and HGLM Results Predicting Marital Perspectives at Wave IV

	Marriage benefits ^b 1	Marriage costs ^b 2	Marital importance ^c 3	Marital Salience ^c 4
<u>Individual Attributes</u> (Wave IV)				
Female	-0.117 (0.092)	-0.038 (0.049)	-0.310 (0.238)	-0.048 (0.227)
Age ^a	0.079 * (0.036)	-0.023 (0.029)	-0.053 (0.114)	0.144 (0.095)
Religious involvement ^a	0.099 * (0.041)	-0.064 † (0.033)	0.423 * (0.169)	0.494 *** (0.106)
Traditional gender attitudes ^a	0.124 *** (0.031)	0.308 *** (0.051)	-0.439 * (0.196)	0.424 * (0.174)
Conventional goals ^a	0.340 *** (0.063)	0.058 (0.048)	3.842 *** (0.327)	0.845 ** (0.292)
Educational aspirations (1 = no degree)	0.022 (0.070)	0.095 (0.059)	0.510 † (0.273)	0.287 (0.268)
In school	0.014 (0.067)	-0.024 (0.048)	-0.362 (0.260)	-0.305 (0.187)
Parent	-0.134 † (0.068)	0.041 (0.059)	-0.530 † (0.286)	-0.025 (0.254)
<u>Relationship Experiences</u> (Wave IV)				
Romantic partner	0.265 ** (0.078)	-0.092 * (0.043)	0.605 ** (0.230)	0.175 (0.212)
RP x Female	-0.239 * (0.107)			
Quality of relationship	0.215 *** (0.050)	-0.111 ** (0.035)	0.351 * (0.149)	0.258 (0.175)
Quality x Female	-0.140 † (0.073)			
<u>Family background</u> (Wave I)				
Married-parent family	0.007 (0.087)	0.021 (0.058)	0.020 (0.344)	0.314 (0.243)
Parents' marital quality	-0.033 (0.068)	0.084 (0.052)	-0.411 † (0.210)	-0.064 (0.186)
Relationship quality with PC ^a	-0.008 (0.012)	0.003 (0.011)	-0.035 (0.055)	-0.031 (0.049)
Household income ^a	0.011 (0.017)	-0.020 (0.016)	0.046 (0.056)	-0.016 (0.054)
PC education ^a	0.000 (0.014)	0.014 (0.011)	-0.109 * (0.055)	-0.081 (0.050)

Table 2.2: Continued

	Marriage benefits ^b 1	Marriage costs ^b 2	Marital importance ^c 3	Marital Salience ^c 4
<u>Community context (Wave I)</u>				
% population Black ^a	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.013 ** (0.005)	0.005 (0.004)
% population female ^a	0.005 (0.011)	-0.031 * (0.016)	0.102 * (0.042)	0.042 (0.036)
% pop female x Female		0.038 * (0.017)		
Community disadvantage ^a	-0.107 ** (0.040)	-0.051 * (0.025)	-0.162 (0.151)	-0.223 (0.182)
Female divorce rate (#/1000) ^a	-0.002 * (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.003)
Intercept	3.566 ***	2.941 ***	0.416	-1.163 ***

Notes: N = 644 respondents nested within 46 communities; Unstandardized coefficients

†p<.10, *p<.05, *p<.01, *p<.001

^a Continuous variables have been grand mean-centered

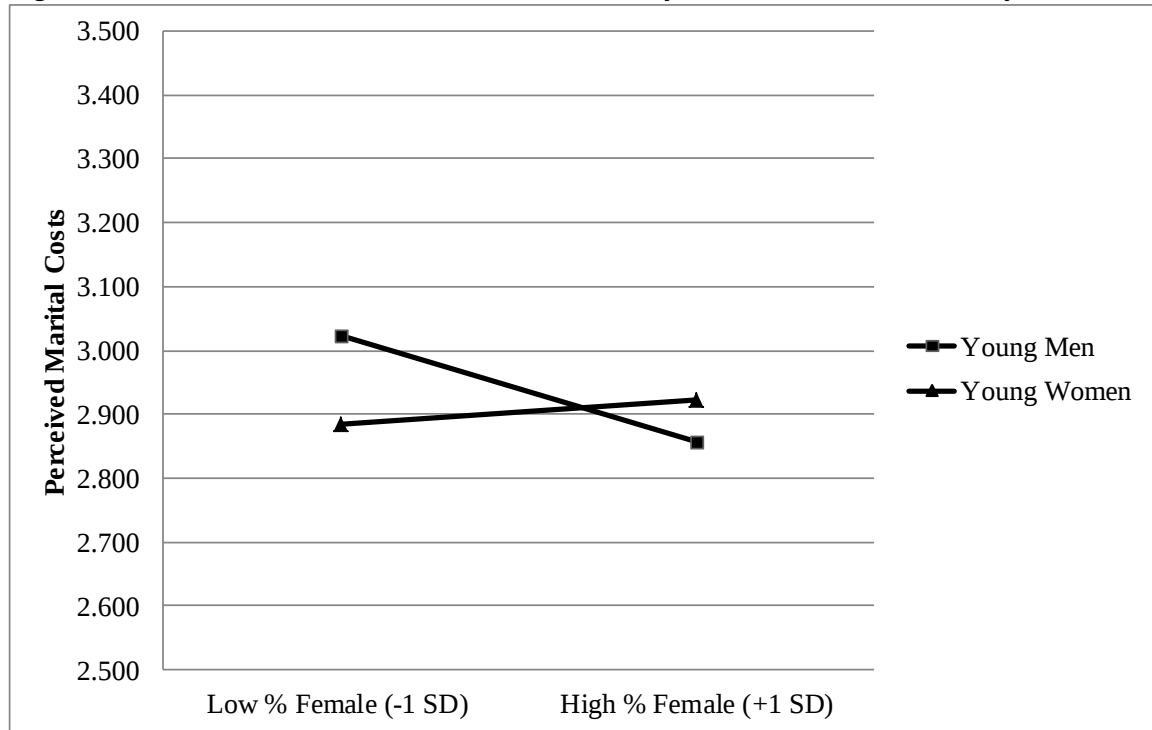
^b Results of HLMs with restricted maximum likelihood.

^c Results of HGLM (Bernoulli model) unit-specific models.

marital perspectives, I discuss the results by context of development rather than by outcome. I begin with community context. All of the community context indicators were significantly predictive of at least one marital perspective, yet no indicator of community context was consistently predictive across all outcomes. Independent of the individual, relationship, and family indicators in the models, the percent of the population that was Black, for instance, was negatively predictive of general marital importance ($\gamma = -.01$, $p < .01$). For each percentage point increase in the Black population, the mean odds of viewing marriage as important decreased by about 1.3%. The percent population female was also significantly but positively associated with general marital importance ($\gamma = .10$, $p < .05$) and significantly and negatively predictive of marital costs ($\gamma = -.03$, $p < .05$). This latter association varied by gender, however, such that the percent population female was more negatively predictive of marital costs for men than for women. This gendered association is modeled in Figure 1.1. Simple slope tests indicated that the slope for men but not for women significantly differed from zero, indicating that the percent female in one's childhood community reduced marital costs for young men but was not associated with young women's perceptions of marital costs.

In addition to the effects of the racial and gender makeup of the community, community disadvantage proved negatively predictive of both marital benefits ($\gamma = -.11$, $p < .01$) and marital costs ($\gamma = -.05$, $p < .05$). When standardized, a one standard deviation increase in community disadvantage was predictive of an 11% standard deviation decrease in average marital benefits and a 6% standard deviation decrease in average marital costs. Finally, female divorce rate was significantly predictive of only marital benefits ($\gamma = -.002$, $p < .05$), suggesting that, on average, young men and women viewed

Figure 2.1: Association Between Percent Female in Community and Perceived Marital Costs by Gender



marriage as having fewer benefits in communities with greater proportions of divorced women. With the entrance of the community predictors into our models, the significant random effects for marital benefits, marital costs, and general marital importance were reduced to nonsignificance, indicating that the community-level variables attended to here significantly explained between-community variation in marital perspectives. In subsequent models, including the full models presented in Table 2.2, the intercept was specified as a fixed effect.

As can be seen in Table 2.2, the prospective measures of family characteristics proved relatively weak predictors of marital perspectives. Although primary caregiver education was associated with reduced marital importance ($\beta = -.11, p < .05$), none of our other indicators of family context was significantly predictive of marital perspectives at conventional levels of significance. Given the relative lack of findings with regard to family characteristics, post-hoc tests with more intricate indicators of family structure were constructed so that potential differences between married-biological-parent families and single-parent and divorced families could be assessed. None of these comparisons proved significant either, however. The general lack of effects was not the case with relationship characteristics, however.

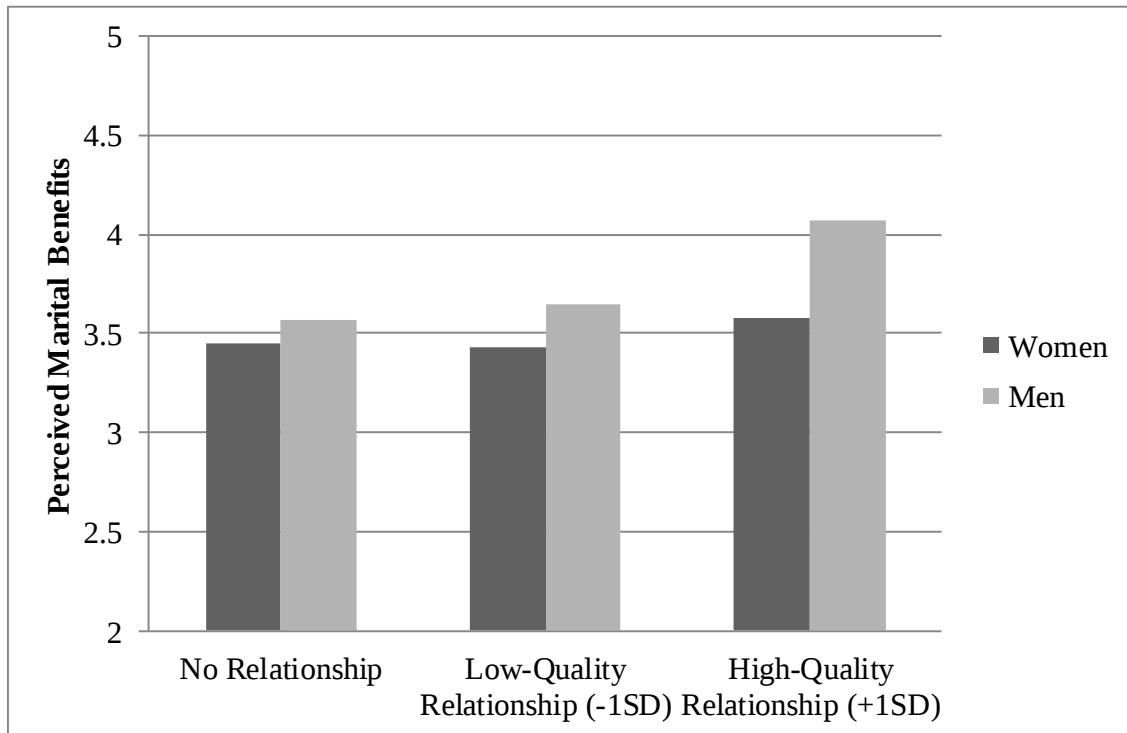
Along with individual-level control variables, like religious involvement, conventional goals, and gender role attitudes, romantic relationship status and quality proved to be among the most consistent predictors of marital perspectives. The presence of a romantic partner, for instance, was associated with greater perceived marital benefits ($\beta = .13, p < .05$; coefficient for non-interactive model), fewer perceived marital costs ($\beta = -.09, p < .05$), and a greater importance placed upon having a good marriage ($\beta = .61, p$

< .01). Likewise, the quality of these relationships moderated the partner effects, such that higher quality relationships were associated with greater perceived benefits ($\beta = .12$, $p < .001$), fewer perceived costs ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .01$), and a higher log-odds of viewing marriage as extremely important ($\beta = .35$, $p < .01$). Importantly, the associations between both the presence and quality of romantic relationships and perceived marital benefits differed significantly by gender. These gendered effects suggested that the positive associations between both relationship status and relationship quality and the perceived benefits of marriage were significantly weaker for young women than they were for young men. These interactions are presented in Figure 2.2.

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study explored how community, family, and relationship contexts influence multiple domains of marital perspectives among African Americans on the cusp of transitioning to adulthood. The meaning and importance of marriage during this developmental period has been posited to influence relationship and nonrelationship experiences across the transition to adulthood (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007) and, potentially, the remainder of the life course (Raley, Crissey, and Muller 2007). Despite renewed interest in the role of marital attitudes in explaining individual and, in particular, group differences in family-related behavior (Browning and Burrington 2006; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Raley and Sweeney 2007), the role of multiple contexts of development on the formation of such attitudes is not very well understood. Utilizing a life-course sensitive, multilevel framework and prospective measures of community and family context, the current study provides strong evidence for the effects of childhood community context and relationship experiences on the development of

Figure 2.2: Predicted Value of Perceived Marital Benefits by Gender and Relationship Characteristics



young African Americans' marital perspectives and fairly weak evidence for the effect of family background.

The lack of findings attributable to family background may be attributable to several factors. First, the childhood characteristics attended to here were prospective reports from the respondents' primary caregivers and hence less subject to recall or single-reporter bias, both of which may have inflated coefficients in previous research. Second, the link between family background and marital perspectives may be a spurious one, attributable to neighborhood characteristics, or one mediated by relationship experiences. Given the largely null bivariate correlations between family background and marital perspectives in the current study, however, it is unlikely that the family background effects have simply been accounted for by other variables in our models. Third, and perhaps most likely, the current study utilized an all-African American sample. Past research has shown that family-of-origin effects, like those attended to here, on many relationship and non-relationship behaviors tend to be weaker or nonexistent for Blacks than for Whites (Amato and Bruce 1991; Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones 2002; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Phillips and Sweeney 2005). This has been posited to be the case because of the greater role that extended families play in Black versus White households and because of the added stress implicit in many Black neighborhoods that makes family-of-origin experiences less salient (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, and Wilson 2000). In addition to being less robust predictors of behaviors for Blacks than Whites, it is plausible that family-of-origin experiences may also be less robust predictors of marital perspectives for Blacks than for Whites. Future work with more racially diverse samples may be able to shed light on this possibility.

Unlike family background, community context and relationship experiences proved important predictors of marital perspectives. It is important to note that relationship and community effects maintained significance even after accounting for individual-level measures of conventionality, like religious involvement, gender role attitudes, and conventional goals. The implications of these findings are twofold. First, it appears that marital perspectives are not simply conceptually and empirically synonymous with conventionality (Johnson, Anderson, and Stith 2011). Second, the results suggest that childhood community context is not related to marital perspectives solely through its effects on individual traits and relationship experiences. In other words, community context matters in predicting marital perspectives above and beyond its potential effects on individual conventionality and relationship experiences.

All of the community context indicators attended to in the current study have been previously examined for their associations with marital behavior (Albrecht 2001; Bryant and Wickrama 2005; Oppenheimer 1988; South and Lloyd 1992), and, by and large, the present findings with regards to marital perspectives are similar to those found for marital behavior. For instance, community disadvantage has been shown to be negatively predictive of marriage (Massey and Shibuya 1995; South and Crowder 1999) and was found here to be negatively associated with perceived benefits of marriage. Other findings regarding community context, those related to sex ratio, in particular, run counter to prior findings on behavior, however. For instance, a greater proportion of women in the FACHS respondents' childhood community was associated with fewer perceived marital costs, especially for young men, and greater marital importance for both young men and young women. Past work on sex ratios and marital behavior has

suggested two different models linking sex ratios to marital behaviors. The first, the marital search model (Becker 1981; Oppenheimer 1988), posits that the probability of marriage is highest for both men and women when the number of potential partners is greatest. Hence, women are more likely to marry when the proportion of women in a given setting is lowest, and men are more likely to marry when the proportion of women in a given setting is highest. Alternatively, the imbalanced sex ratio perspective suggests that, because men may not be motivated to commit to marriage when women are plentiful, their odds of marriage will be lowest when women are scarce (Kiecolt and Fossett 1997; Lloyd and South 1996). The current findings counter both the marital search model because the proportion of women in a given community was predictive of greater marital importance for both men and women rather than opposite effects for men and women. Likewise, the current findings counter the imbalanced sex ratio perspective because a greater proportion of women was predictive of fewer perceived marital costs for young men.

Rather than interpreting such findings as failing to support either model, however, it is likely that the measure of community sex ratio utilized here is not an accurate indicator of the practicality and opportunity costs associated with marriage, as it is intended to be in research on marriage behavior. Rather, the sex ratio indicator utilized here, measured prospectively in childhood, is likely indicative of the lessons about marriage inherent in the setting, or of the “virtual” structure (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011) dictating the marital schema available to youth in different communities. This interpretation lends itself to new avenues of research regarding the ways in which communities may provide not only the material structure in which people

make marital decisions but also the virtual structure dictating the marital perspectives available to young people prior to the time at which marital decisions are actually made.

Embedded within these community contexts, young African Americans' marital perspectives were associated with their relationship experiences. Importantly, both the presence of a romantic partner and the quality of the relationship were associated with an increased likelihood of marital importance, lower marital costs, and greater marital benefits, with this latter effect being stronger for young men than young women. This gendered finding is consistent with research suggesting that the symbolic value of marriage may be greater for young women than young men (Chasteen 1994; Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Sharp and Ganong 2007; Sharp and Ganong 2011) and, hence, that young women's views of marriage may be less affected than young men's by the characteristics of particular relationships. This gendered interpretation was not robust to other outcomes, however, and thus should be further examined in future research.

Importantly, the community and relationship contexts discussed so far proved much better predictors of generalized marital perspectives, like the perceived costs, benefits, and importance of marriage, than they did of marital salience. This is likely the case given that much theoretical and empirical work to date, from which our predictors were drawn, has focused on the former "public morality" attitudes rather than the latter "personal choice" (Hakim 2003) attitudes. The current findings suggest, however, that the contexts that make marriage salient for young Blacks beginning the transition to adulthood are different from those that increase the benefits, costs, or importance of marriage. Given the importance placed upon life-course specific measures of marital attitudes in new theories, like marital horizon theory (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al.

2007), and arguments made by Hakim (Hakim 2003) regarding the greater predictive power of these measures over more generalized measures, it is imperative that we begin to explore the seemingly unique contexts that make marriage salient for some young people during the transition to adulthood.

Although providing insight into the multiple contexts of development important in explaining variation in young African Americans' marital perspectives, the current study has several limitations. First, the age and race homogeneity of the sample restricts its generalizability. The experiences and attitudes of this subsample of youth, however, demand exploration given what seems to be their relatively unique experiences of the transition to adulthood (Settersten and Ray 2010b) and their disadvantaged status with regards to marital behavior (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Osterman, Wilson, and Mathews 2012; United States Census Bureau 2010). A second limitation is the study's single-item measure of marital salience. Although this measure arguably taps into the multiple domains of marital horizons (Carroll et al. 2007) by assessing the extent to which marriage is a primary focus of the respondents at the beginning of the transition to adulthood, more nuanced or multi-item measures of marital salience may be able to offer robustness checks of the patterns of results found here. Third, because few respondents were married by Wave IV, or even by Wave VI, of the FACHS, marital behavior could not be assessed. Hence, it is unclear the extent to which the marital perspectives assessed here are related to marital behavior and may mediate the effects of community, family, and relationship contexts on such behavior.

Despite these limitations, the current study points to the importance of childhood community and relationship contexts in explaining variation in marital perspectives

among young African Americans. In doing so, it calls attention to the often-overlooked heterogeneity among this population of young people (Bryant et al. 2008; Bryant et al. 2010; Raley and Sweeney 2007). The patterns of results point to the nuanced ways in which young Blacks come to think about marriage on the cusp of the transition to adulthood. It is only through developing this understanding further, particularly for life-course specific marital perspectives like marital salience, that we can properly assess the implications of these marital perspectives for behavior in both relationship and non-relationship domains across the transition to adulthood and later into the life course.

CHAPTER 3

STUDY 2: FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE: THE ROLE OF MARITAL PERSPECTIVES IN STRUCTURING EDUCATION, HEALTH-RISK BEHAVIORS, AND RELATIONAL EXPERIENCES ACROSS THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD³

³ Barr, Ashley B. and Ronald L. Simons. To be submitted to *Social Forces*.

ABSTRACT

Given demographic trends toward a later age at first marriage, the study of marriage has been increasingly detached from the study of the transition to adulthood, particularly among Blacks. Recent theoretical developments, however, like marital horizon theory (MHT), suggest that this movement away from the study of marriage early in the life course has been premature. MHT argues that, rather than being irrelevant to the transition to adulthood, young people's marital perspectives structure their experiences of this transition and, hence, help to explain variation within this developmental period. Using longitudinal data on several hundred unmarried African Americans drawn from the Family and Community Health Study, the current study tests the core proposition of MHT by examining the ways in which marital salience, relative to other more general marital perspectives, prior to the transition to adulthood structure trajectories of health-risk behaviors, education, and cohabitation experiences across this transition. Results support the core contention of MHT in each of the aforementioned domains. That is, young African Americans' marital perspectives, particularly marital salience, help to explain variation in health-risk behavior, educational attainment, and cohabitation experiences during the transition to adulthood. Importantly, however, the ways in which they do so complicate existing assumptions by both sociologists and policy makers regarding the benefits of a positive orientation toward marriage.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the United States has undergone what scholars have referred to as the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe 2010). Along with increased rates of maternal employment, cohabitation, divorce, and nonmarital childbearing, this transition has been accompanied by an extension of the transition to adulthood (Arnett 2004; Furstenberg Jr. 2010; Settersten and Ray 2010b; Tanner and Arnett 2009) marked by educational gains and delays in the timing of first marriage. The median age at first marriage, for instance, rose from a low of 22.5 for men and 20.7 for women in 1956 to 28.7 for men and 26.7 for women in 2010 (Payne 2012). For Blacks, those with the latest age at first marriage, the median age at first marriage has reached 30.8 for men and 30.3 for women. This rising age at first marriage means that for young people today, especially young Blacks, marriage is largely absent from the transition to adulthood. In fact, rather than a milestone accomplished during this transition, “marriage has become the culminating event,” or the capstone, of the transition to adulthood (Furstenberg Jr. 2010:75).

As Carroll and colleagues (Carroll et al. 2007) argue, developmental and family scholars have responded to these demographic changes in the age at first marriage by shifting their focus away from the study of marriage among emerging adults. The underlying assumption of this shift seems to be that the absence of marriage implies a growing irrelevance of marriage during the transition to adulthood. This assumption, however, has been challenged by two seemingly disparate lines of work, one operating from the perspective of marital horizon theory (MHT) and the other operating from the tradition of critical race and gender scholarship. Proponents of marital horizon theory, for

instance, argue that young people's outlook on marriage helps to determine the extent to which the transition to adulthood is used as a period of anticipatory socialization (Merton 1957) for marriage and, hence, helps to explain variation among young people across this transition. Likewise, although operating from a different theoretical tradition, critical race and gender scholars have argued that the "politics of respectability" (Higginbotham 1993) surrounding marriage today give the ideal and prospect of marriage substantial power in shaping the lives of women, particularly African American women (Collins 1990; Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Jenkins 2007; Moore 2011). Although coming from two distinct perspectives, marital horizon theory and critical race and gender scholars reject the assumption that the absence of marriage indicates an irrelevance of marriage. To the contrary, both lines of work suggest that, even in its absence, marriage can and often does play a central role in shaping people's lives.

The current study tests this basic proposition by examining the ways in which marital perspectives, or one's outlook on marriage, help to shape variation in young people's experiences of the transition to adulthood. More specifically, utilizing a longitudinal sample of young African Americans, the current study asks the extent to which marital perspectives on the cusp of the transition to adulthood shape the health-risk behaviors, education, and romantic relationship trajectories of unmarried African Americans' across the transition to adulthood. Tests of marital horizon theory thus far have been limited in at least three respects. First, despite explicit claims by marital horizon theorists that the meaning of marriage during the transition to adulthood "impact[s] trajectories of individual development...and family formation patterns" (Carroll et al. 2009:350), tests of marital horizon theory have been largely restricted to

explaining variation in health-risk behaviors. This focus on health-risk behaviors neglects principles of life course theory regarding the interdependence of life course domains (Elder Jr. 1985; Elder Jr. 1998; Guzzo 2006), a contention which is implicit in MHT itself. Second, although such work often finds support for MHT, this work is exclusively cross-sectional and thus limited in its ability to test the core hypotheses of the theory regarding trajectories across the transition to adulthood. Third, tests of MHT have utilized primarily White, college student samples, thus ensuring a certain degree of homogeneity in the experience of the transition to adulthood and disregarding insights from critical gender and race scholars. By examining multiple life course domains relevant to the transition to adulthood and by drawing upon a longitudinal, heterogeneous sample of young African Americans, the current study overcomes all of these limitations.

In addition to providing a more vigilant test of the core tenet of MHT, one informed by critical race and gender scholarship, understanding the influence of marital perspectives across multiple life course domains is important for broader reasons. First, in assessing four different types of marital perspectives, the current study adds nuance to our understanding of the link between attitudes and behavior. As argued by the proponents of MHT, as well as others like Hakim (2003), not all attitudes are expected to be equally important in explaining individual variation in behavior. A more intricate understanding of *which* marital attitudes are most useful in predicting a range of behaviors, including anticipatory socialization behaviors, can provide insight into age-old and ongoing sociological debates about human agency throughout the life course (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011; Merton 1957; Raley and Sweeney 2007; Sassler and Schoen 1999). Finally, in an era when the normative imperative to

marry has declined (Thornton 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), an exploration of the role that marital perspectives play in structuring the lives of young Blacks—perhaps the group for whom demographic trends suggest this normative imperative is all but dead—can address broader questions about the continued relevance of marriage in the United States today.

THE RELEVANCE OF MARRIAGE DURING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

In tandem with a rising age at first marriage, marriage and family life in the United States has undergone other substantial changes. As Smock (2000; Smock and Manning 2010) notes, cohabitation has become commonplace and is now the modal route to marriage in the United States. Roughly 40% of cohabiting unions contain children (Smock and Manning 2010). In 1970, roughly 10% of children were born outside of a marital union. By 2007, nearly 4 in 10 births were outside of marriage (Ventura 2009). Along with increased rates of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing, the proportion of never-married Americans has reached a high of about one in three in 2010 (United States Census Bureau 2010). For those who do marry, the divorce rate in 2010 was roughly 17.5 per 1,000 adult women in first marriages. Correspondingly, the percentage of American adults currently married (51.6%, United States Census Bureau 2010) is at its lowest level ever recorded (Cohn, Passel, Wang, and Livingston 2011). These rapidly changing patterns of family formation have led scholars (e.g. Wilcox and Cherlin 2011) and the general public (e.g. Ludden 2011; Luscombe 2010) to question the relevance of marriage in the lives of Americans, particularly young Americans, today. In fact, since the late 1980s, scholars have argued that the normative imperative to marry has declined over time, as marriage has become viewed in more individualistic terms (Cherlin 2004;

Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993; Thornton 1989). Despite the growing acceptance of nonmarriage (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001) and the relative absence of marriage from the lives of young people, Carroll and colleagues (Carroll et al. 2007) argue that the informal understanding among scholars that marriage is not pertinent (or at least less pertinent than it once was) to scholarship on young people has been misguided.

Marital Horizon Theory

In their explication of marital horizon theory, Carroll and colleagues (2007) argue that “scholars have largely disregarded the role of marriage during the transition to adulthood” (220). They suggest, however, that this disregard is the result of the mistaken assumption that the absence of marriage deems it largely irrelevant. Marital horizon theory asserts that, rather than being irrelevant during the transition to adulthood, marriage actually helps to guide this transition.

Marital horizon theory places the transition to adulthood within a family life cycle perspective in that this transition is viewed as one in which young people prepare for the shift from the family of origin to the family of formation. Because marriage is central to Americans’ notion of family (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, and Steelman 2010), this transition away from one’s family of origin toward an eventual family of formation engages what Carroll and colleagues (2007) refer to as “marriage philosophies,” or one’s general “outlook or approach to marriage in relation to his or her current situation” (224). According to marital horizon theory, these marital philosophies, what I refer to in the remainder of the proposal as marital perspectives or marital paradigms (Willoughby, Hall, and Luczak 2013), determine the extent to which young people use the transition to adulthood as a period of anticipatory socialization (Merton 1957) for marriage.

Marital horizon theory highlights three distinct components of marital perspectives that are important during the transition to adulthood: the relative importance of marriage, the desired placement/timing of marriage in the life course, and the criteria that individuals view as important for marriage readiness. Of primary importance in this theory, then, are not the generalized, abstract attitudes toward marriage that are of interest in much of the literature to date—attitudes Hakim (2003) refers to as “public morality” attitudes—but the more specialized, concrete attitudes indicating the salience of marriage during the transition to adulthood. That is, MHT emphasizes that

“It is not the general importance that emerging adults place on marriage that affects trajectories through this time period but rather the relative priority placed on marriage compared to other aspects of their current life (e.g., education, career, or peers). Although most emerging adults value marriage and hope for it in the future, emerging adults who would be willing to prioritize marriage in relation to other goals in life will likely prepare and plan for marriage differently than their peers.” (Carroll et al. 2007:225)

The more life-course specific attitudes emphasized in MHT are more in line with what Hakim (2003) refers to as “personal choice” attitudes. In the MHT framework, then, young people who view marriage as relatively important, desire marriage relatively soon in the life course, and believe marriage readiness to entail internally-defined (e.g. personal maturation) rather than socially-defined (e.g. completing education) competencies would be more likely than their peers to view the transition to adulthood as a period of anticipatory socialization for marriage and, hence, to adjust their behavior in

preparation for marriage and the role of spouse (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007). Ultimately, then, marital horizon theory asserts that, although marriage is largely absent during the transition to adulthood, the meaning of and importance placed upon marriage become central to the experience of transitioning to adulthood and that different marital perspectives help to explain the large degree of heterogeneity among young people's experience of this transition (Arnett 2004; Settersten and Ray 2010a; Settersten and Ray 2010b).

As indicated above, tests of marital horizon theory, however, have been limited to cross-sectional samples of primarily White college students. Such a focus is problematic not only because college-student samples restrict the variability of experiences during the transition to adulthood but also because the demographic changes that have led family scholars away from the study of marriage during the transition to adulthood are more pronounced among African Americans. For instance, the median age at first marriage is over 30 for Blacks (Payne 2012), and nearly three quarters of births among non-Hispanic Blacks take place outside of marriage (Martin et al. 2012). Likewise, although the majority of Americans marry, roughly 10 percent of White men and women and 25 percent of Black men and women over age 35 have never been married (Elliott, Krivickas, Brault, and Kreider 2012). Among first marriages, the divorce rate for Black women (30.4 per 1,000) was nearly double that of their White (16.3 per 1,000), Hispanic (18.1 per 1,000), and Asian (10 per 1,000) counterparts in 2010 (Gibbs and Payne 2011). Such racialized demographic trends suggest that if marriage is presumed irrelevant for young people, a presumption Carroll and colleagues (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007) call into question, it may be presumed particularly irrelevant in the lives of young

African Americans. Like marital horizon theory, however, the work of critical race and gender scholars forces us to reconsider the extent to which the absence of marriage, particularly among African Americans, implies an irrelevance of marriage.

Critical Race and Gender Scholarship

Critical race and gender scholars have problematized the culture and rhetoric of marriage politics in the United States today. In doing so, they have highlighted the ways in which our understanding of marriage is entangled in a gendered and racialized “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham 1993), one that problematizes singlehood for all women and pathologizes Black intimacies and Black families, in particular (Collins 1990; Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Jenkins 2007). In documenting the effects of this pathologization on the lived experiences of Black women, Collins (2005) argues that love “is profoundly affected by the political, economic, and social conditions of the new racism” (249). More specifically, the respectability politics surrounding marriage are thought to imbue heterosexual marriage and partnership with substantial symbolic significance, particularly for women. For instance, both Chasteen (1994) and Sharp (2007) have shown that, in their largely White samples, women problematized singlehood and that marriage, or at least the prospect of it, provided women with symbolic capital of “looking less out of place to others,” of “appear[ing] ‘normal’ and appropriate” (Chasteen 1994:322) in their everyday environments. For Black women, in particular, heterosexual partnership allowed them to “claim the mantle of Black respectability” (Collins 2005:253), what Jenkins (2007) refers to as the “salvific wish” (188).

Such work by critical race and gender scholars is far removed, both theoretically and methodologically, from that on marital horizon theory. Despite this division, both lines of work reject the assumption that the general absence of marriage implies its irrelevance. Instead, both marital horizon theory and critical race and gender scholars assert marriage often looms large over the lives of the unmarried. That is, marriage is often salient in the lives of the unmarried, and this salience has substantial implications in their lives. Evidence in the literature thus far suggests that this may be the case in at least three life course domains during the transition to adulthood: health-risk behaviors, education, and nonmarital romantic relationships.

Marital Perspectives and Health-Risk Behaviors

Much research has documented a reduction in risk-taking behaviors upon entry into marriage (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006) and other committed romantic relationships (Simons and Barr 2012). Given marital horizon theory's emphasis on the ways in which young people might adjust their behaviors during the transition to adulthood in preparation for marriage, it is not surprising that support for marital horizon theory thus far rests upon a series of studies examining the link between young people's marital perspectives and their engagement in risky behaviors, like participation in risky sex, drinking, and drug use. Carroll and colleagues (Carroll et al. 2007), for instance, show that, controlling for religiosity, current dating status, and personality traits, young men and women who consider getting married to be a current priority and, hence, desire an earlier age at marriage engage in less substance use and are less sexually permissive than those who do not. Willoughby and Dworkin (2009) report similar findings in that young people with the "desire to marry now" engage in less

marijuana use and binge drinking behavior than those without such a desire. Such findings have led proponents of marital horizon theory to assert that the well-documented changes in risk-taking behavior thought to be associated with the transition to marriage might actually be part of the anticipatory socialization process prior to marriage (Carroll et al. 2007).

Although insightful, all of the work linking marital perspectives to health-risk behavior has been cross-sectional and thus limited in its ability to test the core claims of marital horizon theory. The current study uses growth models to examine the extent to which marital perspectives predict changes in risky behavior, particularly health-risk behavior, across the transition to adulthood. Consistent with the cross-sectional work to date, I expect that young people for whom marriage is more highly salient, compared to their counterparts for whom marriage is not salient, will experience a greater reduction in health-risk behaviors across the transition to adulthood. Formally stated, this hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 3.1: Marital salience will be associated with a reduction in health-risk behaviors across the transition to adulthood.

In addition to their cross-sectional nature, tests of marital horizon theory have largely failed to consider the impact of marital perspectives on educational and union formation experiences during the transition to adulthood. This is the case despite explicit claims by proponents of MHT that orientations toward marriage during the transition to the adulthood affect not only risk-taking behavior but also “trajectories of individual development (e.g., identity development, adult status, career directedness, etc.) and family formation patterns (e.g., sexuality, cohabitation, fertility rates, etc.)” (Carroll et al.

2009:350). Hence, the current study extends tests of MHT into school and relationship domains by examining the extent to which marital perspectives, particularly marital salience, predict educational and cohabitation experiences across the transition to adulthood.

Such a shift in focus is warranted not only because fuller tests of marital horizon theory demand delving into multiple life domains but also for two other reasons. First, educational attainment and relationship exploration are two central endeavors of an extended transition to adulthood (Arnett 2000; Arnett 2004). Given evidence in the tradition of a life course perspective documenting the interdependence of life course domains (Elder Jr. 1985; Guzzo 2006), marital perspectives *should* be associated with more than health-risk behavior during the transition to adulthood. Second, educational and relationship experiences in this period are thought to lay the foundation for future outcomes across many domains and, hence, may hold the potential to exacerbate or reduce existing inequalities throughout the life course (Furstenberg Jr. 2010; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth 2005; Settersten and Ray 2010b; Shanahan 2000).

Marital Perspectives and Education

Although plenty of work has studied the association between social class and marital perspectives cross-sectionally (e.g. Trail and Karney 2012), no work of which I am aware has examined how marital perspectives, and specifically marital salience, might guide educational trajectories or outcomes across the transition to adulthood. There is evidence to suggest, however, that marital salience during the transition to adulthood may actually curtail educational endeavors. Marriage and school enrollment are considered to be somewhat incompatible by young people. For instance, Furstenberg

notes that “marriage has become the culminating event” of the transition to adulthood (Furstenberg Jr. 2010:75), to be undertaken only after other markers of adulthood (e.g. the completion of schooling) have already been accomplished. Guzzo (2006) supports the incompatibility of schooling and marriage by revealing that school enrollment is negatively associated with a transition to either marriage or cohabitation among young adults. Hence, young people who view marriage as highly salient at the beginning of the transition to adulthood may place limits on their education across the transition to adulthood given the perceived incompatibility of school and marriage.

Hypothesis 3.2: Marital salience will be associated with fewer years of education obtained during the transition to adulthood.

As indicated above, critical qualitative work suggests that the respectability politics surrounding marriage may make marriage more salient for young women than for young men. Further, young men have been shown to engage in more health-risk behaviors (Byrnes, Miller, and Schafer 1999) and, for African Americans in particular, to attain fewer years of education (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, and Shwed 2011) than young women. Gender, then, may play an important role in predicting initial levels of marital salience, as well as initial levels of health-risk behaviors and education. There is no evidence of which I am aware suggesting that marital salience may affect trajectories of health-risk behavior and education differently for young men and women, however. Although I test for this possibility, I do not hypothesize any specific gender differences in the link between marital salience and trajectories of health-risk behaviors or education across the transition to adulthood.

Marital Perspectives and Cohabitation

In addition to health-risk behaviors and education, the current study examines the link between marital perspectives and cohabitation across the transition to adulthood. Much work outside of marital horizon theory has assessed the impact of marital perspectives on future relationship behaviors. For example, using a dyadic approach, Barr and Simons (2012) revealed that a positive orientation toward marriage was positively associated with partner-specific marriage expectations. Sassler and Schoen (1999) similarly found that, independent of several economic and family background indicators, women who viewed marriage more positively were more like to transition to marriage. Further, Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite (1995) reported that the general importance placed on marriage upon graduating high school predicted marriage and cohabitation status later in life. Although Sassler & Schoen's (1999) work found that marital attitudes were more strongly predictive of marital behavior for women than for men, the work of Clarkberg and colleagues (1995) found similar effects for young men and women. Those who placed more general importance on "finding the right person to marry and having a happy family life" had a higher probability of forming a first union in any given year, but had a lower probability of forming a cohabiting union. Hence, Clarkberg et al. (1995) revealed that marital attitudes were predictive of not only marriage but also nonmarital relationship formation, the focus of the current study given its emphasis on the transition to adulthood.

All of this work, however, has focused not on life-course specific marital perspectives, like those important in explications of marital horizon theory and thought to hold more predictive power in explaining behavior, but on more generalized marital

perspectives more akin to Hakim's (2003) "public morality" attitudes. The more recent qualitative work of Huang, Smock, Manning, and Bergstrom-Lynch (2011) offers insight into the potential link between life-course specific marital perspectives, like marital salience, and cohabitation. Unlike much work to date, Huang and colleagues (2011) were not interested in the effects of marital attitudes on marital behavior but in the meanings that young people attach to cohabitation and, implicitly, to marriage. In their interviews with young men and women, they revealed evidence of a symbolic and gendered link between marriage and cohabitation. Young women tended to view cohabitation as a potential impediment to marriage much more so than did men. Hence, for women, "cohabitation was frequently discussed as counterproductive to the goal of marriage, and thus a reason to avoid it" (Huang, Smock, Manning, and Bergstrom-Lynch 2011:23). For men, however, cohabitation was not strongly linked positively or negatively to marriage. Following from this work, the hypothesis regarding the link between marital salience and cohabitation is explicitly gendered. I anticipate that, for women, marital salience will be associated with a lower likelihood of cohabiting across the transition to adulthood. I expect no such association for men. Formally stated, this hypothesis is as follows.

Hypothesis 3.3: For women, marital salience will be associated with a lower probability of cohabiting across the transition to adulthood.

METHOD

Data

The primary data used to test the above hypotheses were drawn from the Family and Community Health Study (FACHS). The FACHS began in 1997 as a prospective, longitudinal study of health and well-being among African American youth and their

families. All participants were living in Iowa (IA) and Georgia (GA) at the time of recruitment. Data were collected on target children, all in the 5th grade public school system at the time of recruitment, every two to three years, with the latest wave of data (Wave VI) collected in 2010-2011. Data were also collected from primary caregivers, secondary caregivers, siblings, and best friends at earlier waves, and from romantic partners at the latter two waves.

Unlike many studies focused on African Americans, the FACHS was not designed as a study of Black poverty. Instead, it was designed to capture heterogeneity among Black families, in terms of their structure, economic standing, and community context. Families were randomly selected from block groups drawn from the 1990 United States Census (259 block groups in total) that varied on socioeconomic factors. Hence, although the FACHS is homogenous in terms of racial composition, FACHS participants are diverse with regards to other socioeconomic, community, and family characteristics. Perhaps because of the FACHS sampling strategy, its respondents prove similar to national samples of African American young adults in terms of fertility behaviors (United States Census Bureau 2011b), educational attainment (United States Census Bureau 2011a), and marital status (United States Census Bureau 2010).

The current study is concerned with health-risk behaviors, education, and relationship experiences across the transition to adulthood, and hence utilizes data primarily from Waves IV through VI, the latest three waves, of the FACHS. Waves IV through VI of the FACHS were collected in 2007, 2009, and 2011, respectively, and captured respondents experienced from the ages of 18 to 24, on average. Hence, the latter three waves of the FACHS is ideal for studying the transition to young adulthood, or the

period referred to as *emerging adulthood* by developmental psychologists (Arnett 2000; Arnett 2004).

I also drew upon information in earlier waves of the FACHS and upon Census block group data for family background and contextual controls. In addition to FACHS, community variables came from the 1990 U.S. Census, which measured contextual factors at the block group level. Most block group areas from which the FACHS sample was drawn contained fewer than five participating families, however. Block group areas were combined into larger clusters of community groups in order to assess true contextual effects in a multilevel modeling approach. To do so, cluster analysis was performed using five socioeconomic variables: average per capita income, proportion of households headed by females, proportion of persons receiving public assistance, proportion of households below the poverty level, and proportion of males unemployed. This strategy, as described in much greater detail in Simons et al. (2002a), resulted in 46 community clusters, each of which contained roughly 15 families. Although the block group areas within any given cluster were not necessarily geographically adjacent, they were internally homogenous on the five demographic indicators described above and shared geographic locales within each state.

Of the 889 target youth involved in the FACHS at Wave I, 699 remained in the study by Wave VI (78.6% of the Wave I sample). Of these 699, 589 participated across all three of the latest study waves. Although female respondents are overrepresented at later waves of the FACHS (e.g. 53.5% female at Wave I vs. 58.1% female at Wave VI), respondents at these later waves did not differ from nonrespondents on Wave I family structure, family income, parent-child relationship quality, and community disadvantage.

With the exception of gender, then, there has been little evidence of selective attrition over the six waves of the FACHS.

Because the current study focuses on the effect of marital perspectives on the lives of the unmarried during the transition to adulthood, the analytical sample for the current study was limited to never-married target respondents. After excluding 37 respondents (6.28% of the viable sample) who reported being married at one for more of the latter FACHS waves, the final sample consisted of 552 unmarried respondents. The analytical sample varied slightly by outcome, however, due to missing data on the dependent variables. All variables are described in detail below.

Dependent Variables

Health-risk behavior. A variety of health-risk behaviors were assessed across Waves IV through VI. These behaviors included both sexual risk-taking and substance use, and all items used to measure them were consistent across the latter three waves. Sexual risk-taking behaviors included the number of sexual partners in the last three months (0 = 0 partners, 4 = 3+ partners), frequency of using alcohol or drugs prior to sex (1 = Never, 4 = Most of the time), and frequency of sex without a condom (1 = Never, 4 = All of the time). Substance use behaviors included frequency of smoking cigarettes (1 = Never, 5 = More than a pack a day), frequency of binge drinking (defined for respondents as more than 3 drinks at one time; 1 = Never, 6 = Several times per week), frequency of marijuana use (1 = Never, 6 = Several times per week), and the use of hard drugs, included ecstasy, cocaine, or methamphetamine (0 = no hard drugs, 1 = used hard drugs). With the exception of number of sexual partners and cigarette smoking, all items were in reference to the past year. Because preliminary models indicated that the pattern

of results was consistent across each of these items, as well as sexual-risk and substance-use subscales, and that all items loaded on a single factor, these seven sexual and substance use risk behaviors were standardized and averaged to form an index of health-risk behaviors at each wave. Cronbach's alpha for this index ranged from .65 to .68 across waves.

Years of education. Years of education was assessed at waves IV and VI. Respondents were asked to report the highest level of education they have completed. Responses ranged from 5 to 16 and averaged 12.24 years of education at Wave IV. At Wave VI, responses ranged from 5 to 17 and averaged 13.01 years of education. The Wave VI education measure served as the dependent variable for education models, while the Wave IV measure served as a control. Models predicting education, then, essentially predict the years of education accumulated across Waves IV through VI, or the extent to which respondents used the transition to adulthood to acquire education. Regression utilizing a change score method produces consistent results as those shown below.

Cohabitation. At each of the latter three waves, respondents were asked to report on their current relationship status. Respondents who indicated that they were living with a romantic partner were coded as cohabiting. If respondents reported being in a cohabiting relationship at either Wave V or Wave VI, they were coded 1 for having cohabited during the transition to adulthood. Those who already cohabited by Wave IV were excluded from the cohabitation analysis ($N = 33$) so that these models predicted entry into cohabitation during the period between Waves IV and VI, or 18 to 24 years of age.

Marital Perspectives

Four different marital perspectives were available through the FACHS, each of which was measured at the beginning of the transition to adulthood at Wave IV. Three out of the four perspectives—costs, benefits, and general importance—fall under what Hakim (2003) refers to as “public morality” attitudes, because they tap general thoughts about the desirability and importance of marriage. Four questions asked about the costs of marriage, including the extent to which respondents think that “life becomes harder when a person gets married” and “a person who marries loses a lot of his/her freedom” (*marital costs*, $\alpha = .64$). Two questions asked about the perceived benefits of marriage, like the extent to which “marriage leads to a happier life” (*marital benefits*, $\alpha = .68$), and one question asked about the importance placed upon “having a good marriage” (*general marital importance*). Unlike these measures, the fourth marital perspective measure asks not about the costs, benefits, and importance of marriage in an abstract manner but about the extent to which respondents agree that “getting married is the most important part of my life” (*marital salience*). This measure of marital salience is more in line with what Hakim (2003) calls “personal choice” attitudes and arguably taps all three dimensions—relative importance, desired timing, and readiness—relevant to marital horizon theory, as it assesses the extent to which marriage was a central focus of the unmarried FACHS respondents at the beginning of the transition to adulthood.

Possible response values ranged from 1 (“not at all important”) to 5 (“extremely important”) for general marital importance and from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”) for marital salience. Both of these variables were dichotomized, however, for several reasons. First, for marital importance, the overwhelming majority

(81.70%) of respondents chose one of the top two response categories (either “extremely important” or “very important”), with 56.70% choosing the top category. Second, although the variability in marital salience was not as restricted as that for general marital importance, the most common response category for marital salience was “neutral or mixed.” Preliminary models utilizing all response categories indicated the effect of marital salience to be non-linear. Post-hoc tests of these models revealed the effects of response categories 4 (“agree”) and 5 (“strongly agree”) not to differ significantly but for each to differ significantly from response categories 1 (“strongly disagree”) through 3 (“neutral or mixed”). Hence, response categories 4 and 5 were collapsed to indicate the salience of marriage, and response categories 1 through 3 were collapsed to indicate a lack of marital salience. This dummy coding resulted in a more statistically viable variable and made the coding and interpretation of marital salience more consistent with that of general marital importance.

Control Variables

To reduce the risk of spurious associations between the four marital perspectives and each of the dependent variables, I included an extensive set of controls. Given robust links between family background factors and risk-taking behaviors, education, and relationship experiences, I control for several family background characteristics, including whether or not respondents lived in a *married, two-parent family*, whether or not they lived with a *single mother*, and whether or not they experienced a *parental divorce* (with the latter two statuses not mutually exclusive), *primary caregiver’s education* (in years), *family income* (reported in whole dollars and coded in \$10,000 increments), and *parent-child relationship quality*, a composite index of parental warmth,

parental hostility (reverse-coded), and child satisfaction with the relationship (reliability = .83; Nunnally 1978). For those respondents with married parents, *parents' marital quality*, an index consisting of parental satisfaction, warmth, and hostility (reverse-coded), was also assessed (reliability = .94; Nunnally 1978). Because a minority of FACHS respondents were living with married, biological parents, this latter variable was coded as an internal moderator (Frech and Williams 2007; Mirowsky 1999). All family background factors were assessed using prospective data from Wave I, and all except parent-child relationship quality were reported by the primary caregiver.

In addition to these family background controls, several other variables reported by respondents at Wave IV were included in all analyses. These include target *age* (in years), *parental status* (1 = parent), *educational aspirations* (1 = did not aspire college degree), *education completed* (in years), whether the respondent was enrolled in school (1 = *in school*), and whether the respondent had a romantic partner (1 = *in relationship*). Further, given suggestions by Johnson, Anderson, and Stith (2011) that the attitudes relevant to marital horizon theory may simply be proxies for conventionality, I included several indicators of conventional attitudes, including a measure *conventional goals* (the extent to which having a good education, having a successful career, having children, saving money, and being a religious person were important; $\alpha = .76$), *traditional gender role attitudes* (e.g. "Women are happier if they stay home and take care of the children;" $\alpha = .76$), and *religious participation* (frequency of attending church services or religious gatherings; $\alpha = .87$).

Because FACHS respondents were nested within block groups when recruited for the study and because neighborhood characteristics have proven important predictors of

risk-taking behaviors (Simons and Burt 2011; Simons et al. 2002a), educational outcomes (Garner and Raudenbush 1991), and relationship experiences (Bryant and Wickrama 2005; Warner, Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2011), I controlled for several neighborhood-level characteristics. These characteristics included the percent population that is Black (% *Black*), percent population that is female (% *female*), the *female divorce rate* (# divorced females per 1,000 females), and a *neighborhood disadvantage* index consisting of the percent males unemployed, percent households below the poverty line, percent households receiving public assistance, per capita income (reverse-coded), percent population with less than high school education, and percent single mother households. All neighborhood-level controls were drawn from block group data in the 1990 U.S. Census, thus representing childhood community context.

Plan of Analysis

Each of the dependent variables used in the current study, as well as its respective hypothesis, demanded a different analytical plan. To assess trajectories of change in health-risk behavior across the transition to adulthood (relevant to hypothesis 3.1), I utilized a three-level growth curve model via HLM 7.0 (Raudenbush et al. 2011). In this model, there were three types of change assessed. At level 1, the within-individual model, individual health-risk behavior varied from wave to wave. This simple variation is illustrated in equation 3.1 below. In this level-1 equation, the intercept, π_{0ij} represents the health-risk behavior for individual i in community j at Wave V , the midpoint of the observation period and the point at which I centered the time indicator. The linear component, π_{1ij} , is the growth rate for individual i in community j , and hence represents change in health-risk behavior across the latter three waves of the FACHS. I assumed the

error term, e_{tij} , was independently and normally distributed with a mean of 0 and a constant variance, σ^2 .

$$\text{Equation 3.1: } y_{tij} = \pi_{0ij} + \pi_{1ij}(\text{Wave}) + e_{tij}$$

At level 2, the between-individual model, both the intercept and slope were allowed to vary across individuals. The semi-conditional level-2 models are below in Equations 3.2 and 3.3. Because marital horizon theory posits that marital perspectives at the beginning of the transition to adulthood help to guide behavior across this transition, the primary coefficient of interest in the level 2 models was β_{11} in Equation 3.3, as this coefficient specified the extent to which marital salience helped to explain variation in health-risk slopes across individuals. In the fully conditional models, all of the marital perspectives, as well as other controls, were used as predictors of both the health-risk behavior slope and intercept.

$$\text{Equation 3.2: } \pi_{0ij} = \beta_{00} + \beta_{01}(\text{salience}) + r_{0ij}$$

$$\text{Equation 3.3: } \pi_{1ij} = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11}(\text{salience}) + r_{1ij}$$

In a three-level growth model, the between-individual health-risk slope and intercept can also vary between neighborhoods. Hence at level 3, neighborhood-level characteristics were used to predict between-neighborhood variation in the average health-risk intercept and slope. The unconditional level-3 equations are as follows:

$$\text{Equation 3.4: } \beta_{00} = \gamma_{000} + \mu_{00j}$$

$$\text{Equation 3.5: } \beta_{10} = \gamma_{100} + \mu_{10j}$$

To reiterate, the key association of interest in hypothesis 3.1 is the extent to which marital perspectives, particularly marital salience, could distinguish between the risk-

taking trajectories of persons within the same community. Hence, I was primarily interested in the fully conditional version of equation 3.3.

To assess educational accumulation and entry into cohabitation, other types of analyses were necessary. Because FACHS lacks decent measures of the timing of relationship behaviors and educational outcomes, accurate life history information was impossible to construct. Hence, the data used here were unsuitable for a latent class analysis of family formation/educational trajectories, like that used by Amato et al. (2008), or an event history analysis of first union formation, like that used by Guzzo (2006). Nonetheless, both educational outcomes and relationship behaviors were examined using alternative methods.

Years of education obtained during the transition to adulthood was assessed via Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression in which years of education completed by Wave VI was regressed on marital perspectives at Wave IV, along with an extensive set of individual, relationship, family, and community controls drawn from Waves I through IV. Robust standard errors were adjusted to account for the clustering of respondents in similar community contexts.

To assess associations between marital perspectives and cohabitation, logistic regression was used to predict cohabitation among never-married respondents during the transition to adulthood from earlier marital perspectives and an extensive set of control variables (including relationship status at Wave IV). Again, all respondents who reported cohabiting at wave IV were excluded from the analyses, so the models predict the odds of transitioning into a cohabiting union across Waves IV through VI. Because short-lived cohabiting unions that occurred between waves would have been missed in the survey

data, this analytic method provided a conservative estimate of cohabitation during the transition to adulthood. As with the OLS models of education, robust standard errors were adjusted for community clustering. In all models, potential gender differences in the effects of marital perspectives were examined with gender x perspective interaction terms.

RESULTS

Table 3.1 presents the descriptive statistics for all variables used in the current study. With regards to marital perspectives, the key predictors of health-risk behavior, education, and cohabitation used here, two patterns are noteworthy. First, these descriptive data support the distinction made by Hakim (2003) and Carroll and colleagues (2009; 2007) between general (i.e. public morality) and life-course specific (i.e. personal choice) marital perspectives. Although only about a quarter (24.5%) of the sample indicated at age 18 that marriage was highly salient, over half of the sample (56.7%) indicated that, in general, having a good marriage was extremely important. Hence respondents distinguished between the general importance of marriage and the relative importance of marriage in their own lives during the transition to adulthood. While marriage was generally important to most, it was a key focus of the transition to adulthood for few. Also of note, and contrary to popular rhetoric about young African Americans, is that, on average, respondents viewed marriage as being generally beneficial ($\bar{x} = 3.50$, range = 1-5) and as having a modest amount of costs ($\bar{x} = 2.85$, range = 1-5).

Table 3.1: Descriptive Statistics for Study 2 Variables

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Dependent Variables				
Health-risk Behavior (Wave IV)	-0.001	0.580	-0.563	2.581
Health-risk Behavior (Wave V)	0.000	0.569	-0.722	2.187
Health-risk Behavior (Wave VI)	0.001	0.585	-0.772	2.263
Years of Education (Wave VI)	13.005	1.723	5.000	17.000
Entered Cohabiting Union (Wave IV - Wave VI)	0.195	0.396	0.000	1.000
Marital perspectives (Wave IV)				
Marriage salient	0.245	0.430	0.000	1.000
Marriage important	0.567	0.496	0.000	1.000
Marital benefits	3.504	0.760	1.000	5.000
Marital costs	2.853	0.628	1.000	5.000
Controls				
<i>Time-varying</i>				
In school (Wave IV)	0.676	0.469	0.000	1.000
In school (Wave V)	0.513	0.500	0.000	1.000
In school (Wave VI)	0.504	0.500	0.000	1.000
Romantic partner (Wave IV)	0.520	0.500	0.000	1.000
Romantic partner (Wave V)	0.537	0.499	0.000	1.000
Romantic partner (Wave VI)	0.531	0.500	0.000	1.000
Cohabiting (Wave IV)	0.060	0.237	0.000	1.000
Cohabiting (Wave V)	0.136	0.343	0.000	1.000
Cohabiting (Wave VI)	0.105	0.307	0.000	1.000
<i>Person-level (Time invariant)</i>				
Female	0.605	0.489	0.000	1.000
Age (Wave IV)	18.777	0.909	16.000	21.000
Years of Education (Wave IV)	12.256	1.539	5.000	16.000
Religious involvement (Wave IV)	1.767	0.823	1.000	5.000
Traditional gender role attitudes (Wave IV)	2.295	0.616	1.000	4.000
Conventional goals (Wave IV)	4.371	0.516	2.571	5.000
Educational aspirations (Wave IV; 1 = no college degree)	0.183	0.387	0.000	1.000
Parent (Wave IV)	0.165	0.371	0.000	1.000
Married, biological parents (Wave I)	0.212	0.409	0.000	1.000
Parental marital quality (Wave I)	0.000	0.457	-3.556	1.574
Experienced divorce (Wave I)	0.357	0.480	0.000	1.000
Single mother (Wave I)	0.458	0.499	0.000	1.000
Relationship quality with primary caregiver (Wave I)	-0.002	2.263	-12.148	3.265
Household income (Wave I)	26123.640	22770.950	3.000	201100.000
Primary caregiver education (Wave I)	12.388	2.169	2.000	20.000
<i>Community context</i>				
Percent population Black (Wave I)	45.624	25.350	0.766	90.668
Percent population female (Wave I)	53.591	2.744	47.360	61.633
Disadvantage (Wave I)	0.000	0.789	-1.899	2.231
Female divorce rate (# per 1000; Wave I)	88.489	34.906	28.403	194.192

With regards to the dependent variables, health-risk behavior, on average, was relatively unchanging across waves, as the mean score at each wave ranged from only -.001 to .001. Average years of education obtained by Wave VI, however, was 13.01 versus 12.26 years at Wave IV. Hence, on average, respondents gained about .75 years of education across the transition to adulthood. Finally, about one-fifth of the noncohabiting Wave IV sample (19.5%) entered a cohabiting union between Wave IV and Wave VI.

Health-Risk Behaviors

Prior to examining change in health-risk behaviors across the transition to adulthood, I began with an unconditional model to partition the within-person, between-person, and between-neighborhood variance in health-risk behaviors. This unconditional model (not shown) revealed that 45.09% of the variance in health-risk behaviors was within-person variation over time, while 49.01% and 5.90% of the variance was between persons and between communities, respectively. After partitioning the variance, I explored an unconditional growth model, with both the intercept and wave coefficients at level 1 modeled as randomly varying at level 2 and the level 2 intercept and slope modeled as randomly varying at level 3. The results of this unconditional growth model for the estimation of the fixed effects indicated that the intercept, or health-risk behaviors at Wave V, was not significantly different zero ($\gamma_{000} = -0.006$, $p = .841$). Similarly, the fixed effect for wave, or the growth rate parameter, was also not significantly different from zero ($\gamma_{100} = -.006$, $p = .724$). Nonetheless, both the intercept and slope varied significantly between individuals ($r_{0ij} = .176$, $p < .001$; $r_{1ij} = .026$, $p < .001$). Further, the average person-level intercept and slope varied significantly by community context ($\mu_{00j} = .019$, $p < .001$; $\mu_{10j} = .003$, $p < .05$). Hence the change in health-risk behavior

over time, the outcome of interest, differed by person within a given community and differed between communities.

As indicated in hypothesis 3.1, the crux of marital horizon theory lies in the ability of marital perspectives, particularly marital salience, to explain the between-person variation in the health-risk behaviors slope. To test this proposition, I began entering level-1, level-2, and level-3 predictors into the model in a stepwise fashion. The results of the fully conditional model are shown in Table 3.2. Of primary concern are the coefficients for the marital perspectives on the health-risk behavior slope, and as shown in the model, the only marital perspective to significantly predict change in health-risk behavior between individuals was marital salience. Those respondents who viewed marriage as salient, compared to those who did not view marriage as salient, at Wave IV reported reduced involvement in health-risk behaviors across the transition to adulthood, supportive of hypothesis 3.1 ($\gamma_{1130} = -0.066$, $p < .05$). This effect of marital salience held even after controlling for time-varying factors like relationship status and school enrollment.

The effect of marital salience on change in health-risk behavior is modeled in Figure 3.1. Because level-2 gender interactions indicated a marginally significant interaction between gender and marital salience (results not shown in table; $\gamma_{1200} = 0.109$, $p < .10$), the figure plots the risk-taking trajectories separately for young men and young women. Nonetheless, the pattern of results was consistent for both young men and women in that, as shown in Figure 3.1, those who viewed marriage as highly salient experienced a reduction in health-risk behaviors across the transition to adulthood. As indicated by the marginally significant gender difference in this slope, the divergence in

Table 3.2: Results of HLM Predicting Health-Risk Behavior Over Time

	Coefficient	Std. Error
<i>Fixed Effects</i>		
Intercept (centered at Wave V)	0.141	0.060 *
Slope	0.012	0.038
Time-varying predictors		
RP	0.071	0.025 **
In school	-0.042	0.026
Person-level predictors on Intercept		
Female	-0.071	0.042 †
Marriage salient	-0.044	0.049
Marriage important	-0.037	0.051
Marital benefits	0.003	0.029
Marital costs	0.070	0.033
Married, biological parents	-0.166	-0.166 **
Parents' marital quality	-0.066	0.044
Single mother	-0.146	0.047 **
Parents divorced	0.021	0.045
Quality of relationships with PC	-0.011	0.009
Primary caregiver education	0.011	0.011
Age	0.045	0.024 †
Religious involvement	-0.103	0.027 ***
Traditional gender role attitudes	-0.003	0.036
Conventional goals	-0.072	0.051
Parental status	0.067	0.055
Educational aspirations (1 = no college degree)	-0.003	0.056
Years of education	0.019	0.014
Person-level predictors on Slope		
Female	-0.027	0.028
Marriage salient	-0.066	0.032 *
Marriage important	-0.010	0.034
Marital benefits	-0.013	0.019
Marital costs	-0.035	0.022
Household income	0.000	0.000
Married, biological parents	0.062	0.039
Parents' marital quality	0.018	0.029
Single mother	0.014	0.031
Parents divorced	0.018	0.030
Quality of relationships with PC	-0.003	0.006
Primary caregiver education	-0.001	0.007

Table 3.2: Continued

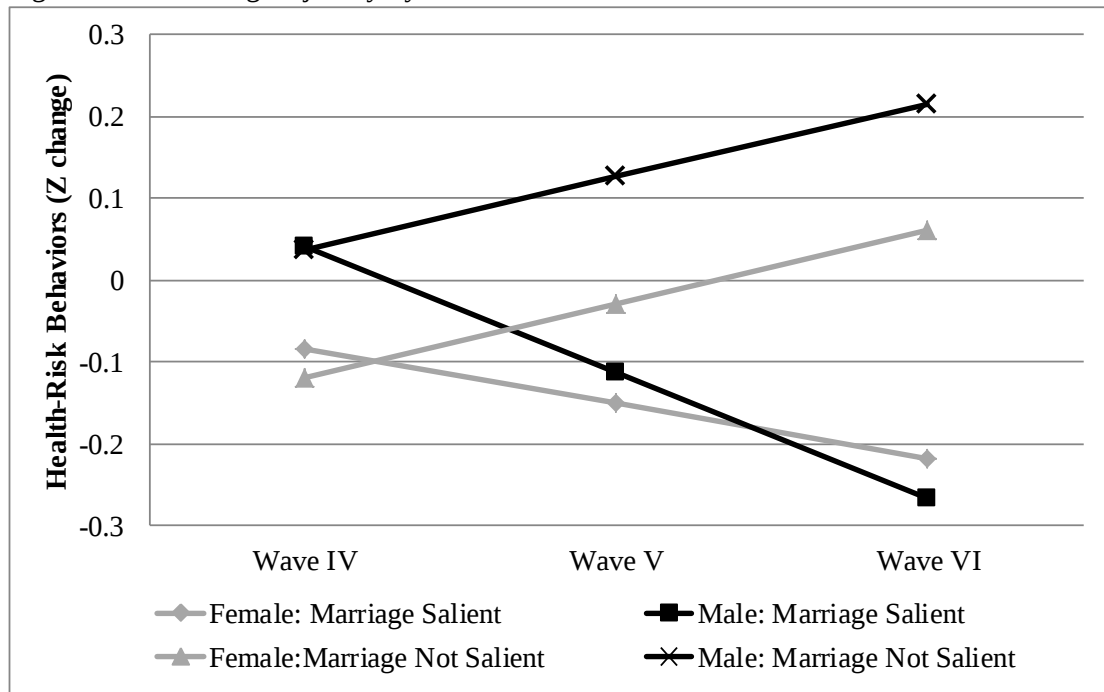
	Coefficient	Std. Error
Age	-0.047	0.016 **
Religious involvement	0.014	0.018
Traditional gender role attitudes	0.020	0.024
Conventional goals	0.003	0.034
Parental status	-0.029	0.036
Educational aspirations (1 = no college degree)	-0.033	0.037
Years of education	0.010	0.010
Community-level predictors on average intercept		
Percent population Black	-0.001	0.001
Disadvantage	-0.030	0.035
Percent population female	0.006	0.009
Female divorce rate	0.001	0.001 †
Community-level predictors on average slope		
Percent population Black	0.000	0.001
Disadvantage	-0.041	0.023 †
Percent population female	-0.002	0.006
Female divorce rate	0.001	0.000
<i>Random Effects</i>		
r_0 (intercept across persons)	0.144***	
r_1 (slope across persons)	0.020***	
μ_{00} (mean intercept across communities)	0.002	
μ_{00} (mean slope across communities)	0.001	

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

N = 1523 person-waves, 509 persons, 46 community clusters

Note: Unstandardized coefficients presented

Figure 3.1: Risk-taking Trajectory By Marital Salience at Wave IV



health-risk behavior slopes by marital salience was greater for men than it was for women.

Education

The results of the OLS regression predicting years of education obtained by Wave VI are presented in Table 3.3. Model 1, with only controls, proved fairly consistent with past work on educational attainment. Years of education obtained at the beginning of the transition to adulthood, being enrolled in school at this time, primary caregiver education, and female divorce rate in the community were all significantly and positively associated with education obtained across the transition to adulthood. Traditional gender role attitudes, not wanting a college degree, and becoming a parent prior to the transition to adulthood were all significantly and negatively associated with education obtained across this transition. As with the health-risk behavior models above, the only marital perspective to predict years of education accumulated by Wave VI was marital salience. Young men and women who viewed marriage as salient around the age of 18 had obtained, on average, one-third fewer years of education across the transition to adulthood than their counterparts who did not view marriage as salient. In post-hoc sensitivity analyses, the effect of marital salience held even when controlling for whether or not the respondent cohabited or got engaged during the transition to adulthood and the number of waves the respondent reported being partnered. This effect, supportive of hypothesis 3.2, is modeled in Figure 3.2. Although women, on average, accumulated more years of education than did men, nonsignificant gender interactions revealed that the size of the marital salience effect did not differ significantly for young men and young women.

Table 3.3: Results of OLS Regression (with robust clustered standard errors)
Predicting Years of Education by Wave VI

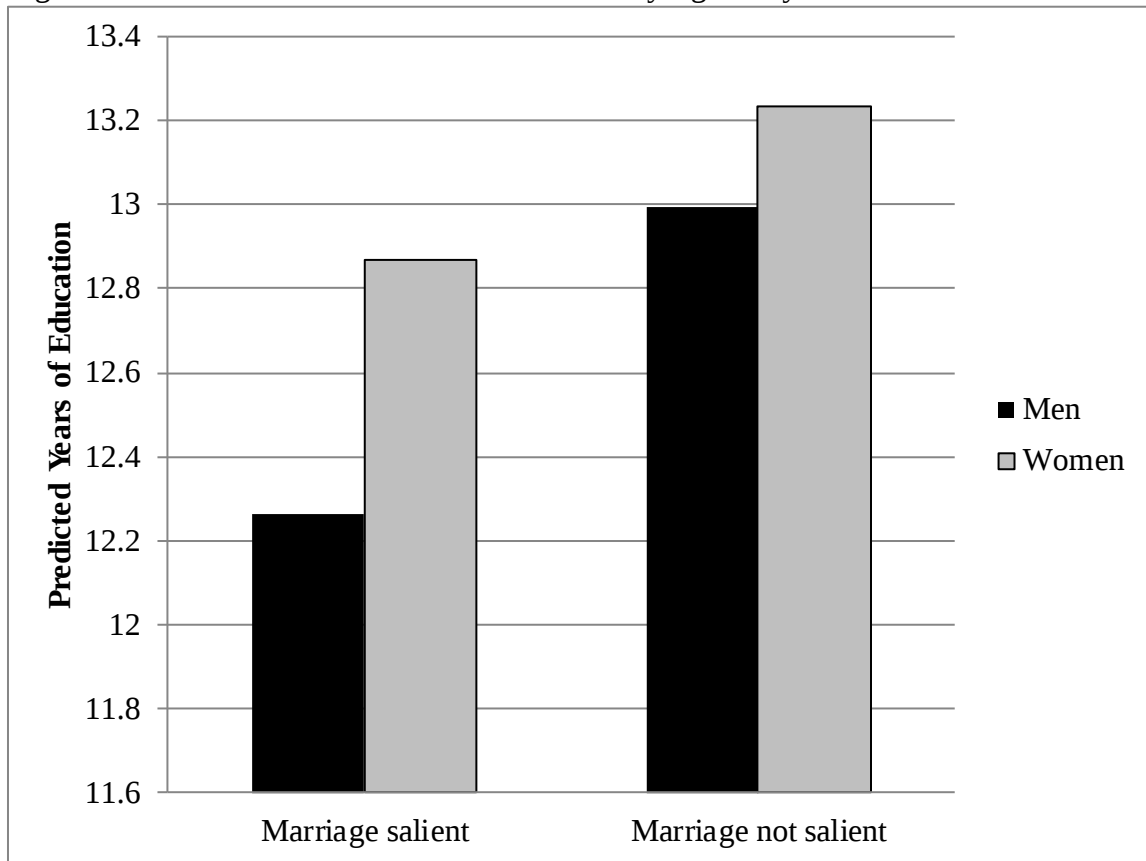
	1	2
Marriage salient		-0.307 *
Marriage important		0.110
Marital benefits		-0.016
Marital costs		-0.133
Education (wave IV)	0.309 **	0.300 **
Romantic partner (wave IV)	-0.205	-0.222 †
Female	0.175	0.176
Age (wave IV)	0.036	0.044
Religious involvement (wave IV)	0.042	0.050
Traditional gender role attitudes (wave IV)	-0.210 *	-0.138
Conventional goals (wave IV)	0.273	0.268
Educational aspirations (wave IV; 1 = no college degree)	-0.267 †	-0.257 †
In school (wave IV)	0.759 ***	0.742 ***
Parent (wave IV)	-0.421 **	-0.428 **
Married, biological parents (wave I)	0.127	0.138
Parental marital quality (wave I)	-0.148	-0.133
Experienced divorce (wave I)	-0.054	-0.073
Single mother (wave I)	0.221	0.227 †
Relationship quality with primary caregiver (wave I)	0.025	0.026
Household income (wave I)	0.000	0.000
Primary caregiver education (wave I)	0.135 **	0.131 **
Community-level predictors		
Percent population Black (wave I)	-0.004	-0.003
Percent population female (wave I)	-0.011	-0.013
Disadvantage (wave I)	0.041	0.025
Female divorce rate (# per 1000; wave I)	0.004 *	0.004 *
Constant	12.5 ***	12.54 ***

Note: All continuous predictors centered around grand mean. Unstandardized

† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

N = 509 persons, 46 community clusters

Figure 3.2: Predicted Years of Education Obtained by Age 24 by Gender and Marital Salience



Cohabitation

Results for the logistic regression models predicting entry into a cohabiting union across the transition to adulthood are shown in Table 3.4. As can be seen in model 1 of this table, cohabitation by Wave VI was not easily predicted by the individual, family, and community variables attended to thus far. Having a romantic partner at Wave IV, the beginning of the transition to adulthood, was significantly and positively associated with later cohabiting ($e^{\Delta b} = 1.850$, $p < .05$), while growing up with married, biological parents ($e^{\Delta b} = .385$, $p < .05$), having higher relationship quality with one's primary caregiver in childhood ($e^{\Delta b} = .927$, $p < .05$), and being in school at Wave IV ($e^{\Delta b} = .559$, $p < .05$) were significantly and negatively associated with cohabitation during the transition to adulthood.

As shown in model 2, marital perspectives failed to predict cohabitation across the transition to adulthood for the full sample. As shown in model 3, the null effect of marital salience in model 2 is likely due to its differential effects on the odds of cohabitation for young men and women, as indicated by the significant gender x marital salience interaction term ($e^{\Delta b} = .294$, $p < .05$), the only significant gender interaction. To interpret this interaction term correctly, I ran the full logit models separately by gender and examined the predicted probabilities using the marginal means posthoc command available in Stata (Long and Freese 2006). Results from the gender-specific models indicated that for women, marital salience was associated with roughly a 52% *decrease* in the likelihood of cohabiting by Wave VI. For men, however, marital salience was associated with more than a twofold *increase* in the likelihood of later cohabiting. The predicted probabilities from the full model are plotted in Figure 3.3 and tell a similar

Table 3.4: Results of Logistic Regression (with robust clustered standard errors) Predicting Cohabitation by Wave VI

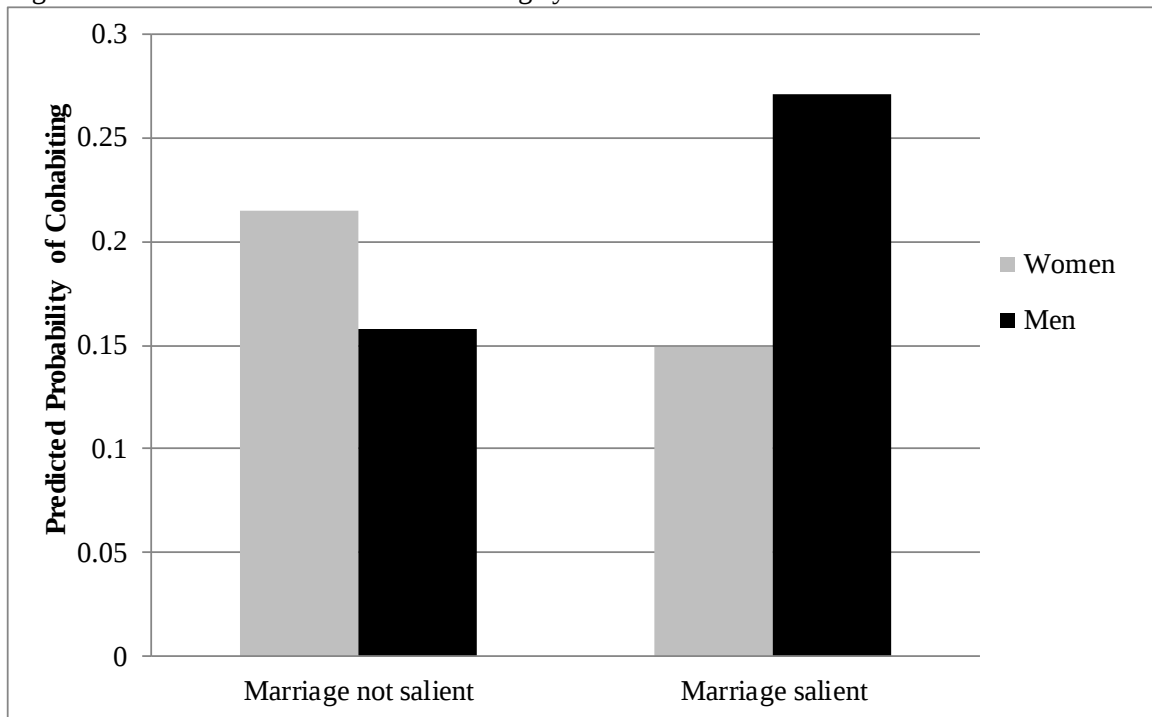
	1	2	3
<i>Marital Perspectives</i>			
Marriage salient		1.040	2.087
x Female			0.294 *
Marriage important		1.454	1.546
x Female			0.956
Marital benefits		1.119	0.854
x Female			1.499
Marital costs		1.017	1.016
x Female			1.017
<i>Individual-level controls</i>			
Education (wave IV)	0.932	0.928	0.915
Romantic partner (wave IV)	1.850 *	1.786 *	1.724 *
Female	0.951	0.991	1.370
Age (wave IV)	1.299	1.308	1.346
Religious involvement (wave IV)	0.982	0.955	0.963
Traditional gender role attitudes (wave IV)	0.919	0.913	0.949
Conventional goals (wave IV)	0.889	0.694	0.668
Educational aspirations (wave IV; 1 = no college)	0.659	0.646	0.612
In school (wave IV)	0.559 *	0.565 *	0.585
Parent (wave IV)	1.040	1.087	1.046
Married, biological parents (wave I)	0.385 *	0.386 *	0.396 *
Parental marital quality (wave I)	1.265	1.291	1.306
Experienced divorce (wave I)	0.754	0.767	0.748
Single mother (wave I)	0.733	0.751	0.762
Relationship quality with primary caregiver (wave I)	0.927 *	0.929	0.933
Household income (wave I)	1.000	1.000	1.000
Primary caregiver education (wave I)	1.030	1.035	1.030
<i>Community-level variables</i>			
Percent population Black (wave I)	0.993	0.993	0.993
Percent population female (wave I)	1.085	1.081	1.089
Disadvantage (wave I)	1.117	1.156	1.166
Female divorce rate (# per 1000; wave I)	1.002	1.002	1.002
Constant	0.400	0.305	0.250

Note: All continuous predictors centered around grand mean. Exponentiated coefficients (odds ratios) presented. Robust standard errors adjusted for clustering within community

† p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

N = 476 persons, 46 community clusters

Figure 3.3: Predicted Probabilities of Cohabiting by Gender and Marital Salience



story—during the transition to adulthood, marital salience reduced the odds of cohabiting for young women and increased the odds of cohabiting for young men, findings consistent with hypothesis 3.3.

DISCUSSION

In light of changing demographics in the U.S. marked by later ages at first marriage and increased rates of nonmarriage and nonmarital childbearing, the association between marital attitudes and marital behavior has been of persistent interest and much debate to sociologists and family scholars. Although prior work has shown moderate associations between marital attitudes and behavior (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Sassler and Schoen 1999) and has refuted claims of weakened marital values among African Americans and the poor (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Trail and Karney 2012; Tucker 2000), initiatives to promote marriage in the United States assume that marriage has somehow lost its significance/meaning and hence seek to restore the value of marriage (Avishai, Heath, and Randles 2012), particularly among subgroups of Americans (Administration for Children and Families 2012a; Heath 2009; Trail and Karney 2012). In the sociohistoric context of changing demographics and the marriage promotion policies designed to “correct” them, the current study examined the role that marital perspectives play in structuring African Americans’ risk-taking, education, and relationship experiences across the transition to adulthood.

Unlike most work on marital perspectives, the current study expanded past research on the attitudes-behavior link in three ways. First, it attended to both life-course specific, or “personal choice” (Hakim 2003), perspectives relevant to marital horizon theory (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007), and more general “public morality”

(Hakim 2003) perspectives. Second, it expanded the life course domains that have been explored with regards to marital perspectives. That is, rather than examining the link between marital perspectives and marital behavior, this study tested core claims of marital horizon theory by exploring the extent to which marital perspectives affected multiple domains in the lives of the unmarried. Lastly, the current study focused on the role of marital perspectives during a particular juncture in the life course—the transition to adulthood—for African Americans. Results suggest that one particular marital perspective, marital salience, among young, unmarried African Americans predicts a range of outcomes across the transition to adulthood. Such findings yield several implications for marriage and family literature and for sociological literature on the attitudes-behavior link more broadly.

The study of marriage has been increasingly detached from the study of young adulthood, particularly among Blacks, for whom the age at first marriage and the rate of nonmarriage far exceeds other racial and ethnic groups (Elliott, Krivickas, Brault, and Kreider 2012; Payne 2012). Marital horizon theory, however, has forced a reconsideration of the relevance of marriage during this juncture in the life course, as its proponents have claimed that the meaning and importance of marriage during the transition to adulthood helps to determine the extent to which young people use this transition as anticipatory socialization for marriage and hence helps to explain variation among individuals' experiences during this transition. Although tests of MHT thus far have been restricted to cross-sectional data, results of the current prospective, longitudinal study support MHT's core contention.

Young people who viewed marriage as highly salient around the age of 18 engaged in fewer health-risk behaviors and accumulated fewer years of education across the transition to adulthood than did their peers who did not view marriage as salient. Such findings are consistent with the cross-sectional tests of MHT to date (Carroll et al. 2007; Willoughby 2012) and with suggestions in the literature that young people may view student and spouse as somewhat incompatible roles (Guzzo 2006). In addition to its effect on risk-taking behavior and education, marital salience was associated with cohabitation across the transition to adulthood, but this effect differed by gender. Women who viewed marriage as highly salient were less likely than those for whom marriage was not salient to enter into a cohabiting union across the transition to adulthood. Marital salience increased the odds of cohabiting for men, however. Such findings are consistent with recent qualitative evidence by Huang and colleagues (2011) that young women, more so than young men, viewed cohabitation as a potential impediment to marriage. It makes sense, then, that young women whose current focus is getting married might reject cohabitation in the near future. For all three outcomes, then, marital salience was a consistent predictor of behavior across the transition to adulthood, findings which contradict assumptions that marriage is largely irrelevant in the lives of young people, particularly young Blacks. To the contrary, the emphasis that young people place or do not place on marriage at the beginning of the transition to adulthood seems to be a robust predictor of their risk-taking, educational, and relationship experiences across this transition.

Another implication of these findings is concerned with implicit assumptions regarding the beneficiality of favorable attitudes toward marriage throughout the life

course. Because marriage promotion policies in the United States assume that marriage has become less valued by certain segments of the population, much of the effort among sociologists has been utilized either to debunk notions that African Americans and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds value marriage less than other people (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Trail and Karney 2012) or to argue that, even if this were the case, marriage is not a solution to poverty (Avishai, Heath, and Randles 2012). Implicit in both marriage promotion policies and sociological arguments against them, however, is the assumption that holding favorable attitudes toward marriage can be nothing but beneficial. Although results of the current study suggest that marital salience during the transition to adulthood might deter participation in health-risk behaviors, findings also indicate that marital salience might deter educational endeavors. Hence, this work compels us to rethink our implicit assumption about marriage-friendly attitudes always being positive forces in the life course.

As predicted in marital horizon theory and by Hakim (2003), however, not all marital perspectives hold similar predictive power. Marital salience was the only marital perspective to significantly predict changes in health-risk behavior, education, and relationship formation across the transition to adulthood. This finding supports the distinction between general and life-course specific marital attitudes emphasized by scholars like Hakim (2003) and by Carroll and colleagues (2007) in their explication of marital horizon theory. Support for this distinction forces us to reconsider past work examining primarily general attitudes toward marriage. This work has been used to draw implications about the roles of structure and agency in predicting family formation behavior (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011; Raley and Sweeney

2007; Sassler and Schoen 1999). The current findings suggest that life-course specific, or “personal choice”, perspectives should be incorporated into ongoing structure/agency debates. Further, these perspectives should be incorporated into work on the causal effects of marriage. Carroll and colleagues (2007) argue that some of the effects of marriage, particularly on deviant behavior, may actually be part of the anticipatory socialization process prior to marriage. To the extent that marital salience actually predicts marital behavior, the current findings are suggestive of that possibility.

Of course, these findings and their implications should be considered in light of several limitations. First, the marital perspectives used here could not offer a perfect test of marital horizon theory. Marital salience was the only item relevant to the theory available via the FACHS, and, at best, it approximated the three domains of marital horizons. Despite this less-than-perfect indicator of marital horizons, this measure captured the extent to which marriage was a primary focus of the transition to adulthood, the intention of the marital horizon measures used in MHT. The findings supported the core claim of MHT: that young people’s marital perspectives help to shape variation in experiences across the transition to adulthood. A second limitation of this study is that the FACHS data lack nuanced measures of educational attainment and relationship transitions, which made more intricate event history or latent class trajectory models untenable. Lastly, the racial homogeneity of the FACHS sample limits the generalizability of the study’s findings. Future research should expand this line of inquiry to more nationally representative samples.

In an era when the normative imperative to marry has seemingly declined (Thornton 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), an exploration of the role that

marital perspectives play in the lives of young Blacks—perhaps the group for whom this normative imperative is thought to be all but erased—may tell us something about the continued relevance of marriage in the U.S. today. For young Blacks in the FACHS study, marriage appears to be highly relevant in shaping the transition to adulthood. This relevance, however, was apparent not in the domain of marital behavior, as few of the FACHS respondents actually married during this time period, but in other domains, like health-risk behavior, education, and nonmarital relationships. Further exploration into the interdependence of these life course domains (Elder Jr. 1985; Guzzo 2006) may prove fruitful not only for life course theorists and researchers attempting to understand the transition to adulthood but also for sociological inquiry into expressions of human agency throughout the life course.

CHAPTER 4

STUDY 3: NONMARITAL RELATIONSHIPS AND CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF MARRIAGE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS DURING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD⁴

⁴ Barr, Ashley B., Ronald L. Simons, and Leslie Gordon Simons. Submitted to *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 06/30/2013.

ABSTRACT

Cohabitation has become increasingly widespread over the last decade. Such trends have given rise to debates about the relation between cohabitation and marriage, both in terms of what cohabitation means for individual relationship trajectories and for the institution of marriage more generally. Using data on almost 800 African Americans and fixed effects modeling procedures, the present study sheds some light on these debates by exploring the extent to which cohabitation, relative to both singlehood and dating, is associated with within-individual change in marital perspectives during the transition to adulthood. Findings suggest that cohabitation is indeed predictive of change in marital beliefs in ways that reposition partners toward marriage, not away from it. This seems to be especially the case for women. Further, although cohabitation affects marital perspectives no matter its quality, relationship quality in both cohabiting and dating unions also proves to be an independent predictor of marital perspectives. Future work on relationship status effects must begin to take into account the conditioning effect of relationship quality.

INTRODUCTION

Cohabitation has become increasingly widespread in the United States over the last decade. In fact, cohabiting unions are now the modal route to marriage and a common experience in the lives of young people (Cherlin 2010a). Such trends have given rise to debates about the relation between cohabitation and marriage. These debates have centered around not only what cohabitation might mean for individual marriage experiences and trajectories (e.g. Manning and Cohen 2012) but also, more broadly, what the increased prevalence of cohabitation might mean for the future of marriage as an institution (Cherlin 2004; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; The National Marriage Project 2010; Wilcox and Cherlin 2011).

In her model of marriage entry, McGinnis (2003) shed some light on these debates by arguing that cohabitation, by affecting the costs and benefits associated with marriage, “appears to significantly change the context in which decisions about marriage are made in romantic relationships” (p. 105). Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) made a similar argument about the potential for cohabitation to change relational partners’ standpoint with respect to marriage. In particular, their inertia perspective argued that the constraints associated with cohabitation (e.g. a shared lease or pet) increase the difficulty of ending a relationship, hence “tipping the scale toward staying together and, for some, marriage” (Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman 2006).

Although these perspectives draw upon different theoretical frameworks which are expanded upon below, both suggest that cohabitation repositions romantic partners with respect to marriage. The current study further explores this possibility by examining how cohabitation, relative to both dating and singlehood, is associated with changes in

marital perspectives. These marital perspectives — perceived marital costs, perceived marital benefits, the general importance of marriage, and marital salience — tap into several of the multiple dimensions of “marital paradigms” highlighted by Willoughby, Hall, and Luczak (2013). Four primary questions are addressed: (1) To what extent does cohabitation, relative to dating and singlehood, affect marital perspectives?; (2) Does the expected cohabitation effect hold after accounting for relationship quality?; (3) To what extent is the effect of cohabitation conditioned by relationship quality?; and (4) To what extent is the effect of cohabitation gendered?

In addressing these questions, this study expands upon and overcomes some of the limitations inherent in our current understanding of how cohabitation might reposition one with respect to marriage. First, it provides a deeper consideration of the sociohistorical context surrounding marriage and marriage politics in the United States today. Second, it focuses on the transition to adulthood, a period in which romantic relationships are a central concern for young people (Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, and Haggart 2006; Mikulincer and Shaver 2009) and one that helps to lay the foundation for future family formation behaviors (Furstenberg Jr. 2010; Raley, Crissey, and Muller 2007). Third, the current study assesses several different dimensions of marital perspectives to examine how cohabitation is associated with both general, “public morality” marital perspectives and life-course specific, “personal choice” marital perspectives (Hakim 2003). Although much work to date has focused on the former (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Whitton, Stanley, Markman, and Johnson 2013), life-course informed theories, like marital horizon theory (Carroll et al. 2007), posit that the latter is especially important for understanding

young people's experiences during the transition to adulthood. Fourth, with the use of fixed effects models, the current study assesses intraindividual change in marital perspectives over time. Relatedly, the data utilized here contain relationship quality indicators across multiple waves and for respondents in both dating and cohabiting relationships. This not only allows for the examination of the cohabitation effect independent of relationship quality, something Stanley et al. (2006) argue is essential, but also permits a consideration of how quality might condition the effect of cohabitation. Finally, given recent evidence that the link between cohabitation and marriage may be gendered (e.g. Huang, Smock, Manning, and Bergstrom-Lynch 2011), the current study attends to the potentially gendered effects of cohabitation on marital perspectives.

Importantly, these issues are tackled using an all-African American sample of young people during the transition to adulthood. Although such a sample has limitations, it allows for a nuanced investigation of marital perspectives among a population that leads demographic trends in nonmarriage (United States Census Bureau 2010), nonmarital childbearing (Ventura 2009), divorce (Gibbs and Payne 2011), and the age of first marriage (Payne 2012). In addition, as described further below, marriage politics in the United States intersect heavily with racial politics in ways that call for a deeper understanding of marriage, in practice and in principle, in the lives of African Americans.

COHABITATION: REORIENTING PARTNERS TOWARD MARRIAGE?

As Smock (2000; Smock and Manning 2010) noted, cohabitation is now the modal route to marriage and is a "typical experience in many people's lives" (2010:131). By age 25, roughly 55 percent of young women in the United States have experienced a cohabiting union, while almost three quarters have done so by age 30 (Copen, Daniels,

and Mosher 2013). Further, adolescents have begun to place cohabitation in their life plans, as roughly one-third of Toledo adolescents indicated that they saw themselves “probably” or “definitely” cohabiting in the future (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007). As indicated above, the increased prominence of cohabitation has led to both scholarly and popular interest about the future of marriage. Some of this interest concerns the extent to which cohabitation may serve as an alternative to marriage, thereby weakening the institution of marriage (Wilcox and Cherlin 2011). Others focus on what, if anything, cohabitation might mean for individual experiences of marriage. For instance, several studies have found a positive association between cohabitation and marital instability or distress (e.g. Jose, O’Leary, and Moyer 2010; Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, and Johnson 2010). This “cohabitation effect,” however, has recently been called into question (Manning and Cohen 2012).

Nonetheless, two models have been put forth that are relevant to debates concerning cohabitation’s effect on both the institution of marriage and individual experiences of marriage. Both of these models, although drawing upon different theoretical insights, suggest that the experience of cohabitation may reposition relational partners with respect to marriage in ways that dating does not. The first of these models is one of marriage entry put forth by McGinnis (2003). This model posits that cohabitation changes the perceived costs and benefits of marriage, thereby affecting partners’ intentions and expectations to marry, and ultimately increasing the likelihood of marriage. Rather than affecting the costs and benefits of marriage, Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) argued that cohabitation orients partners’ toward marriage simply by affecting the costs associated with ending the relationship. That is, by virtue of the added

constraints associated with cohabitation, cohabitators may be more likely than daters to maintain a relationship, even one of poorer quality, and, perhaps, to marry. Although McGinnis (2003) did not tie her model of marriage entry into the literature on the “cohabitation effect,” Stanley et al. (2006) argued that the inertia of cohabitation may help to explain any purported effect of cohabitation, particularly pre-engagement cohabitation, on future marital troubles and instability. Hence both models suggest that cohabitation repositions relational partners with respect to marriage in ways that make marriage more probable. Importantly, this reorientation toward marriage is presumed to operate independently of relationship quality. A consideration of marriage politics in the United States today may help to explicate this process of inertia.

Contemporary Marriage Politics in the United States

The general consensus among family scholars is that marriage is still highly valued and desired among Americans (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001) and that the vast majority of adolescents expect to get married as adults (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007). Despite this, others have argued that the normative imperative to marry has declined over time, as marriage has become viewed in more individualistic terms (Cherlin 2004; Thornton 1989). Much of the work deeming the marriage imperative to be relatively dead, however, was conducted prior to massive efforts by the U.S. government to promote marriage. These efforts are illustrated in two national policies: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF; Public Law 104-193, Section 401) and the Healthy Marriage Initiative, now termed the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood initiative (Administration for Children and Family 2011; 2012b).

TANF was the component of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA; more commonly referred to as “welfare” reform) that provided states with block grants to assist low-income families. In addition to changes in the structure of welfare (e.g. time limits; Greenberg et al., 2002), TANF legislation asserted the promotion of marriage as an explicit goal (Public Law 104-193, Section 401) and gave states wide latitude on how to spend TANF funds to meet this goal. Hence welfare funds were no longer required to be spent on providing direct or indirect cash assistance to families (Public Law 104-193, Section 404). As Gallo (2012) argued, TANF effectively “positioned the promotion of heterosexual marriage as a building block of antipoverty policy” (p. 64) .

In 2001-2002, such anti-poverty efforts were expanded when the federal government launched its Healthy Marriage Initiative (Administration for Children and 2011; 2012b). Through “support, information, and education” (Dion 2005), marriage promotion programs, funded by the federal initiative but enacted at the state and local level, aimed to increase the number of healthy marriages. Since 2005, governmental efforts to promote healthy marriages have been accompanied by efforts to promote responsible fatherhood and have been fully subsumed under TANF and its reauthorizations. The latest reauthorization granted \$150 million to states per year “for the purpose of carrying out healthy marriage promotion activities” and “activities promoting responsible fatherhood” (Public Law 111-291, Section 811).

These policies show that “the engineering of marriage has been a central concern” (Moon and Whitehead 2006) for the United States government in the past decade and a half. Contrary to those scholars who argue that the normative imperative to

marry has declined in the United States, some scholars suggest that this imperative has simply been encoded into U.S. public policies, effectively venerating “marriage as *the* normative intimate relation for human beings” (Jenkins 2007). This is not the case in other countries, like the Netherlands, France, Sweden, and Germany, that allow for legally recognized, non-marital union statuses (e.g. registered partnership or registered cohabitation; Badgett 2009), often for both same-sex and different-sex couples. Hence, although the scope of marriages legitimated by the government has recently been expanded to include same-sex marriages (Liptak 2013), marriage remains the only nationally legitimated union status in the United States. This sociopolitical context is indicative the symbolic significance of marriage in the U.S. today, with marriage serving as not only a “symbol of successful self-development” (Cherlin 2009) but also as one of respectable citizenship (Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Jenkins 2007; Moon and Whitehead 2006; Onwuachi-Wilig 2005).

These marriage politics may help to shed some light on the property of inertia that has been associated with cohabitation. Without an understanding of marriage politics, it is relatively easy to see how the added constraints associated with cohabitation may inhibit relationship dissolution, but it is a bit more difficult to explain how or why the constraints associated with *dissolving* a cohabiting union might lead to the *intensification* of that union through marriage. Placing cohabitation in the sociohistorical context of contemporary marriage politics, however, reveals that cohabitation lacks the symbolic significance of marriage and is not a legally and socially legitimated long-term relationship status in the United States. Cohabiting couples may feel more anxiety than dating couples with regards to making a relationship move—either marrying or ending

the relationship (presumably in order to find one worthy of marriage). In this context, “sliding” toward marriage (Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman 2006), even one of low quality, may seem quite practical.

As mentioned previously, the current study does not assess the move toward marriage in terms of marital behavior but in terms of four marital perspectives—marital costs, marital benefits, marital importance, and marital salience. Although research on the causal implications of marital attitudes (e.g. Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995) and group differences (e.g. South 1993; Tucker 2000) in such attitudes seems to imply relative stability in these attitudes, recent work supports the notion that marital perspectives shift with development and experience. Willoughby (2010), for instance, found significant within-individual change in general marital importance, relative marital importance, marital expectations, and expected age at marriage across adolescence. Consistent with this view that marital perspectives are malleable across the life course, it is anticipated that cohabitation will be accompanied by the increased appeal of marriage. In particular, it is expected that cohabitation will be associated with a more positive outlook on marriage. Further, such effects are expected to be independent of relationship quality. Formally stated, these hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 4.1: Cohabitation, relative to both dating and singlehood, will be associated with a negative change in perceived marital costs and a positive change in perceived marital benefits, marital importance, and marital salience.

Hypothesis 4.2: The association between cohabitation and changing marital perspectives will hold after controlling for relationship quality.

Two caveats are in order at this point. First, hypotheses 4.1 and 4.2 are, by and large, consistent with Stanley et al's (2006) notion of inertia and McGinnis' (2003) model of marriage entry. An exception, however, is that the current study hypothesizes a positive association between cohabitation and perceived marital benefits, whereas McGinnis hypothesized and found a negative association between cohabitation and perceived marital benefits. The current hypothesis concerning marital benefits diverges from McGinnis' for two primary reasons. First, the benefits being assessed are of a different kind. Whereas the NSFH used by McGinnis (ibid.) asked respondents to report how they expected that their lives would change if they were to get married, the Family and Community Health Study used here asked respondents to report about the general benefits of marriage (e.g. the extent to which they agreed that "marriage leads to a happier life"). Hence the benefits attended to here capture the more general, symbolic benefits of marriage rather than the tangible, practical benefits (e.g. changes in economic security and standard of living) attended to by McGinnis. Second, the current study assesses within-individual change in marital perspectives rather than between-individual differences between cohabitators and daters. Hence, it is expected that the move from dating or singlehood to a cohabiting relationship will increase the general favorability with which respondents view marriage.

The second caveat that is in order concerns the disjuncture between the nature of the samples utilized in many of the studies that inform the above hypotheses and that which is used here. As previously mentioned, the current study employs an exclusively African American sample of young people, while those cited above used samples that contained predominantly White respondents. There is inconsistent evidence regarding

whether or not cohabitation may reposition Blacks with respect to marriage differently than Whites. On the one hand, qualitative researchers have pointed out that respectable citizenship has been denied legally to African Americans historically and continues to be threatened symbolically today. For instance, critical scholars have claimed that despite the explicit rhetoric of “health and social capital” (Heath 2009), contemporary marriage politics rely upon historically racialized understandings of healthy families, such that “the poor Black family remains an invisible standard of deviancy” (Heath 2009). As Jenkins (2007) argued, this racialization of marriage politics may venerate marriage with even more symbolic power for African Americans than Whites and suggests that a repositioning toward marriage upon cohabitation should be evident among Blacks and may even be greater for Blacks than for Whites. On the other hand, Blacks have been shown to be much less likely than Whites to transform cohabiting unions into marital unions (Copen, Daniels, and Mosher 2013; Manning and Smock 1995), suggesting that cohabitation may not orient Blacks toward marriage, or at least may not do so to the same extent that it is expected to for Whites. These seemingly incongruent perspectives highlight the need for nuanced investigations of marital perspectives and meaning in the lives of African Americans.

The moderating role of relationship quality?

As indicated in hypothesis 4.2, the effect of cohabitation on marital attitudes is expected to be independent of relationship quality, which has itself been linked to a more positive outlook on marriage (Simons, Simons, Lei, and Landor 2012). It is also possible, however, that relationship quality may condition the effect of cohabitation on marital perspectives. For instance, because cohabitation is seldom considered to be a

long-term state (and, in fact, is often short-lived in the United States; Cherlin 2010a), higher quality cohabiting unions may be associated with an even greater orientation toward marriage than lower quality cohabiting unions. Alternatively, cohabitations of higher quality may be perceived as indistinguishable from marriage and hence may be associated with lesser orientation toward marriage. These possibilities suggest that the effect of cohabitation on perceptions of marriage may differ by relationship quality.

Hypothesis 4.3: Relationship quality will condition the association between cohabitation and changes in marital perspectives.

Gender, cohabitation, and changing perceptions of marriage

In addition to testing the moderating effect of relationship quality on the link between cohabitation and marital attitudes, the current study also attends to the role that gender may play in conditioning the effects of cohabitation. Although marriage is a desired status for both men and women (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), some research suggests that the prospect of marriage plays a more central role in the lives of women than in those of men. For instance, both Chasteen (1994) and Sharp (2007) have shown that women often problematize singlehood and that marriage, or at least the prospect of it, may afford women with a sense of normalcy. Chasteen (1994) argued that this is the case because men provide women the symbolic capital of simply “looking less ‘out of place’ to others”, of “appear[ing] ‘normal’ and appropriate” in their everyday environments (p. 322). Similarly, Huang et al. (2011) reported that women, but not men, noted the social disapproval of cohabitation and viewed marriage as the more legitimate (and legitimating) relationship status. As some have argued, these gendered “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham 1993) surrounding heterosexual partnerships may be

especially salient for African Americans (e.g. Clarke 2011; Collins 2005; Jenkins 2007; Moore 2011) given the persistent pathologization of Black intimacies, especially those of Black women (Collins 1990; Jenkins 2007; Moon and Whitehead 2006).

This notion that women, more so than men, gain symbolic status and social legitimacy from being partnered, and particularly from being married, has been tangentially supported in national survey data. For instance, although women are more likely than men to disagree that marriage brings happiness and to agree that there are few good marriages, they rate marriage as being more important than do men, are more likely to prefer to be married than are men, and are more likely to be certain about getting married than are men (Thornton 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). These patterns are evident even among younger cohorts, as Wood, Avellar, and Goesling (2008) reported that even though teen girls have more negative attitudes toward marriage in general, they expect marriage and want to be married sooner than their male counterparts. Huang et al. (2011) further reported that women cohabiters were more likely than their male counterparts to link cohabitation directly to marriage and to express concern that cohabitation might actually be counterproductive to their marriage goals. Such findings imply gendered decision-making processes regarding cohabitation and suggest that the effects of cohabitation (and perhaps its quality) on perceptions of marriage may also be gendered. It is expected that cohabitation will be tied to favorable marital perspectives more strongly for women than for men. Formally, this hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 4.4: Cohabitation will be associated with favorable marital perceptions more strongly for woman than for men.

METHOD

Data

Data from the Family and Community Health Study (FACHS) are used to test the above hypotheses. FACHS is a multi-site, longitudinal research study of over 800 African American youth (the target respondents) and their family members living in Iowa and Georgia at the study's initiation. Targeted youth were in the fifth grade public school system at the time of recruitment. Unlike more commonly used studies containing significant numbers of African Americans (e.g. Fragile Families, Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, and McLanahan 2001), FACHS was designed to capture the diversity of African American families and the variety of communities in which they live. Hence youth and their families were drawn from school rosters across a variety of communities that differed on racial composition and economic level within each state (sampling and data collection procedures have been described in much greater detail elsewhere; e.g. Simons et al. 2002a).

At the first wave of the FACHS (1997-1998), data were gathered on 889 target children (average age at Wave I=10.5) and their family members. Subsequent waves were completed every 2 to 3 years thereafter, with the sixth and most recent wave of data collection occurring more than a decade after the study's initiation in 2010 and 2011. At this latest wave, 699 target children, now in their early-to-mid twenties, participated in the study (78.6% of the original sample; average at Wave VI = 23.6). In its entirety, then, the FACHS captures the experiences of African American youth from late childhood through the early years of the transition to adulthood. Given the current interest in romantic relationship experiences, the latest three waves of FACHS data, beginning at

Wave IV when respondents were on the cusp of the transition to adulthood (average age at Wave IV = 18.8), are utilized here. Because respondents who failed to participate in one wave of data were still contacted for participation at later waves, 793 of the original 889 target respondents (89.2%) participated in at least one of the latter three FACHS waves. Although participants in these later waves of data were more likely than Wave I participants to be female, there was little evidence of selective attrition with respect to community characteristics, family structure, and parenting practices.

The original sample drawn from the latter three waves of data included 2,102 observations (person-years) from 793 respondents. Excluding person-years with missing values for key study variables and those in which respondents reported being married, the final sample consisted of 1,989 observations from 780 unmarried respondents. As noted below, however, this analytic sample varied slightly across outcomes.

Prior to discussing the measures, a few additional notes about the FACHS are in order. First, for the study questions addressed here, the FACHS is preferable to several more commonly used nationally representative studies, like the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health; Harris et al. 2009) or the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH; Sweet and Bumpass 2002) for several reasons. First, the FACHS has a more limited time span between waves during the period of the transition to adulthood when romantic relationships are a primary focus in people's lives (Arnett 2004; Carroll et al. 2007; Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, and Haggart 2006; Mikulincer and Shaver 2009). For instance, the FACHS waves are separated by 2 to 3 years, while the latter Add Health waves are separated by 6 to 7 years, and all NSFH waves are separated by 5 or more years. Second, the FACHS contains multiple

dimensions of marital perspectives, including general measures of costs, benefits, and importance, as well as a more life-course specific measure of marital salience. Although all of these dimensions comprise components of “marital paradigms” (Willoughby, Hall, and Luczak 2013) or marital perspectives, both Hakim (2003) and Carroll and colleagues (2007) have drawn an important distinction between these perspectives with regard to their variability and, hence, their potential explanatory power throughout the life course. Third, the FACHS includes similar indicators of relationship quality for those in dating and cohabiting unions and hence allows for an assessment of both relationship status and quality in predicting change in marital perspectives. Although it is the case that the restrictive FACHS sample limits the study’s generalizability, U.S. Census data reveal that the FACHS respondents are fairly representative of Blacks aged 18-24 nationwide on measures of marital status (United States Census Bureau 2010), fertility (U.S. Census Bureau 2011b), school enrollment (United States Census Bureau 2011c), and educational attainment (United States Census Bureau 2011a).

Dependent Variables

Perceived benefits of marriage. The perceived benefits of marriage were assessed at each wave via a 2-item scale indicating the degree to which respondents think marriage “leads to a happier life” and to a “fuller life.” Response categories ranged from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”), and items were summed to form the index of perceived benefits. Cronbach’s alphas across waves ranged from .69 to .87.

Perceived costs of marriage. The perceived costs of marriage were assessed at each wave via a 4-item index indicating the degree to which respondents associated marriage with a loss of friends, a loss of freedom, a worse sex life, and a harder life. For

each item, response categories ranged from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”), and items were summed to form an index of marital costs. Cronbach’s alphas ranged from .67 to .77 across waves.

General marital importance. The general importance of marriage at each wave was assessed with one item asking: “How important is it to you to have a good marriage?” This item was prefaced with the statement: “We now have a few questions about your goals and values.” Potential responses ranged from (1) “Not at all important” to (5) “Extremely important.”

Current marital salience. The salience of marriage at each wave was assessed with one item asking the extent to which respondents agreed that “Getting married is the most important part of my life.” Potential responses ranged from (1) “Strongly disagree” to (5) “Strongly agree.” Unlike general marital importance, the indicator of marital salience was intended to measure the extent to which marriage was not only important but also a primary focus during the transition to adulthood.

Independent Variables

Union type. At each wave, union type was assessed via an item that asked respondents to best describe their current relationship status. Those who reported currently living with a partner but not being married to that partner were coded as *cohabiting*. Those who reported being in a nonmarital romantic relationship but not living with their partner were coded as *dating*. Those reporting that they were not romantically involved with someone on at least “a regular basis” were coded as being *single*.

Relationship quality. Three subscales — relationship satisfaction, partner warmth, and partner hostility (reverse-coded) — were used to assess relationship quality for both

cohabiting and dating respondents. Relationship satisfaction was assessed with 2 questions about respondents' overall satisfaction and happiness with their romantic relationship. Because potential responses varied across these two items, the items were standardized and then averaged to form an index of relationship satisfaction. Partner warmth was assessed via 3 questions that asked how often in the past month one's romantic partner acted "loving and affectionate," helped the respondent do something that was important to him/her, and expressed appreciation. These 3 items were averaged to form the index of relationship warmth. Finally, partner hostility was assessed via 5 items that asked how often in the past month one's romantic partner was verbally or physically abusive (e.g. shout at, insult or swear at, slap or hit). These 5 items were first reverse-coded and then averaged to form the index of (lack of) relationship hostility. The satisfaction, warmth, and reverse-coded hostility indices were then standardized and summed to create an index of relationship quality at each wave. Using Nunnally's (1978) formula for the linear combination of measures, the reliability of this composite index ranged from .82 to .86 across waves.

The measure of relationship quality was then recoded into an "internal moderator" by first standardizing the composite index to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 and then assigning single respondents a score of 0. The relationship quality index that resulted from the use of the internal moderator approach showed variation among partnered respondents and no variation among single respondents. As Mirowsky (1999) notes, the use of internal moderators enables one to test the extent to which "the qualities of a situation determine the effect of being in it" (p. 177) and to make comparisons that conventional coding schemes do not allow. For example, the effect of having a romantic

partner on marital perspectives may depend on relationship quality, as hypothesized. This hypothesis, however, forces a comparison between those in higher quality relationships, lower quality relationships, and no relationship. Excluding single respondents from the analysis due to missing data on relationship quality, however, would preclude such a comparison. Alternatively, dichotomizing romantic relationships into high quality, low quality, and single in order to maintain single respondents and make the desired comparisons would be accompanied by a loss of data sophistication. This latter approach becomes even more problematic when the partnered group can further be distinguished by union type (e.g. cohabiting and dating), as is the current case. Internal moderators overcome these limitations by allowing one to maintain the continuous nature and intricacy of the moderating variable while retaining the group for whom the moderating variable does not apply (in this case, single respondents). The benefits of internal moderators and the interpretation of their coefficients should become apparent in the presentation of results.

In addition to union type and relationship quality, the following analyses included several time-varying control variables that, if left unattended to, may confound the associations between cohabitation and marital perspectives. These variables included school enrollment (*in school* = 1), parental status (*parent* = 1), and employment (*full-time employment* [≥ 35 hours/week] = 1). As described further below, fixed effects models were used, thus making time-invariant control variables unnecessary.

Plan of Analysis

The above hypotheses were tested via a series of fixed effects models (performed in Stata 12; StataCorp 2011). Fixed effects models assess the relation between

cohabitation and marital perspectives, factors that change across waves, within each individual. This focus on intraindividual change attempts to rule out omitted variable bias and hence rule out potential selection mechanisms by controlling for time-invariant factors, both observed and unobserved (e.g. family background, gender, childhood community context). Although this means that the direct effect of these time-invariant factors cannot be estimated directly, one can test for the interaction between time-varying variables and time-invariant variables by entering the main effect of the time-varying predictor and the interaction effect between the time-varying and time-invariant predictors into the model (Allison 2009). This was the approach taken here with gender. Further, fixed effects of time were included in the model when the test of significance (via the *testparm* command in Stata 12) indicated that time coefficients were not jointly equal to zero.

For perceptions of both marital benefits and costs, the conventional unconditional maximum likelihood estimator with robust standard errors was used. Because both the general marital importance and marital salience outcomes were measured on an ordinal scale, however, neither the maximum likelihood estimator nor the conventional conditional likelihood estimator used for fixed effects logit models was appropriate. Instead, the “blow-up and cluster” (BUC) estimator, proposed by Mukherjee, Ahn, Liu, Rathouz, and Sánchez (2008) and developed by Baetschmann, Staub, and Winkelmann (2011), was used for these two outcomes. This estimator “blows up” the sample size by dichotomizing the dependent variable at each of its cut-points for all individuals (hence each individual will have $K-1$ copies, each at a different cutoff point, where K is the number of ordered outcomes). Then, a conditional maximum likelihood estimator, with

standard errors clustered at the individual level, is used on the expanded sample. The BUC estimator has been shown to provide reliable fixed effects estimates on ordered outcomes, to be less sensitive to the number of panel waves, and to perform better than the conventional approach of dichotomizing an ordinal variable at only 1 cut-point (Baetschmann, Staub, and Winkelmann 2011). BUC estimation of fixed effects was implemented via the *feologit_buc* command in Stata 12. It is important to note that fixed effects ordered logit models, like fixed effects logit models in general, can be performed only on those whose outcome is not constant across waves. Hence, as becomes evident in the presentation of results, the analytic sample for the ordered logit models was smaller than that for the linear regression models.

For each of the four outcomes, the analyses proceeded in several steps. First, the main effects of relationship status were considered by entering the time-varying cohabiting and dating indicators, along with the time-varying controls, into the model. Because this first model compared cohabiting and dating to singlehood, differences between cohabiting and dating statuses were assessed via an incremental likelihood-ratio Chi-square test. This test was conducted by comparing the unconstrained model in which the cohabiting and dating coefficients were allowed to vary to an alternative, constrained model in which cohabiting and dating statuses were combined into one partnered status, thus constraining their coefficients to be equal. A significant test statistic indicated that the cohabiting and dating coefficients significantly differed from one another. Upon determining main effects for union type, the time-varying relationship quality indicator was entered into the model, followed by its relationship quality-by-union type interaction terms. Lastly, the moderating role of gender was assessed by entering its interaction with

both status and quality into the model. For outcomes in which there was evidence of gendered effects, the models were separated by gender and are discussed as such below.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Findings

Table 4.1 provides descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for all study variables. As can be seen in this table, slightly more than half (56.9%) of the observations across the FACHS waves were from young women. School enrollment was reported in 56.2%, parenthood in 28.8%, and full-time employment in 37.4% of observations. About one-tenth of observations (10.3%) were from cohabiting respondents, while 42.1% were from dating respondents. Given that years in which respondents were married were excluded from the analytic sample, the remainder of observations (47.6%) were from years in which respondents reported having no romantic partner. On average, the quality of these relationships tended to be fairly high, with an average score of 0 on a scale ranging from -11.5 to 3.7. Importantly, union type (cohabiting or dating status) was not significantly associated with relationship quality.

With regards to the outcome variables, respondents' perceptions of marital benefits were generally high (7.3 on a scale ranging from 2 to 10), while their perceptions of marital costs were more neutral (11.3 on a scale ranging from 4 to 20). Further, respondents average a score of 4.2 on a scale ranging from 1 to 5 on general marital importance (between “very important” and “extremely important”) but only a 2.8 on marital salience (between “disagree” and “neutral or mixed”). These four marital perspectives were significantly, but only weakly-to-moderately, correlated with one

Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics for Study 3 Variables Across Waves (N = 1989 observations)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Gender (1 = female)	—										
2 School enrollment (1 = in school)	0.127 *	—									
3 Parental status (1 = parent)	0.124 *	-0.092 *	—								
4 Full-time employment (1 = ≥ 35 hrs per week)	-0.037	-0.163 *	0.007	—							
5 Cohabitation status (1 = cohabiting)	0.023	-0.025	0.151 *	0.071 *	—						
6 Dating status (1 = dating)	0.031	-0.016	0.034	0.012	-0.289 *	—					
7 Relationship quality ^a	0.085 *	0.088 *	-0.053	0.012	0.028	-0.028	—				
8 Perceived benefits of marriage	-0.092 *	0.024	-0.013	0.030	0.081 *	0.079 *	0.162 *	—			
9 Perceived costs of marriage	-0.144 *	-0.085 *	-0.040	0.011	0.009	-0.070 *	-0.264 *	-0.123 *	—		
10 General marital importance	0.026	0.105 *	-0.032	0.031	0.090 *	0.113 *	0.218 *	0.478 *	-0.165 *	—	
11 Marital salience	-0.097 *	-0.018	-0.033	-0.003	0.096 *	0.073 *	0.074 *	0.474 *	0.021	0.340 *	—
Mean	0.569	0.562	0.288	0.374	0.103	0.421	-0.012	7.250	11.328	4.282	2.847
Std. Deviation	0.495	0.496	0.453	0.484	0.303	0.494	2.270	1.814	2.933	1.041	1.131
Min	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	-11.527	2.000	4.000	1.000	1.000
Max	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	3.708	10.000	20.000	5.000	5.000

a. For descriptive purposes, relationship quality is not coded as an internal moderator. Hence descriptive statistics and correlations between quality and other study variables are for partnered respondents only.

another, and, in particular, marital importance and marital salience were correlated at only .34. This descriptive information regarding general marital importance and marital salience supports Hakim (2003) and Carroll and colleagues' (2007) distinction between general, "public morality" attitudes and life-course specific, "personal choice" attitudes. That is, although FACHS respondents tended to view having a good marriage as extremely important, they tended to be more neutral with regards to marriage being their prime focus during the transition to adulthood. It is also worth noting that, although women perceived fewer benefits to marriage than did men, they also perceived fewer costs and reported lower marital salience. Gender was not significantly associated with general marital importance.

Fixed Effects Models

Table 4.2 displays the results of the fixed effects regression models predicting general marital importance and the perceived benefits of marriage. For these outcomes, the models are separated by gender because interactive models indicated that one or more effects differed by gender. Regarding general marital importance, Table 4.2 shows a significant and positive effect of both dating and cohabiting (versus singlehood) for both women and men. For women (model 1), cohabiting unions were associated with a threefold increase and dating unions nearly a twofold increase in general marital salience ($e^{\hat{b}}_{\text{cohabiting}} = 3.26, p < .01$; $e^{\hat{b}}_{\text{dating}} = 1.79, p < .05$). For men (model 3), cohabiting and dating unions both about doubled the odds of placing greater general importance on marriage ($e^{\hat{b}}_{\text{cohabiting}} = 2.13, p < .10$; $e^{\hat{b}}_{\text{dating}} = 2.10, p < .01$). Post hoc tests revealed that the cohabiting and dating coefficients did indeed differ significantly for women (LR $X^2 = 5.21, p < .05$), but they did not significantly differ for men (LR $X^2 = 0.00, p > .10$). This

Table 4.2: Fixed Effects Regression Models Predicting General Marital Importance and Perceived Marital Benefits Among Unmarried Respondents by Gender

	General Marital Importance ^a				Perceived Marital Benefits ^b				
	Females ^c (N = 244)		Males (N = 196)		Females ^c (N = 430)		Males (N = 350)		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<i>Relationship status</i>									
No relationship	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref	ref
Cohabiting	3.260 **	4.380 ***	2.131 †	2.354 *	0.364 †	0.368 †	0.480 †	0.478 †	0.480 †
Dating	1.793 *	2.038 **	2.104 **	2.508 ***	0.014	0.013	0.453 **	0.492 **	0.483 **
<i>Relationship Quality</i>									
Quality (IM)		2.201 ***		1.436 *		0.135 †		0.316 **	
x Cohabiting									0.786 ***
x Dating									0.208 †
<i>Time-varying controls</i>									
In school	0.974	1.095	0.900	0.840	0.016	0.017	-0.227	-0.264	-0.261
Parent	0.894	1.044	0.971	0.980	0.009	0.022	-0.285	-0.269	-0.243
Full-time employment	1.036	1.070	0.735	0.722	-0.166	-0.167	-0.084	-0.094	-0.092

†p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed)

a Exponentiated regression coefficients presented.

b Unstandardized regression coefficients presented.

c These models control for the fixed effects of time given that a test of their joint parameters was statistically different from zero.

remained the case in models 2 and 4 when relationship quality was considered. Although relationship quality had a direct and significant association with general marital salience, it did not attenuate the effects of union type. Further, for both men and women, the effect of relationship quality on general marital salience did not differ by union type (results not shown; LR $X^2_{\text{women}} = 0.00$, $p > .10$; LR $X^2_{\text{men}} = 0.04$, $p > .10$), indicating that, for both cohabiting and dating unions, higher quality relationships were associated with greater general importance placed upon marriage.

By and large, the patterns found for general marital importance were similar to those found for the perceived benefits of marriage. As shown in model 5, for women, only cohabitation differed from singlehood in its association with perceived marital benefits, such that cohabitation but not dating was associated with greater marital benefits ($b_{\text{cohabiting}} = .364$, $p < .10$; $b_{\text{dating}} = .014$, $p > .10$), but this effect was only marginally significant. For men (model 7), however, both cohabitation and dating, relative to singlehood, were significantly and positively associated with perceived marital benefits ($b_{\text{cohabiting}} = .480$, $p < .10$; $b_{\text{dating}} = .453$, $p < .01$). As was the case with general marital importance, cohabitation and dating statuses differed in their link to marital benefits for women but not for men (LR $X^2_{\text{women}} = 5.25$, $p < .05$; LR $X^2_{\text{men}} = 0.02$, $p > .10$), and this remained the case even after controlling for relationship quality (models 6 and 8). Again, although relationship quality was directly associated with perceived marital benefits, it did not account for the union type effects. Further, for women, the effect of relationship quality did not differ by union type (results not shown; LR $X^2 = 1.23$, $p > .10$). For men, however, relationship quality did prove to condition the effect of union type on perceived marital benefits. As shown in model 9, the interaction between relationship quality and

both cohabitation and dating proved statistically significant and positive ($b_{\text{cohabiting*quality}} = .786, p < .001$; $b_{\text{dating*quality}} = .208, p < .10$), but post-hoc tests revealed that the effect of relationship quality on marital benefits in cohabiting unions was significantly greater than its effect in dating unions ($\text{LR } X^2 = 8.26, p < .01$). Hence, for both men and women in both dating and cohabiting unions, relationships of higher quality were associated with greater perceived marital benefits, and this effect was amplified for cohabiting men.

Table 4.3 displays the results of the fixed effects regression models predicting marital salience and the perceived costs of marriage. Because gender interactions provided no evidence of gendered effects across models, these models are presented for the full sample. As model 1 of Table 4.3 shows, both cohabitation and dating were significantly predictive of current marital salience. Cohabitation, relative to singlehood, was associated with nearly a twofold increase in marital salience ($e^{\wedge b} = 1.88, p < .01$), while dating, relative to singlehood, was associated with a 36% increase in the odds of greater marital salience ($e^{\wedge b} = 1.36, p < .05$). The effects of cohabitation and dating further proved significantly different from one another ($\text{LR } X^2 = 4.06, p < .05$), such that the effect of cohabitation on marital salience was greater than that of dating. As shown in model 2, these union type effects held when relationship quality was considered. Although relationship quality proved directly and positively associated with marital salience, as it has with other outcomes thus far, it neither attenuated the union type effects nor mattered differently for cohabitation versus dating ($\text{LR } X^2 = 0.32, p > .10$).

With the exception of gendered effects, the results for the three outcomes discussed thus far have proven fairly consistent. In predicting marital costs, however, models 3 and 4 of Table 3 reveal a somewhat unique pattern of results. Although dating,

Table 4.3: Fixed Effects Regression Models Predicting Marital Salience and Marital Costs from the Relationship Experiences of Unmarried Respondents

	Marital Salience ^{a, b} (N = 525)		Marital Costs ^{a, c} (N = 780)	
	1	2	3	4
<i>Relationship status</i>				
No relationship	ref	ref	ref	ref
Cohabiting	1.877 **	1.862 **	-0.364	-0.362
Dating	1.364 *	1.389 *	-0.721 ***	-0.744 ***
<i>Relationship Quality</i>				
Quality (IM)		1.181 †		-0.502 ***
<i>Time-varying controls</i>				
In school	0.688 *	0.690 *	-0.068	-0.039
Parent	1.168	1.197	0.202	0.153
Full-time employment	0.786 †	0.794 †	0.201	0.211

†p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed)

a These models control for the fixed effects of time given that a test of their joint parameters was

b Exponentiated regression coefficients presented.

c Unstandardized regression coefficients presented.

compared to singlehood, was significantly predictive of perceiving fewer marital costs ($b = -.721, p < .001$), cohabitation did not differ from singlehood in this regard ($e = -.364, p > .10$). Further, dating was significantly associated with fewer perceived marital costs than was cohabitation ($LR X^2 = 3.43, p < .10$). As model 4 indicates, relationship quality did not account for this union type effect, although a direct association between relationship quality and lower perceived marital costs was found. As indicated by post hoc comparisons, the effect of relationship quality did not vary by union type ($LR X^2 = 0.76, p > .10$).

Such results provide at least partial support for all study hypotheses. For both men and women, cohabitation was linked to greater perceived marital benefits, higher general marital importance, and higher marital salience, relative to singlehood (supportive of hypothesis 4.1). Relative to dating, however, cohabitation was associated with increased marital salience for both men and women (supportive of hypothesis 4.1) but was associated with increased general marital importance and marital benefits only for women. Hence for these latter two outcomes, cohabitation and dating had differential effects for women, but similar effects for men (supportive of hypothesis 4.4). Hypothesis 4.2 was supported across all outcomes given that the inclusion of relationship quality into the models never fully attenuated union type effects. Lastly, hypothesis 4.3 was supported in that the effect of cohabitation was conditioned by relationship quality such that higher quality unions were associated with a greater reorientation toward marriage than were lower quality unions. This was also the case for dating unions, however, indicating that relationship quality not only conditions the effect of cohabitation on marital perspectives but also of dating on marital perspectives.

Post-Hoc Propensity Models

Although utilizing data across multiple waves and examining within-person effects, fixed effects models require the assumption of a particular causal ordering. Guided by theory, the presentation of results thus far presumed the causal order to be one in which cohabitation led to changes in marital perspectives. A propensity score approach was used to evaluate this presumption further. To do so, Waves IV and V were used and a variable was constructed that indicated whether or not respondents had entered a cohabiting union between these two waves. This variable was coded 1 if a respondent reported not cohabiting at Wave IV but cohabiting at Wave V. It was coded 0 otherwise. Respondents who reported cohabiting at Wave IV or being married at Wave IV or V were removed from the analysis so that those who entered a cohabiting union were being compared and matched with those that either entered no union or entered a nonmarital and noncohabiting union. These treatment and control groups were successfully matched (via the nearest neighbor matching with a caliper of .05) on a number of variables at Wave IV, including prior levels of respective marital perspectives, age, education level, gender, school enrollment, employment status, parental status, and whether or not they were involved in a dating relationship. Entering a cohabiting union was associated with more than a twofold increase in marital salience ($e^b = 2.13$, $p = .001$), nearly a twofold increase in general marital importance ($e^b = 1.67$, $p = .062$), and about a half point increase in perceived marital benefits ($b = .41$, $p = .089$). It was not significantly associated with a change in marital costs ($b = -.017$, $p = .968$). Although these propensity models reduced the viable analytic sample and attended to only two consecutive waves,

the results supported the causal ordering assumed thus far in the fixed-effect regression models.

DISCUSSION

The current study sought to examine the extent to which cohabitation might reposition relational partners toward marriage by affecting their perceptions of marital costs and benefits as well as the importance they place upon marriage, both generally and in their current life context. The results provided overwhelming support that the experience of cohabitation was associated with changing marital perceptions in ways that enhanced the salience of marriage and accentuated, rather than minimized, its potential benefits. Notably, this reorientation toward marriage took place no matter the quality of the relationship, although higher quality relationships helped to enhance its effect. Such findings imply that, rather than serving as a deterrent to or a replacement for marriage, cohabitation appears to direct relational partners' focus toward marriage.

Although this story seems fairly straightforward and that which was anticipated, two of the core strengths of the study—its ability to compare cohabiting and dating unions and to assess the role of relationship quality across both types of unions—uncovered some other intriguing findings. The first of these is that, although in the majority of instances cohabitation yielded different effects than dating, this was not always the case. On two occasions, when predicting perceived marital benefits and general marital importance, cohabitation was indistinguishable from dating in its effects on men's marital perspectives. Both of these statuses, however, were distinguishable from singlehood, indicating that for men, it was the experience of simply having a romantic partner rather than the type of relationship that produced a shift toward more

favorable perceptions of marriage. For women, however, cohabitation and dating were consistently distinguishable in their effects on marital perceptions, in that cohabitation was predictive of greater marital importance and higher perceived marital benefits than was dating. These specific gendered findings are not surprising given evidence both that the legitimating value, the symbolic capital, of marriage is thought to be greater for women than men (Chasteen 1994; Sharp and Ganong 2007), a symbolic capital apparently not provided to women by cohabitation (Huang, Smock, Manning, and Bergstrom-Lynch 2011). It is important to note that, despite these gendered findings regarding general marital importance and marital benefits, cohabitation enhanced the current salience of marriage equally for men and women. Further, the young Black men in the FACHS sample actually scored slightly higher than young Black women on the measure of current marital salience. Such patterns cannot be overlooked, as they contradict stereotypes of the prospect of marriage mattering very little to Black men. How it matters and how it matters differently from Black women and both women and men in other racial groups needs further exploration.

The second finding to which more attention should be paid is that, across all outcomes for both men and women, relationship quality, in both cohabiting and dating unions, was positively associated with more favorable marital perceptions. Consonant with the work of Simons and colleagues (Simons, Simons, Lei, and Landor 2012), relationship quality, in addition to relationship status, appears to be an essential element in understanding the development of and changes in marital perspectives.

Not only are such findings relevant for understanding the link between cohabitation and marriage, but they also shed important insights on broader sociological

debates about the relation between attitudes and behavior. Recently, Willoughby (2010) refuted the often implicit assumption in the literature that marital perspectives are relatively static by showing that marital perspectives change significantly across adolescence. The current findings present another challenge to this assumption by revealing that marital perspectives continue to be responsive to social conditions throughout the transition to adulthood. This was the case across multiple dimensions of marital perspectives, including marital salience and marital costs and benefits. Importantly, however, although the general pattern of change was consistent across these different marital perspectives, there were some noteworthy differences by outcome. Marital salience, for instance, was the only marital belief measured in the present study to be responsive to changes in nonrelationship factors, like respondents' work and schooling situation. This finding is consistent with Carroll et al.'s (2007) contention about the utility of distinguishing between more general marital perspectives and more life-course specific marital perspectives across the life course. Similar distinctions between "public morality" and "personal choice" have also been advocated by Hakim (2003). The current findings support this multidimensionality of marital perspectives, but it is worth noting that even general, or public morality, perspectives about marriage were subject to change across the relatively short time span analyzed here.

Although the above findings are interesting in their own right, they are perhaps especially remarkable given that this study utilized an all-African American sample of young people. Although comparisons in the effect of cohabitation on marital perspectives by race cannot be drawn, one might have expected cohabitation to matter very little in changing marital perspectives for young Blacks. This is so because scholars have

postulated that cohabitation may serve as more of an alternative to marriage for Blacks than it does for Whites (see Smock 2000 for a brief review), and Blacks have consistently been shown to be much less likely than Whites to convert cohabiting unions into marital unions (Copen, Daniels, and Mosher 2013; Manning and Smock 1995). Given these patterns, the model of marriage entry extended by McGinnis (2003) and the process of inertia identified by Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) may have been thought to be relatively inapplicable to African Americans. Although such models, with their ultimate focus on marital behavior, may still prove to be less applicable to African Americans than to Whites, the general argument of these models, that cohabitation reorients relational partners' toward marriage, holds true in the current sample of African Americans during the transition to adulthood, at least when this reorientation is measured by changing marital perspectives. It is imperative that future work examines this paradox and its implications for cohabiting couples. The most obvious question may be why, if cohabitation causes a reorientation toward marriage, less than one-third of first cohabiting unions among Black women transition to marriage (Copen, Daniels, and Mosher 2013)? Undoubtedly, material resources, which prove important in explaining the gap between marital attitudes and behavior in general (e.g. Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005), play a large role in answering this question. Perhaps a more interesting line of inquiry, then, might be how the added salience of marriage brought on by cohabitation affects the well-being of cohabiting partners and the stability of their unions, particularly among those who lack the real or perceived resources deemed necessary for marriage by young people today (Cherlin 2009; Cherlin 2013; Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton, and Garrett-Peters 2008).

This study drew heavily on the unique sociopolitical context of marriage in the United States today to explain why it is that cohabitation would be expected to reorient relational partners toward marriage, no matter the quality of the cohabiting union. The symbolic value of marriage (Cherlin 2009) and the lack of legally recognized alternative relationship statuses (for both same-sex and different sex couples) in the United States are not universal, however. For instance, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the UK, Switzerland, Hungary, France, Belgium, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Luxembourg, and the Nordic countries all offer registered partnerships or registered cohabitations to same-sex and/or different-sex couples (Badgett 2009). Such relationship statuses incur most of the rights and responsibilities of marriage. Perhaps as a result, cohabiting unions tend to be longer in these countries than in the United States. In fact, the median length of cohabiting unions among Swedes is greater than that for marriages among Americans (Heuveline, Timberlake, and Furstenberg 2003). In such countries where legitimate and institutionalized relationships outside of marriage exist, one might expect cohabitation to change marital perceptions, or to reorient partners toward marriage more generally, to a much lesser extent than in the United States.

These findings and their implications must be considered in light of several limitations. Although the all-African American sample utilized here was relevant given racialized demographic trends and politics surrounding marriage and family formation behaviors, this sample restricts the study's generalizeability. Given its sampling design, however, the FACHS did allow us to capture heterogeneity among African American young people not only in marital perspectives but also in community context, family background, relationship experiences, and personal resources. This heterogeneity has

often been obscured in popular discourses about cultural values and group differences in marital attitudes (Bryant et al. 2008; Bryant and Wickrama 2005; King 1999). Second, central to Stanley and colleagues' (Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman 2006; Stanley et al. 2010) inertia perspective is the timing of cohabitation relative to engagement. FACHS lacks information on the timing of engagement, however, and hence a distinction could not be made between cohabiting couples who were engaged prior to cohabiting and those who were engaged after cohabiting. Third, given that respondents' averaged about 24 years of age by Wave VI of the study, marriage was an uncommon phenomenon. Hence questions about the ways in which marital perspectives might mediate the link between cohabitation and marriage, marital quality, and marital stability could not be attended to here.

Nonetheless, by examining intraindividual change in marital perspectives over time, the current study indicates that cohabitation among African American young adults tends to enhance the salience, importance, and benefits of marriage. That is, cohabitation, no matter its quality, seems to reposition relational partners toward marriage rather than away from it. Although Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) have argued that such repositioning may result in partners "sliding" into marriage, the transition from cohabitation to marriage appears to be the exception rather than the norm for African Americans (Copen, Daniels, and Mosher 2013). Other implications of this repositioning, then, remain to be seen. Inquiring about them holds promise for enhancing our understanding about the meaning and role of marriage in the lives of young people today.

CHAPTER 5

STUDY 4: MARITAL SALIENCE IN NONMARITAL ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: GENDERED PROCESSES PREDICTING MARITAL EXPECTATIONS AND RELATIONSHIP STABILITY⁵

⁵ Barr, Ashley B. and Ronald L. Simons. To be submitted to the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

ABSTRACT

The current study draws upon the life course notion of linked lives to introduce a relational approach to the study of marital perspectives. I use dyadic data on several hundred unmarried African American couples during the transition to adulthood to understand how the salience of marriage helps to structure relational partners' marriage expectations and to predict relationship dissolution. Consistent with recent work on the gendered power dynamics of the marriage process, results suggest that the salience of marriage for young men may hold more power than that for young women in predicting marriage expectations. Further, the findings show that men's marital salience may actually work to sustain low-quality relationships, particularly for women. These findings point to the necessity of considering "linked lives" in future assessments of marital attitudes and their links to marital and nonmarital outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, sociologists, demographers, and policy makers have been concerned with the degree to which attitudes and beliefs, particularly those surrounding marriage, influence family formation processes (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011; Raley and Sweeney 2007; Sewell 1992; Sewell 2005; Smock, Casper, and Wyse 2008; Trail and Karney 2012). Although this work has tended to focus on generalized attitudes about, for instance, the value of marriage and the acceptability of divorce, recent efforts to understand the role of family-oriented attitudes and beliefs in shaping behaviors have taken a more developmentally-sensitive approach. For example, Carroll and colleagues (Carroll et al. 2009; 2007) have articulated marital horizon theory, the central tenet of this theory being that the salience of marriage during the transition to adulthood helps to structure this transition and help to explain individual variation within this period. Of primary importance in this theory are not the generalized, abstract attitudes toward marriage, what Hakim (2003) criticizes as “public morality” attitudes, but the more specialized, concrete marital attitudes, like the desired timing of marriage, the importance of marriage relative to other life domains, and the perceived criteria for marriage readiness. These more concrete attitudes, which are more in line with what Hakim (2003) refers to as “personal choice” attitudes or “personal preferences,” have been shown to vary significantly between individuals and across the life course (Willoughby 2010) and to have “developmental implications for the transition to adulthood” (Carroll et al. 2007:241).

Both lines of work—that linking generalized and more life-course specific attitudes to behavior—have produced intriguing findings and have led to ongoing

theoretical development (e.g. Carroll et al. 2007; Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011). Such work, however, has been hindered by an individualistic approach (for exceptions, see Brown 2000; Sanchez, Manning, and Smock 1998). That is, by and large, this research has largely failed to account for the interdependency of human lives. This interdependence is often considered to be an implicit tenet of sociology, in general, and an explicit tenet of a life course framework, in particular (Elder Jr. 1998). Given the general lack of quantitative methodological techniques to address non-individualistic processes, our tendency to ignore this interdependence, both in theorizing about the effect of attitudes on behavior and in our empirical assessments of such effects, is not surprising. Rapid methodological advances over the past decade, however, mean that we are no longer restricted to asking and answering individualistic questions. Rather, we are now better able to capture quantitatively the ways in which lives are lived interdependently (Cook and Kenny 2005; Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006).

These advancements may be particularly relevant when marriage and families are the subjects of interest. Relationship formation, maintenance, and dissolution are inherently relational phenomena. Further, recent evidence suggests that gendered power relations continue to play a part in these relationship processes (Brown 2000; Sassler and Miller 2011). It makes little sense, then, to examine the influence of only one partner's attitudes and beliefs on relational outcomes. Our tendency to do so may be giving rise to an incomplete, at best, and erroneous, at worst, understanding of how marital attitudes and beliefs shape people's lives and relationships, and more broadly, the link between structure and agency. Through dyadic data analysis, the current study draws upon a marital horizon theory framework to introduce a relational approach to the study of

marital attitudes, thereby bridging the marital attitudes literature with the literature seeking to understand the gendering of relationship processes. More specifically, this study asks how marital salience among different-sex, unmarried partners helps to explain (1) partner-specific marriage expectations and (2) relationship stability, particularly the endurance of lower-quality, nonmarital relationships.

Importantly, the current study explores marital salience in a relational context utilizing a sample of African American couples during the transition to adulthood. All of the couples in the current study contain at least one, and usually two, African American partners. As many critical scholars (e.g. Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Crooms 2005; Jenkins 2007; Moon and Whitehead 2006; Moore 2011) have pointed out, “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham 1993) surrounding marriage and marriage promotion in the United States (Administration for Children and Families 2012b; Avishai, Heath, and Randles 2012; Heath 2012) are racialized and gendered in ways that cast Black families, and particularly Black women, as deviants. Further, given that trends in nonmarriage, single parenthood, and divorce have been more pronounced among African Americans (Gibbs and Payne 2011; Payne 2012; Ventura 2009), much of the scholarly interest in marital attitudes has been centered around concern for race (and class) differences in such attitudes (Browning and Burrington 2006; Raley and Sweeney 2007; Sassler and Schoen 1999; South 1993). Although few race differences in the value assigned to marriage have been identified , Blacks are far less likely than Whites to get married, indicating a weaker link between marital attitudes and marital behavior for Blacks than for Whites (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Sassler and Schoen 1999; Tucker 2000). Taken together, these patterns warrant more nuanced examinations of the ways in which

marital perspectives operate in the lives and relationships of Black young adults. The current study takes up this task and, in doing so, situates the study of romantic relationships and marital attitudes, particularly marital salience, within the context of intersecting gender and racial inequalities.

MARITAL SALIENCE DURING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

With increasing delays in the age at first marriage, marriage is growing ever more absent among young people in their late teens through their mid-twenties (Cherlin 2010a). This is especially true among young African Americans (Furstenberg Jr. 2010; Settersten and Ray 2010b). Rather than marriage being undertaken as part of the transition to adulthood, then, marriage has largely become “the culminating event” (Furstenberg Jr. 2010:75) of such a transition, initiated only after other markers of adulthood (e.g. financial independence, completion of education, etc.) have been reached. Given the general lack of marriage among young people, Carroll and colleagues (2007) argue that “scholars have largely disregarded the role of marriage during the transition to adulthood” (220). In their explication of marital horizon theory, they suggest, however, that this disregard is the result of the mistaken assumption that the absence of marriage deems it largely irrelevant in young people’s lives (Carroll et al. 2007).

Marital horizon theory (MHT) places the transition to adulthood within a family life cycle perspective in that this transition is viewed as one in which young people prepare for the shift from the family of origin to the family of formation. Because marriage is often central to Americans’ notion of family (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, and Steelman 2010), this transition away from one’s family of origin toward an eventual family of formation engages what Carroll and colleagues (2007) refer to as “marriage

philosophies,” or one’s general “outlook or approach to marriage in relation to his or her current situation” (224). According to MHT, this outlook shapes the extent to which young people use the transition to adulthood as a period of anticipatory socialization (Merton 1957) for marriage. In other words, MHT asserts that marriage is far from irrelevant during the transition to adulthood. Rather, the salience of marriage actually helps to guide this transition and to explain individual variation within it.

Carroll and colleagues (2007) identify three components that comprise young people’s marital horizons: the relative importance of marriage, the desired timing of marriage in the life course, and the criteria that individuals view as important for marriage readiness. In this framework, young people who view marriage as relatively important, desire marriage soon in the life course, and believe marriage readiness to entail internally-defined (e.g. personal maturation) rather than socially-defined (e.g. completing education) competencies would be more likely than their peers to view the transition to adulthood as a period of marriage preparation and, hence, to behave more conventionally (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007). Ultimately, then, marital horizon theory asserts that the meaning of and importance placed upon marriage become central to the experience of transitioning to adulthood and that different marital horizons help to explain the large degree of heterogeneity among young people’s experience of this transition (Arnett 2004; Settersten and Ray 2010a).

The attitudes attended to in marital horizon theory differ from the generalized, abstract attitudes concerning the value of marriage and the acceptability of divorce/nonmarriage typically measured in marriage and family research (e.g. Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993; Thornton 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Research

suggests that there is relatively little variability in these general attitudes toward marriage given that marriage is still highly valued and desired among Americans across a range of social locations (Axinn and Thornton 2000; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Trail and Karney 2012) and that the vast majority of adolescents expect to get married (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007). The fact that marriage appears to be universally desired and generally important, however, “does not mean that marriage is of equal importance to all young people” (Carroll et al. 2007). As Carroll et al. (2007) explain, “Although most emerging adults value marriage and hope for it in the future, emerging adults who would be willing to prioritize marriage in relation to other goals in life will likely prepare and plan for marriage differently than their peers” (225).

Research examining the more life-course-specific attitudes toward marriage attended to in marital horizon theory supports this notion. For instance, Carroll et al. (2007) found substantial variation in the desired timing of marriage among young people, with the ideal age of marriage ranging from 18-35 for men and 21-36 for women. Further, these young people prioritized marriage to different extents. This variation in relative marital importance and timing, as well as the criteria young people attributed to marriage readiness, was associated with young people’s engagement in risk-taking behaviors, like substance use and sexual permissiveness (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007; Willoughby 2012; Willoughby and Dworkin 2009).

MARITAL HORIZONS, LINKED LIVES, AND INTERSECTING INEQUALITIES

Although insightful, work to date on marital horizon theory is limited in at least four respects. First, this work has been largely cross-sectional and hence limited its ability to test the core hypotheses about trajectories of change inherent in MHT. Second,

given that MHT emphasizes the ways in which young people may utilize the transition to adulthood as a period of anticipatory socialization for marriage, this work has focused largely on the association between marital horizons and risk-taking behaviors. In doing so, this literature has largely failed to consider the impact of marital horizons on relational experiences despite explicit claims that the meaning and importance of marriage become central to young people's experience of this transition, "impacting trajectories of individual development ... and family formation patterns" (Carroll et al. 2009:350). Third, the marital horizon literature, much like the broader marital attitudes literature to date, has assumed an individualistic approach. That is, it has failed to place marital perspectives and their presumed effects within relationship contexts. Lastly, although the larger marital attitudes literature has focused on race and class differences (or the lack thereof), work testing marital horizon theory has utilized fairly homogenous samples of young people (typically predominantly White college students; for an exception, see Willoughby and Dworkin 2009).⁶ Integrating insights from a life course perspective (Elder Jr. 1998; Settersten 2003) into marital horizon theory can begin to fill these gaps in the literature.

Although sharing many concerns relevant to life course theorists, marital horizon theory was developed largely outside of a life course framework. Hence, the testing of its arguments has also tends to fall outside of this framework. The core premise of MHT—

⁶ This is so, perhaps, because the tenets of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000) are thought to apply to the experiences of middle- and upper-class Whites more so than to the experiences of racial minorities and lower-class individuals (e.g. Furstenberg Jr. 2008; Silva 2012).

that the salience of marriage matters in structuring the transition to adulthood— however, seems to demand a life course approach. Further, key propositions from a life course perspective, in particular, the notion of “linked lives” and the importance of macro-social structural context, demand new questions and more nuanced methods of addressing existing ones within MHT and the marital attitudes literature, more generally.

The life course concept of *linked lives* suggests that development is not merely an intraindividual process. Rather, “lives are lived interdependently” (Elder Jr. 1998:4) and must be studied as such. This principle seems to be particularly relevant when issues of marriage and family are of concern, and it highlights the potential importance of studying marital attitudes in a relational context. The life course perspective also draws attention to the ways in which individuals and their relationships are situated within broader macro-social structures (Elder Jr. 1998). Although Carroll and colleagues (2007) do account for the unique sociohistorical context of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000; Arnett 2004) in their formulation of marital horizon theory, they do not attend to macro-social structures of intersecting gender and race inequalities. Work by critical gender and race scholars suggests that MHT may be expanded and informed by placing marital salience, and the study of marital attitudes more generally, not only within a relational context but also within broader structures of gender and race inequalities.

Although most family scholars would agree that marriage is a much more voluntary institution than it once was (Thornton 1989), several scholars highlight the gendered and racialized “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham 1993) still surrounding marriage today (e.g. Chasteen 1994; Clarke 2011; Collins 1998; Heath 2012; Jenkins 2007; Moon and Whitehead 2006; Sharp and Ganong 2007; Sharp and Ganong

2011). Marriage tends to be a desired status by nearly all Americans (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), yet some work suggests that the symbolic value of marriage may be stronger for women than for men. Chasteen (1994) and Sharp and Ganong (2007; Sharp and Ganong 2011), for instance, argue that women problematize singlehood and that being partnered is important for women's sense of normalcy. Quantitative scholarship seems to support this notion. Thornton and colleagues (Thornton 1989; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), for instance, have shown that, compared to men, women rate marriage as being more important, are more likely to be certain about getting married, and are more likely to prefer to be married *despite* also being more likely to disagree that marriage brings happiness and to agree that there are few good marriages. This gendered pattern is also evident among more recent cohorts of young people. For instance, Wood, Avellar, and Goesling (2008) reported that, despite more negative attitudes toward marriage in general, adolescent girls still expected to marry and were less likely than adolescent boys to want to delay marriage.

Many scholars to date have argued that the symbolic value of marriage is not only gendered by also racialized, given that marriage holds the power to challenge both gendered and racialized images of deviant black female sexuality, like those of the matriarch, welfare queen, and jezebel identified by Patricia Hill Collins (1990). Using an intersectional approach that takes into account this historical pathologization of Black female sexuality (Collins 1990) along with the dearth of marriageable Black men due to high rates of unemployment and incarceration (Dixon 2009; Holzer and Offner 2004; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry 1992; Pettit and Western 2004; Schnittker, Massoglia, and Uggen 2011; Wilson, Tienda, and Wu 1995), Collins (2005) showed that

Black women often make gendered sacrifices in romantic relationships in order to “claim the mantle of Black respectability” (253). Similarly, Clarke (2011) found that degreed Black women desired marriage yet had an “awareness of the scarcity of opportunities for love” (118). This recognition often resulted in their involvement in “in and out” relationships, in which women continuously leave and return to admittedly incompatible partners, and/or “sleeper” relationships, those involving sexual intimacy but little companionship or commitment.

Such gendered and racialized politics of respectability operate alongside normative expectations that male partners assume responsibility for the progression of romantic relationships. In a recent study of working class couples, Sassler and Miller (2011) revealed that, although women often challenge conventional gender norms by proposing cohabitation or by bringing up the topic of marriage to their partners, men maintained control of the marriage proposal and, hence, “remain[ed] privileged in the arena of relationship progression” (Sassler and Miller 2011:482). These gendered dynamics operated even in cases where economic resources favored female partners, leaving Sassler and Miller (2011) to conclude that “men continue to play dominant roles in both initiating whether couples become romantically involved and in formalizing these unions via proposing” (501).

Taken together, research on the gendered symbolic value of marriage and on the gendered power dynamics behind relationship progression suggests that gender might structure the link between marital salience and relationship outcomes (and the attitude-behavior link, in general). That is, the salience of marriage for young men might hold more predictive power than that for young women in shaping relationship outcomes. By

introducing a relational approach to the study of marital horizons, the current study is able to test this notion in two ways. First, using dyadic data analysis of unmarried couples, I explore how marital salience for each partner is linked to partner-specific marriage expectations for both partners. Not surprisingly, I anticipate that the salience of marriage for each partner will be positively associated with his or her own expectations for marriage. Given men's presumed control of relationship progression and, hence, women's reliance on a man who is ready and willing to marry in order to meet their marriage goals, however, I expect the link between partner marital salience and marriage expectations to be gendered. That is, I anticipate that men's marital salience will positively predict their female partners' marriage expectations to a greater extent than women's marital salience will predict their male partners' expectations to marry. In other words, women's marital expectations will be tied more strongly to their partners' views on marriage than will men's.

Second, using a subset of longitudinal data on these same couples, I ask how the salience of marriage for each partner might affect the stability of the relationship and, in particular, the stability of lower-quality relationships. If marriage is a coveted status, relational partners may be less likely to end a relationship if they perceive it as having potential to result in marriage. Further, partners may be more willing to stick with a troubled or dissatisfying relationship if it holds this potential. As mentioned above, this pattern of remaining in unsatisfactory relationships for the sake of being partnered and the potential for marriage emerged throughout Clarke's (2011) interviews with college-educated Black women. These possibilities imply both a direct negative effect from partners' marital salience to relationship dissolution independent of relational quality and

an interaction effect between relationship quality and marital salience. Given men's greater responsibility for relationship progression, men's marital salience is hypothesized to be more predictive (both directly and indirectly) of relationship dissolution than women's. Formally stated, these hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 5.1a: Independent of relationship quality, marital salience will be positively associated with both one's own and one's partner's marital expectations.

Hypothesis 5.1b: The association between men's marital salience and women's marital expectations (a partner effect) will be stronger than that between women's marital salience and men's marital expectations.

Hypothesis 5.2a: Independent of relationship quality, marital salience will be negatively predictive of relationship dissolution.

Hypothesis 5.2b: Compared to women's marital salience, men's marital salience will be more strongly predictive of relationship dissolution.

Hypothesis 5.2c: Men's marital salience will condition the link between relationship quality and relationship dissolution such that troubled relationships will be less predictive of relationship dissolution when men view marriage as highly salient.

METHOD

Data

I test the above hypotheses using data drawn from the latter two waves of the Family and Community Health Study (FACHS). The FACHS began in 1997 as a longitudinal study of health and well-being among African American families living in Iowa (IA) and Georgia (GA). Unlike other datasets containing large numbers of African Americans (e.g. Fragile Families; Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, and McLanahan 2001),

FACHS was intended to capture heterogeneity of African American families and the diverse types of communities in which they reside. Because of this intent, block group (BG) information from the 1990 Census was first used to identify neighborhoods in IA and GA that varied on a range of demographic characteristics, including racial composition and economic status. In total, 259 BGs were identified. Families were then randomly selected from within these BGs via rosters of all African American families who had a child (the target child) in the fifth grade public school system at the time of recruitment. Identified families were recruited via telephone, and a total of 889 families participated in the first wave of data collection (1997-1998). These initial recruitment procedures have been described in much greater detail elsewhere (Simons, Stewart, Gordon, Conger, and Elder 2002b).

Data have been collected every two to three years since the FACHS initiation in 1997, resulting in six complete waves of data. Across these six waves, attrition has been relatively low, as FACHS maintained 78.6% of its original sample at Wave VI. At this latest wave of data (collected in 2010-2011), target respondents, who were in the fifth grade when FACHS began, were now in their early-to-mid twenties and beginning to form partnerships and families of their own. In the latter two waves of data, then, the romantic partners of the target respondents were invited to participate in the FACHS. At the fifth wave of data collection, 307 target respondents identified a romantic partner, and 237 of these partners (77.2%) agreed to participate in the study. At the sixth wave of data collection, 386 respondents identified a romantic partner, and 307 of these partners (79.5%) agreed to participate in the study.

The analytic sample used to address the first research question regarding partner-specific marital expectations was drawn from the 307 couples participating in the latest wave of the FACHS (Wave VI). Of the 307 couples participating at Wave VI, 5 (1.6%) were same-gender dyads and 30 (9.8%) were married and were excluded from the analyses. Three additional couples were dropped for missing data on the dependent variable, which resulted in a final analytic sample size of 269 different-gender, unmarried couples for analyses linking each partner's marital salience to partner-specific marriage expectations.

The second research question regarding relationship dissolution requires prospective measures of marital salience. For this research question, then, I draw upon data from the 237 couples in Wave V, 223 of whom had a participating target in Wave VI to provide information on whether or not the relationship dissolved across waves. Of these 223 couples, 7 (3.1%) were same-gender dyads and 22 (9.87%) were married and, hence, were dropped from the analytic sample. An additional 4 couples were dropped for missing data on the dependent variable, resulting in an analytic sample of 190 different-gender, unmarried couples for analyses linking each partner's marital salience to relationship dissolution.

At each wave, those with participating partners and those whose partners did not participate did not differ significantly in age, education, work status, school status, income, relationship commitment, relationship satisfaction, religious involvement, and self-reported health. Compared to those whose partners did not participate, however, those with participating partners were more like to share a child with that partner. With regards to the sample as a whole across waves, target respondents who participated at the

latest of wave of data collection did not differ significantly from their counterparts who did not participate with regards to several Wave I indicators, including educational aspirations and expectations, household income, family structure, and parental hostility. Compared to Wave I respondents, however, respondents at Waves V and VI were slightly more likely to be female. Overall, such findings indicate little selection with regards to the respondents who were willing to participate as couples and little selective attrition over the six waves of the study.

The FACHS was conceived as a study of African Americans and, hence, all target respondents are African American. Because the romantic partners of these target respondents were not required to be African American to participate in the project, the analytic sample contains both monoracial African American couples (76.5% at Wave VI; 73.7% at Wave V) and interracial African American couples (23.5% at Wave VI; 26.3% at Wave V). Although this focus on the relationships of African Americans prevents broad generalizations and comparisons between the relationships of different racial groups, attention to the ways in which marital attitudes shape nonmarital relationships among African Americans is an important endeavor in and of itself. African Americans are much less likely to marry than members of other racial groups (Elliott, Krivickas, Brault, and Kreider 2012; United States Census Bureau 2010), and when they do marry, their marriages tend to be less stable (Kposowa 1998; Sweeney and Phillips 2004) and of lower quality (Broman 2005). Further, African Americans tend to marry at later ages than their White counterparts (Payne 2012). Scholars have attempted to explain such racial disparities in marital formation, quality, and duration through an examination of race differences in the attitudes and values surrounding marriage. This work, however, has

largely failed to find support for race differences in these attitudes. That is, despite lower marriage rates, African Americans hold marriage in high esteem (Tucker 2000). A more nuanced investigation of marital attitudes, particularly in the context of nonmarital relationships, may help to shed light on the processes producing inconsistencies in marital attitudes and behavior. Further, it may enhance our understanding of the implications of marital attitudes beyond their effect, or lack thereof, on marital behavior. In addition, as indicated in the explication of marital horizon theory (Carroll et al. 2007), recent demographic trends toward later marriage have given rise to an informal yet misguided understanding that marriage is not pertinent to scholarship on young people. Such a claim, however, has been driven by findings on Whites (e.g. Willoughby and Dworkin 2009), leading one to question the relevance of marriage to other racial groups during the transition to adulthood, just as others have questioned its relevance to minority groups, particularly African Americans, in general. Although not particularly focused on young people, feminist and race scholars (e.g. Clarke 2011; Collins 1998; Jenkins 2007; Moore 2011) have pointed out that, despite the relative absence of marriage among African Americans, it is a mistake to assume that marriage is not salient in their lives and relationships. Hence, utilizing a sample of young, African American couples, a population for which larger demographic trends might lend one to believe marriage matters very little, helps to address broader questions of the relevance of marriage in the United States today.

Several other features of the FACHS data are notable, as well. First, although the initial FACHS sample was drawn from only IA and GA, target respondents (and their romantic partners) were dispersed across the United States by the latest wave of the

study. Further, because FACHS was designed to capture heterogeneity among African American families, FACHS target respondents prove similar to a national sample of Blacks of similar ages on measures of marital status (United States Census Bureau 2010), fertility (United States Census Bureau 2011b), school enrollment (United States Census Bureau 2011c), and educational attainment (United States Census Bureau 2011a). Third, for the purposes of the current study, FACHS is preferable to more commonly used nationally representative studies (like the National Longitudinal of Adolescent Health; Harris et al. 2009) for several reasons. First, the FACHS has a more limited time span between waves during the transition to adulthood (2 to 3 years in the FACHS versus 6 to 7 years in Add Health (Harris et al. 2009), for instance). Second, the FACHS contains nuanced indicators of relationship quality available for those in nonmarital unions. Finally, the FACHS contains a measure of marital salience from both relational partners, allowing for a dyadic expansion of marital horizon theory. Hence, the FACHS is limited with respect to the generalizability of results and the lack of racial heterogeneity, yet it can provide an in-depth investigation of the role that marital salience plays in the relationships of unmarried African Americans. This investigation is warranted given the diverging demographic trends and racialized respectability politics surrounding marriage in the United States today and, as others have argued (Bryant et al. 2008; Bryant et al. 2010), the obfuscation of heterogeneity among African Americans and their relationships.

Dependent Variables

Marital Expectations. Both partners' expectations to marry their current partner were assessed at Wave VI via the following question: "Do you think you will marry [partner name]?" Possible responses included (1) "Definitely not," (2) "Maybe," (3)

“Probably,” and (4) “Definitely yes.” Because 86.5 % of target respondents and 81.3% of their partners chose one of the latter two responses (either “Probably” or “Definitely yes”), this variable was dichotomized to indicate definite expectations to marry one’s partner (1 = definitely yes, 0 = all other responses).

Relationship dissolution. Relationship dissolution was assessed via target respondents’ reports at Wave VI for those couples who participated in the FACHS at Wave V. Target respondents were prompted with “Last time we talked with you, you were dating or in a romantic relationship with [Wave V partner name]” and then asked: “Are you still dating or in a romantic relationship with [Wave V partner name]?” Respondents who indicated that they were no longer in a relationship with the same partner that participated at Wave V were coded 1 for having had their Wave V relationship dissolve by Wave VI. Respondents who indicated that they were still in a relationship with their Wave V partner were coded 0 for not experiencing the dissolution of their Wave V relationship.

Independent and Control Variables

Marital salience. For both target respondents and their partners, marital salience was assessed at Waves V and VI via one question that asked the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement that “Getting married is the most important part of my life.” Possible responses ranged from (1) “Strongly disagree” to (5) “Strongly agree.” This measure of marital salience captures the life-course specific marital perspectives inherent in MHT, as it assesses variation in the “priority placed on marriage compared to other aspects of [one’s] current life (e.g., education, career, or peers)” (Carroll et al. 2007: 225).

Relationship distress. At Waves V and VI, both partners were asked a series of questions about the quality of their romantic relationship with their current partner. Three items tapped overall *relationship dissatisfaction* (“How happy are you, all things considered, with your relationship?”, “All in all, how satisfied are you with your relationship with [current partner name]?” and “How well do you and your romantic partner get along compared to most couples?”) at Wave V. This latter item was not available at Wave VI, and hence only the first two items were used at this later wave. Possible responses for the happiness item ranged from (1) “Extremely happy” to (6) “Extremely unhappy”; possible responses for the satisfaction item ranged from (1) “Completely satisfied” to (5) “Not at all satisfied”; and possible responses for the getting along item ranged from (1) “A lot better” to (5) “A lot worse.” Because the response sets varied across items, items were standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 prior to averaging them to form the relationship dissatisfaction index for each partner at each wave. Internal reliability for each partner at each wave ranged from .68 to .81. Along with respondents’ affective evaluation of their relationship, respondents were asked to report on their partners’ relationship behaviors over the past month. Supportive behaviors were assessed via 3 questions at each wave that asked about the frequency with which partners acted loving and affectionate, showed appreciation, and helped with something important. Responses ranged from (1) “Always” to (4) “Never” and were summed across items to create an index of *partner’s unsupportiveness*. Internal reliability for each partner at each wave ranged from .76 to .84. The indices for relationship

dissatisfaction and partner's lack of support were used as indicators of a latent *relationship distress* variable in all models.⁷

In addition to marital salience and relationship distress, I include a series of individual- and dyad-level control variables in all analyses so as to reduce the possibility of spurious associations between the primary variables of interest. These controls include factors that have previously been associated with marital attitudes and expectations, relationship quality, and/or relationship stability. At the individual-level, each partner's *school status* (1 = in school, 0 = not in school), *employment* (1 = employed full-time, 0 = not employed full-time), *recent unemployment* (1 = experienced unemployment in the past year; 0 = did not experience unemployment in the previous year), and *educational attainment* (1 = less than a high school diploma, 0 = high school or more) are controlled. At the dyad-level, *relationship length* (in years), *shared children* (1 = couple shares at least one child, 0 = couple shares no children), *interracial status* (1 = Black/non-Black pairing, 0 = Black/Black pairing), and cohabitation status (1 = cohabiting, 0 = not cohabiting) are controlled.

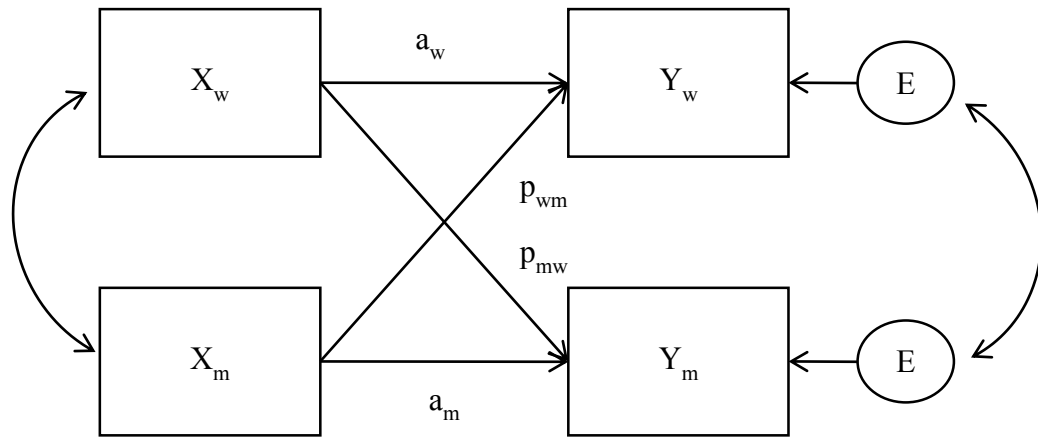
⁷ Although the FACHS data also have 5 items on partner hostility, a confirmatory factor analysis indicated better model fit for the distress measurement model when only lack of support and dissatisfaction were indicated as observed variables (2-item CFA: $X^2 = 1.391$, $p = .238$, RMSEA = .038, CFI = .998, BIC = 4475.122; 3-item CFA: $X^2 = 19.036$, $p = .015$, RMSEA = .072, CFI = .966, BIC = 6346.074). Given the improved model fit when the hostility index was not included as an observed indicator of distress, only dissatisfaction and lack of partner support were used as observed indicators of the latent distress variable.

Analytic Strategy

A major limitation of much, if not all, of the research on marital attitudes, including recent research on marital horizons, in particular, is that it has been focused on the individual as the unit of analysis. This emphasis on *actor effects*, or the association between one's own attitudes and one's own outcomes neglects a key sociological and, especially, life course (Elder Jr. 1998) tenet that human lives are lived interdependently and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to explore "truly relational phenomena" (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006:147). Dyadic analyses, like the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006), can overcome these limitations by allowing for the simultaneous estimation of actor, partner, and couple-level effects on a given outcome. A basic APIM is presented in Figure 5.1, with actor effects indicated by paths a_m and a_w and partner effects indicated by paths p_{wm} and p_{mw} .

The APIM can be used with both distinguishable and indistinguishable dyads and can be estimated via multiple approaches, including structural equation modeling (SEM) and multilevel modeling. For distinguishable members, like the different-gender dyad members utilized here, the SEM approach allows for the relatively simplistic testing and presentation of actor and partner effects and of any gender differences in these effects. Hence, I utilized the SEM approach for both the cross-sectional analysis of marital expectations and the longitudinal analysis of relationship dissolution. It should be noted, however, that, unlike the measure of marital expectations for which both partners have a score, the relationship dissolution variable is a dyad-level variable and hence the SEM used to analyze it is not a true APIM. Hypotheses 5.1a and 5.1b concerning marital expectations were examined via a classic APIM, like that presented in Figure 1, while

Figure 5.1: Classic Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM)



hypotheses 5.2a through 5.2c concerning relationship dissolution were tested via a structural equation model that used men's and women's individual-level reports of marital salience and relationship distress to predict the dyad-level dissolution outcome. These models were conducted in Mplus Version 6 (Muthén and Muthén 2010). Both marital expectations and relationship dissolution were specified as categorical variables, and a maximum likelihood estimator with robust standard errors was used, ensuring a logit model rather than the default probit model.

For each model, continuous coefficients were centered at the grand mean, and unstandardized coefficients are reported, as recommended by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006:178-179). Gender differences in actor and partner parameters were tested via Wald tests of parameter constraints (e.g. "*model test*: $p_{wm} = p_{mw}$ "). Although not hypothesized, potential differences between cohabiting couples and noncohabiting couples and between monoracial Black couples and their interracial Black counterparts were tested via multigroup comparison procedures available in MPlus. All multigroup comparisons indicated that models with parameters constrained to be equal across these groups fit the data just as well as those with freed parameters, meaning that the models presented below do not vary by cohabitation status or interracial couple status. Given that these factors may still directly affect marital expectations or relationship dissolution risk, I included them as control variables in all models.

RESULTS

Descriptive Results and Preliminary Findings

Table 5.1 presents means, standard deviations, and ranges for all variables used in the analyses that follow. With regard to the couple context, about half of the couples in

the study shared a child together at each wave (43% at Wave V and 51% at Wave VI), and nearly one-quarter to one-third of couples were cohabiting. About a quarter of couples at each wave were identified as interracial given that one partner did not identify as African American. On average, couples have been together for 2-3 years. Nearly 40% of couples who participated at Wave V ended their relationship by the Wave VI survey roughly two years later. At Wave V, women averaged 21.4 years of age and their partners averaged 23.5 years of age. This 2-year age gap was also apparent at Wave VI, with women averaging 23.1 years of age and men averaging 25.4 years of age. Importantly, neither relationship dissatisfaction nor partner unsupportiveness significantly differed by gender at either wave. Further, at Wave VI expectations to marry one's current partner did not differ significantly by gender, as roughly 40% of men and 39% of women expected to marry their current partners.

Other factors did differ by gender at each wave. Among these factors was marital salience. At both waves V and VI, men scored slightly higher than women on the measure of marital salience, and these differences were statistically significant at $p < .05$. Both men and women, however, tended to be somewhat neutral with regards to the salience of marriage. Two other gender differences are worth noting. At each wave, men were more likely to report recent unemployment, with about 60% of men and 45% of women reporting unemployment in the past year. Lastly, women were more likely than men to report being enrolled in school at each wave. Nearly 60% of women reported school enrollment, while only about 40% of men reported being enrolled in school.

Significant correlations (not shown) between partners are also noteworthy. As expected, partners' expectations to marry one another were significantly and positively

Table 5.1: Descriptive Statistics for All Study Variables

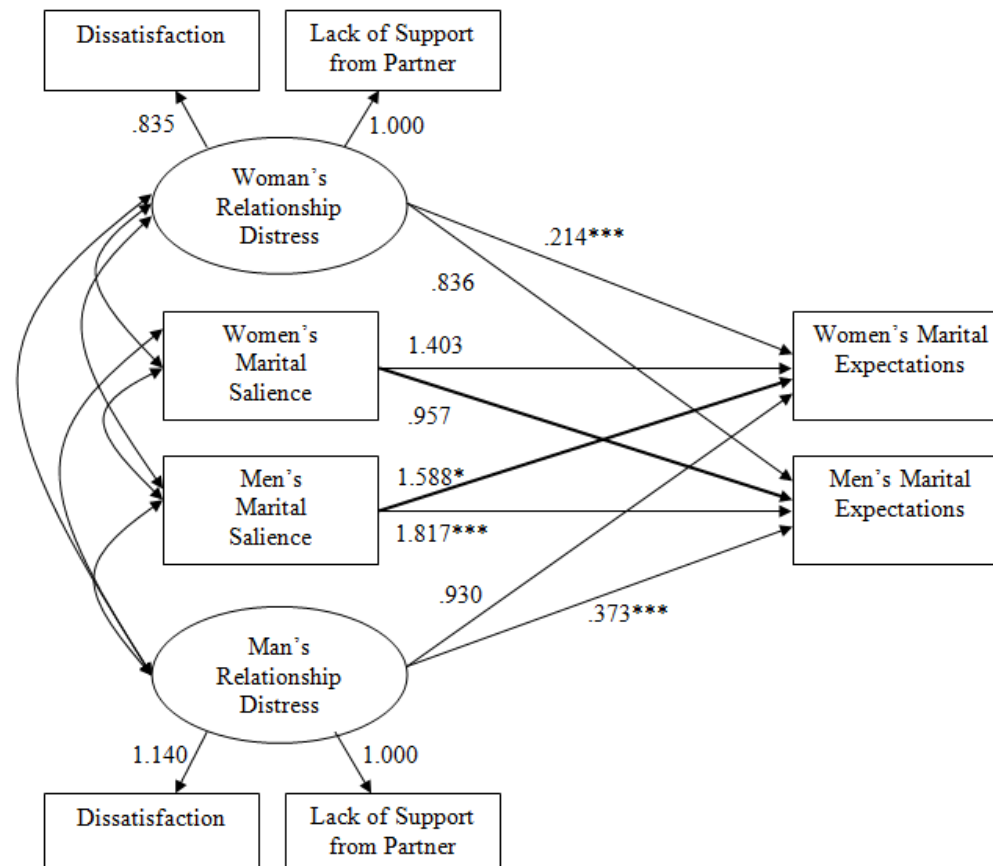
<i>Men's Variables</i>	Wave 6				Wave 5			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Partner-specific marital expectations (1 = expect to marry partner)	0.408	0.492	0.000	1.000	—	—	—	—
Marital salience	2.974	1.157	1.000	5.000	3.134	1.197	1.000	5.000
Relationship dissatisfaction	0.011	1.741	-2.745	6.763	-0.003	2.366	-4.330	8.339
Partner lack of supportiveness	5.677	2.392	3.000	12.000	5.678	2.259	3.000	12.000
Age	25.445	4.026	18.000	42.000	23.139	3.349	18.000	40.000
School status (1 = in school)	0.382	0.487	0.000	1.000	0.418	0.494	0.000	1.000
Educational attainment (1 = less than high school)	0.210	0.408	0.000	1.000	0.175	0.381	0.000	1.000
Full-time employment (1 = employed full-time)	0.476	0.500	0.000	1.000	0.428	0.496	0.000	1.000
Recent unemployment (1 = unemployed in past year)	0.625	0.485	0.000	1.000	0.608	0.489	0.000	1.000
<i>Women's Variables</i>								
Partner-specific marital expectations (1 = expect to marry partner)	0.389	0.488	0.000	1.000	—	—	—	—
Marital salience	2.680	1.122	1.000	5.000	2.851	1.153	1.000	5.000
Relationship dissatisfaction	0.019	1.849	-2.794	6.410	0.004	2.541	-4.137	8.925
Partner lack of supportiveness	5.610	2.426	3.000	12.000	5.319	2.195	3.000	12.000
Age	23.518	2.346	19.000	38.000	21.438	2.183	17.000	32.000
School status (1 = in school)	0.570	0.496	0.000	1.000	0.635	0.483	0.000	1.000
Educational attainment (1 = less than high school)	0.118	0.323	0.000	1.000	0.108	0.311	0.000	1.000
Full-time employment (1 = employed full-time)	0.384	0.487	0.000	1.000	0.381	0.487	0.000	1.000
Recent unemployment (1 = unemployed in past year)	0.435	0.497	0.000	1.000	0.459	0.500	0.000	1.000
<i>Dyad-level Variables</i>								
Relationship Length (in years)	3.143	1.713	0.000	5.000	2.642	1.742	0.000	5.000
Shared child(ren) (1 = yes)	0.507	0.501	0.000	1.000	0.430	0.496	0.000	1.000
Interracial couple (1 = yes)	0.235	0.425	0.000	1.000	0.263	0.441	0.000	1.000
Cohabitation status (1 = cohabiting)	0.232	0.423	0.000	1.000	0.325	0.469	0.000	1.000
Relationship dissolution (between W5 and W6)	—	—	—	—	0.397	0.491	0.000	1.000

correlated ($r = .379, p < .001$), as were partners' reports of marital salience at Wave VI ($r_{Wave VI} = .130, p < .05$; $W_{Wave V}$: $r = .071, p = .326$), partners' relationship dissatisfaction ($r_{Wave VI} = .301, p < .001$; $r_{Wave V} = .371, p < .001$), and partners' perceptions of each other's supportive behaviors ($r_{Wave VI} = .190, p < .01$; $r_{Wave V} = .219, p < .01$). Cohabitation status ($r_{men} = .229, p < .001$; $r_{women} = .153, p < .05$) and relationship length ($r_{men} = .208, p < .001$; $r_{women} = .142, p < .05$) were positively and significantly associated with both men's and women's expectations for marriage. Relationship length ($r = -.143, p < .05$) and shared children ($r = -.186, p < .01$) were significantly and negatively associated with relationship dissolution across Waves V and VI.

Cross-Sectional Models: Marital Expectations

Figure 5.2 displays the results of the cross-sectional APIM predicting partner-specific marital expectations. The model shows the effect of each partner's marital salience on marital expectations, controlling for relationship distress and a series of other dyad- and individual-level control variables. Actor associations between relationship distress and expectations to marry one's partner were statistically significant and negative for both men ($e^{ab} = .373, p < .001$) and women ($e^{ab} = .214, p < .001$), while partner associations between relationship distress and marital expectations were nonsignificant. A one-unit increase in the latent indicator of relationship distress predicted a 78.6% reduction in the odds of women expecting to marry their partner and a 63.7% reduction in the odds of men expecting to marry their partner. Controlling for these effects of relationship distress, the salience of marriage also played a significant role in predicting partner-specific marital expectations. Interestingly, women's marital salience predicted neither their own nor their partner's expectations for marriage. Men's marital salience,

Figure 5.2: APIM Predicting Partner-Specific Marriage Expectations (N = 269 unmarried couples)



Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; Odds ratios presented for all paths predicting expectations; unstandardized coefficients for latent variables presented. Dyad-level control variables include: relationship length, shared child(ren), interracial pairing, and cohabitation status; Individual-level control variables include: age, school status, recent unemployment, current full-time employment, and educational attainment. Model fit from continuous model: $X^2 = 46.530$, $p = 409$, CFI = .996, RMSEA = .011.

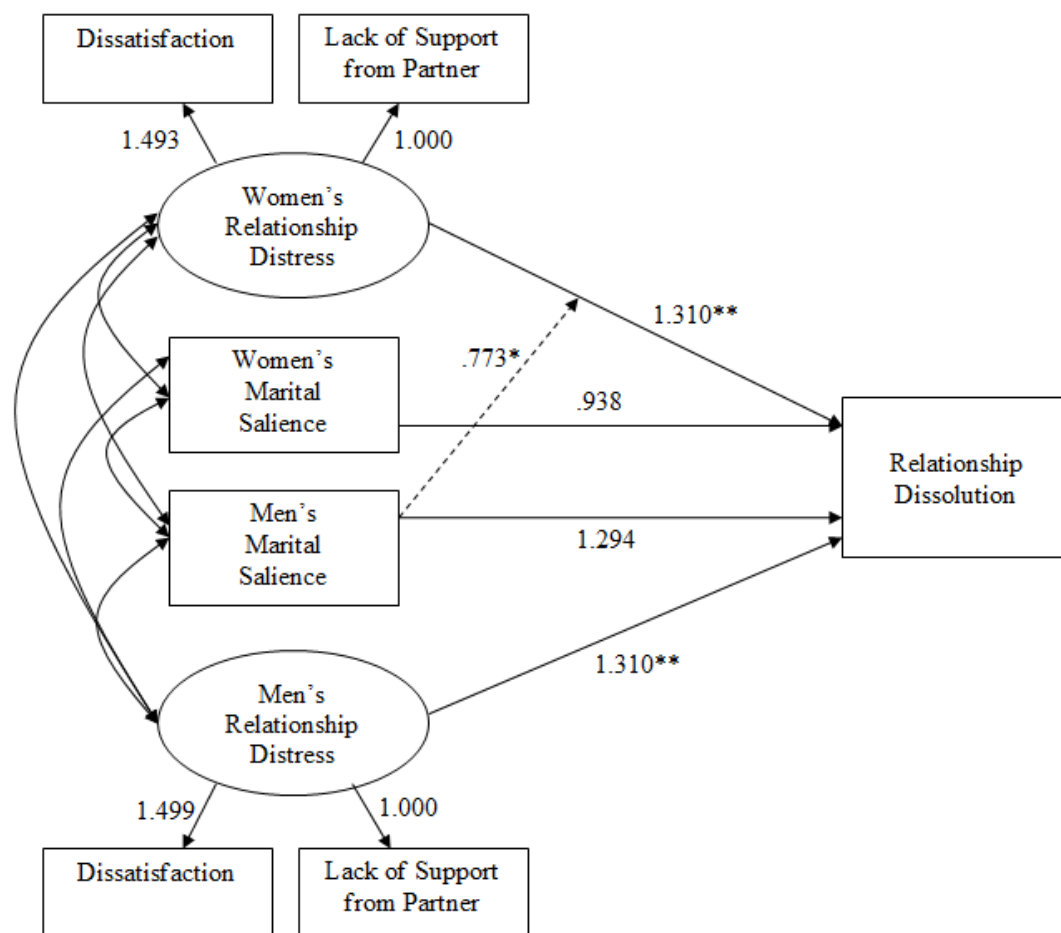
however, significantly predicted both their own ($e^{ab} = 1.817, p < .001$) and their partner's ($e^{ab} = 1.588, p < .001$) marital expectations. That is, a one-point increase in men's marital salience increased their own odds of expecting to marry their partner by a factor of 1.82 and increased their partner's odds of expecting to marry them by a factor of 1.59.

Although the gender difference in actor effects was not statistically significant, the hypothesized gender difference in partner effects was marginally statistically significant. That is, constraining actor effects to be equal did not significantly worsen model fit ($X^2(1) = 1.013, p = .314$), but constraining partner effects to be equal worsened model fit ($X^2(1) = 3.385, p = .066$). As hypothesized (hypothesis 5.1b), then, the association between men's marital salience and women's marital expectations was stronger than that between women's marital salience and men's marital expectations. This difference, however, was only marginally significant.

Longitudinal Models: Relationship Dissolution

Figure 5.3 displays the results of the longitudinal SEM predicting relationship dissolution. As shown in this model, both men's and women's relationship distress at Wave V was significantly and positively predictive of relationship dissolution by Wave VI. Preliminary models showed men's relationship distress, but not women's, to be significantly and positively predictive of relationship dissolution. Inferring a gender difference in effects from the presence of a significant coefficient for one gender and not the other, however, is a common mistake (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006:422). Gender differences can and must be tested explicitly via parameter constraints. Because a Wald tests of parameter constraints indicated that the effects from relationship distress on

Figure 5.3: SEM Predicting Relationship Dissolution (N = 190 unmarried couples)



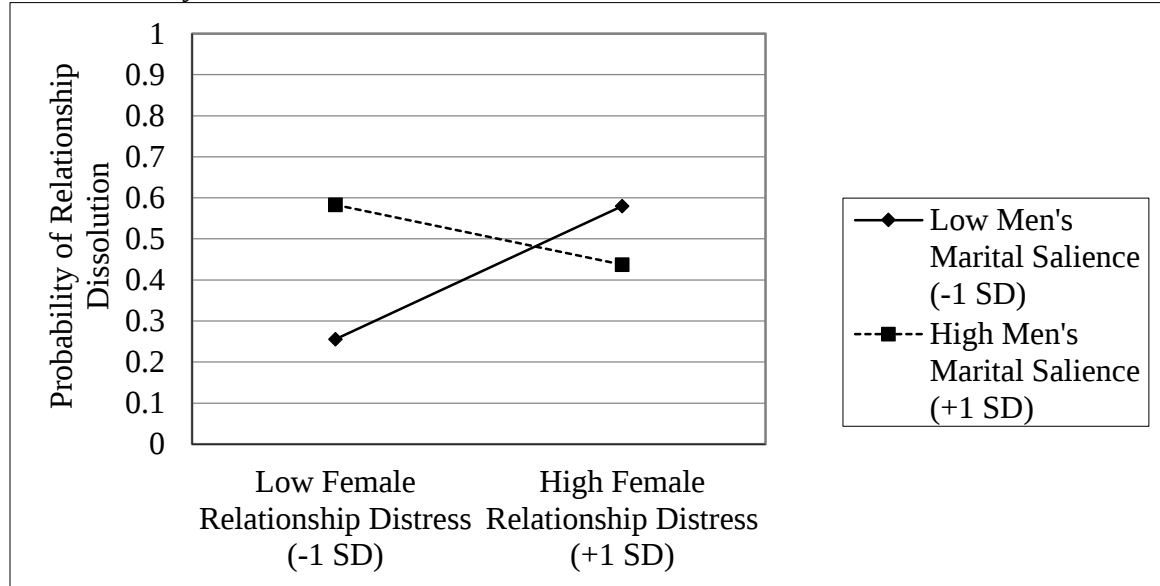
Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; Odds ratios presented for all paths predicting relationship dissolution; unstandardized coefficients for latent variables presented. Dyad-level control variables include: relationship length, shared child(ren), interracial pairing, and cohabitation status; Individual-level control variables include: age, school status, recent unemployment, current full-time employment, and educational attainment. Model fit statistics not available for continuous interactive model.

relationship dissolution did not significantly differ for male and female partners ($X^2(1) = .913, p = .339$), these parameters were constrained to be equal (as depicted in Figure 3). For both men and women, then, relationship distress at Wave V increased the odds of the relationship dissolving by Wave VI.

Contrary to hypotheses 5.2a and 5.2b, neither men's ($e^{ab} = 1.294, p = .097$) nor women's ($e^{ab} = .938, p = .678$) marital salience had a direct effect on relationship dissolution. The significant interaction between men's marital salience and women's relationship distress, however, indicates that men's marital salience conditioned the effect of women's relationship distress on relationship dissolution. In other words, women's relationship distress was less predictive of relationship dissolution at higher levels of men's marital salience. This significant interaction is graphed in Figure 5.4, which shows the probability of relationship dissolution at different levels of women's distress and men's marital salience.

A simple slope test indicated that, at low levels of men's marital salience (1 SD below the grand mean), women's relationship distress was significantly and positively predictive of relationship dissolution ($b = .541, t = 3.237, p = .001$). At high levels of men's marital salience (1 SD above the grand mean), however, women's relationship distress was not significantly predictive of relationship dissolution ($b = -.038, t = -.206, p = .837$). No other interactions were statistically significant, and Wald tests of parameter constraints indicated that women's marital salience did not condition the effect of men's relationship distress on relationship dissolution to the same extent that men's marital salience conditioned the effect of women's relationship distress on relationship dissolution ($X^2(1) = 5.388, p = .020$). Hence, although men's or women's marital salience

Figure 5.4: Effect of Female Relationship Distress on Probability of Relationship Dissolution by Men's Marital Salience



did not play a direct role in predicting relationship dissolution, men's marital salience was more important for understanding the conditions under which women's distress affected relationship stability (supportive of hypothesis 5.2c).

DISCUSSION

Sociologists have long been interested in the link between marital attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993; Sassler and Schoen 1999), a link that has been consistently shown to be weaker for Blacks than for Whites (e.g. Sassler and Schoen 1999; Tucker 2000). Emerging evidence suggests that marital attitudes, however, might come into play in more ways than predicting marital behavior. Marital horizon theory (Carroll et al. 2007), for instance, argues that the place and importance young people attribute to marriage are important determinants in their experiences during the transition to adulthood. Although far removed from work by Carroll and colleagues, some critical scholars of family share the basic contention of marital horizon theory – that, despite the declining normative imperative to marry (Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993; Thornton 1989; Thornton, Axinn, and Xie 2007), the salience of marriage often shapes the lives and relationships of the unmarried in significant ways (e.g. Clarke 2011; Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Sharp and Ganong 2007; Sharp and Ganong 2011). The current study sought to test this proposition by examining the role that marital salience plays in structuring young African Americans' nonmarital relationships. In particular, it incorporated a key principle of the life course perspective—that of linked lives—by introducing a relational approach to marital horizon theory and to the study of marital attitudes more generally. Such an approach was

necessary in order to address the potentially gendered links between marital salience, relationship distress, partner-specific marriage expectations, and relationship dissolution.

The results indicated that, above and beyond the effects of marital quality, marital salience played a role in predicting partners' expectations to marry one another.

Importantly, men's marital salience was particularly important, as it was associated with both men's and women's expectations for marriage. Likewise, the importance that men attributed to getting married conditioned the effect of women's relationship distress on the probability of relationship dissolution. That is, women's relationship distress was not predictive of relationship dissolution when their male partners viewed marriage as highly salient but was positively predictive of relationship dissolution when their male partners did not view marriage as salient.

These gendered patterns are consistent with the recent arguments made by Sassler and Miller (2011) that gender norms help to construct power relations within nonmarital relationships. For instance, male control over the marriage proposal process, control that the women in Sassler and Miller's sample willingly conceded, affords male partners with more power to shape relationship outcomes related to marriage. The current findings suggest that the salience of marriage for men carries more weight than that for women in predicting whether or not relationship partners expect to marry one another. In addition to expectations for marriage, however, men's marital salience acted as a stabilizing force in troubled romantic relationships, particularly those that were troubling for women. In studying the relationships of Black women, other scholars (e.g. Clarke 2011; Sterk-Elifson 1994) have noted a similar pattern in which women maintained (or returned to) unsatisfactory or less-than-ideal relationships for the sake of being partnered. The current

findings suggest that the potential for marriage, as indicated by men's marital salience, might help to understand the persistence of lower-quality relationships. Taken together, the importance men assign to marriage appears to give them considerable power not only in whether or not both partners expect to move their relationship toward marriage but also in whether or not unsatisfactory relationships come to an end.

These findings have several implications for the study of marriage and marital attitudes for Blacks during the transition to adulthood and also for the study of marital attitudes, in general. With the rising age at first marriage and rising rates of nonmarriage, particularly among Blacks (Payne 2012), marriage is no longer considered to be a step in the transition to adulthood. Rather, marriage has become the culminating event, a symbolic "marker of a successful personal life" (Cherlin 2010a; Cherlin 2013). These demographic realities have resulted in two developments. In the academy, scholars have largely deemed the study of marriage as extraneous to the study of the transition to adulthood (Carroll et al. 2007). At the same time, the United States government has engaged in widespread and costly efforts to promote marriage and pro-marriage attitudes, particularly among Blacks (e.g. see Moon and Whitehead 2006; Onwuachi-Wilig 2005). Hence, at a time in which African American young adults are being targeted by government programs that encourage marriage, researchers are shying away from the study of marriage for this population of young people. The results of the current study, however, suggest that, even though young Blacks are not marrying in large numbers, the salience of marriage in their lives helps to structure their nonmarital relationships in gendered and, perhaps, detrimental ways. Hence, family scholars might be wise to broaden the scope of contexts in which we think marital attitudes might be important, as

it appears they have implications not only for entrance into marriage (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Sassler and Schoen 1999) but also for risk-taking behaviors (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007; Willoughby 2012; Willoughby and Dworkin 2009) and, as the current findings suggest, for nonmarital relationships during the transition to adulthood.

The current findings also highlight the importance of taking a relational approach to the study of marital attitudes, more generally. Such an approach enables researchers to better specify models of marital attitudes by taking into account both partners. Further, such an approach is the only way to attend to the potentially gendered processes linking marital attitudes to behaviors, marital or otherwise. In the current study, the salience of marriage for women did not prove to matter much in predicting either marital expectations or relationship stability. Rather, men's marital salience proved more important in these arenas. These gendered complexities to the attitude-behavior link are consistent with an understanding of gender itself as a social structure that works to constrain individual choices and behaviors (Risman 2004), perhaps especially in romantic relationships. These complexities cannot be captured with individual-level data, and given the positive correlation between relationship partners' attitudes, effects identified in individual-level analyses may actually be misspecified.

The findings of the current study, as well as their implications noted above, should be considered in light of several limitations. First, all couples in the FACHS sample contained at least one African American partner, while the overwhelming majority of couples contained two African American partners. At least one partner lived in Georgia or Iowa at the time of FACHS initiation. This sample restricts the study's

generalizability, yet it is a theoretically important sample because it captures heterogeneity among young Blacks in both their attitudes and their relationships. Further, utilizing a sample for whom larger demographic trends and racialized rhetoric (Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Gallo 2012; Moon and Whitehead 2006) about the declining significance of marriage suggests that marriage matters very little provides some insight into the value and importance of marriage, in general. Nonetheless, future research should examine the extent to which the present findings hold up among other racial and age groups. It may be the case that the gendered effects found here are indeed unique to (or exacerbated among) African Americans given intersecting inequalities and the unique structural position of Black women in the dating and marriage market (Clarke 2011; Collins 2005; Dixon 2009; Lane et al. 2004; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, and Landry 1992; Warner, Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2011). Two additional limitations of the current study are the arbitrary time period between study waves and the lack of concrete data on why or when a relationship ended. These additional data would allow for more nuanced analyses predicting time to relationship dissolution and an exploration of whether or not and how gender might influence power to end a relationship and the reasons for ending it.

Despite these limitations, the current study adds to the literature by revealing the theoretical and empirical importance of adopting a relational approach in the study of marital attitudes. The overall findings indicate that marital salience plays a significant and gendered role in shaping nonmarital relationships during the transition to adulthood. Consistent with marital horizon theory (Carroll et al. 2007) and supported by the claims of critical scholars (Clarke 2011; Collins 2005; Jenkins 2007), then, marriage, or at least

the prospect of it, appears to be a central organizing principle in the lives and relationships of young Blacks. Favorable marital attitudes, however, do not appear to be always protective, as is often implicitly or explicitly assumed in work seeking to understand the extent of race and class differences in these attitudes (Trail and Karney 2012; Tucker 2000). Rather, the relative importance men attributed to marriage at this particular juncture in the life course was associated with higher marriage expectations for both partners, despite the quality of the relationship, and helped to stabilize troubled nonmarital relationships, particularly for women. Such findings compel sociologists to reconsider not only whether marriage promotion efforts are an effective poverty-fighting strategy, where much of our effort has been placed thus far (e.g. Avishai, Heath, and Randles 2012; Cherlin 2003), but also the extent to which such efforts may unintentionally yield adverse effects and potentially exacerbate racial and gender inequalities in romantic relationship.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

“The answer is that Americans are now marrying for a different reason. Marriage has become a status symbol — a highly regarded marker of a successful personal life.”

– Andrew J. Cherlin 2013

“The power of this traditional family ideal lies in its dual function as an ideological construction and as a fundamental principle of social organization.”

– Patricia Hill Collins 1996

Rather than being a step in the transition to adulthood as it once was, marriage has become the culminating event, a symbolic “marker of a successful personal life” (Cherlin 2013), and one that is increasingly likely to be missing or substantially delayed for many young African Americans. These demographic realities have resulted in two general developments. In the academy, scholars have largely deemed the study of marriage as extraneous to the study of the transition to adulthood across racial groups (Carroll et al. 2007). At the same time, the symbolic value of marriage, one marked by gendered and racialized politics of respectability (Collins 1998; Jenkins 2007; Moore 2011), has grown (Cherlin 2009). Somewhat illustratively, for more than a decade, the United States government has engaged in widespread and costly efforts to promote marriage and its value, particularly among young people who are delaying marriage longer than ever before, and among African Americans, for whom the Administration for Children and

Families cites “alarming” and “crisis-level” rates of nonmarriage (Administration for Children and Families 2003; 2012a). Hence, at a time in which the respectability politics surrounding marriage and marriage promotion imbues marriage with substantial power to “rescue the Black community from...[a] narrative of pathology” (Jenkins 2007:23), researchers have been shying away from the study of marriage for this population of young people. The four chapters of this dissertation addressed this disconnect between mainstream academic scholarship and the lived experiences of young African Americans. More specifically, these chapters aimed to understand how, even in its absence, marriage might help to shape the lives and relationships of young Blacks.

This overarching question was addressed through four empirical chapters designed to address the following specific aims: (1) to explore the family, relationship, and community-level predictors of marital perspectives among Black young adults, (2) to test the extent to which these early marital perspectives predict relationship formation experiences, educational outcomes, and risk-taking behaviors across the transition to adulthood, (3) to assess the extent to which marital perspectives changed throughout the transition to adulthood in response to relationship experiences, and (4) to investigate the role that marital perspectives play in shaping relational partners’ experiences within non-marital relationships. Collectively, the results of these four studies challenge popular and academic rhetoric claiming marriage to be largely irrelevant to young African Americans.

LIMITATIONS OF PAST WORK

Sociologists have long been interested in understanding the meaning and value attributed to marriage and the implications of these marital perspectives on individual behavior and social organization (Ehrlich 1969; Moynihan 1965; Sewell 1992).

Changing demographics, like increased rates of nonmarital childbearing (Ventura 2009) and later ages at first marriage (Payne 2012), seem to have brought renewed interest among sociologists in examining the link between marital attitudes and behavior (Cherlin 2009; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Raley and Sweeney 2007; Sassler and Schoen 1999; South 1993; Trail and Karney 2012). Although this recent interest has been somewhat guided by age-old debates regarding intersections of structure and agency in explaining human behavior (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Ehrlich 1969; Giddens 1983; Sewell 1992), it has primarily served to examine group differences in marital perspectives in an effort to explain group differences in marital behavior (Browning and Burrington 2006; Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993; Raley and Sweeney 2007; Sassler and Schoen 1999; South 1993; Trail and Karney 2012). By and large, this work has tended to debunk notions of group-specific marital values, notions implicit in marriage promotion efforts.

One of the key limitations of this work, however, is its focus on “public morality” (Hakim 2003) or general marital perspectives. Such perspectives are thought to be dictated primarily by social norms and to have relatively weak predictive power (Hakim 2003; Kraus 1995). In its emphasis on the salience of marriage during the transition to adulthood, marital horizon theory differentiates itself from this more general work by calling our attention to the potential importance of more specific marital perspectives in shaping behaviors, particularly during the transition to adulthood. In addition to focusing on these specific attitudes, those tapping personal preferences rather than public morality, marital horizon theory asks us to expand the domains to which we think such perspectives are relevant. That is, marital horizon theory suggests that, although young

people are unlikely to get married during the transition to adulthood, the salience of marriage during this period impacts other domains, like career directedness, sexuality, and nonmarital relationships (Carroll et al. 2009:350). The implications of marital horizon theory, then, are potentially substantial, as it not only asks us to reevaluate the relevance of marriage in the lives of the unmarried, but also provides new avenues of research for understanding the intersections of structure and agency.

Work on marital horizon theory has been limited in ways that make its core proposition seem insignificant and its implications seem inconsequential. All of the work on marital horizon theory thus far has been cross-sectional in nature and thus has not been able to test the theory's core proposition about trajectories of change. Further, although the explication of the theory considers the interdependence of life course domains (Elder Jr. 1985; Elder Jr. 1998; Guzzo 2006), empirical tests have been largely limited to the domain of health-risk behavior. Further, neither in the explication nor empirical examination of the theory has the interdependence of individual lives been seriously considered (this is also the case with much of the more general work that exists alongside marital horizon theory; for an exception, see Brown 2000). What's more is that the theory is meant to explain variation in young people's experience of the transition to adulthood, yet extant tests rely on samples of primarily White college students. Such samples necessarily restrict the variation the theory is intended to explain. Finally, explications and tests of marital horizon theory exist outside of any sociohistoric context of intersecting inequalities. In the United States today, marriage is imbued with a politics of respectability (Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Gallo 2012; Heath 2012; Jenkins 2007;

Moon and Whitehead 2006; Moore 2011) that seems to deem such inequalities central to the study of marriage and marital perspectives.

Many of these limitations may be due to the fact that marital horizon theory was developed outside of a life course framework. Examining the theory's central proposition from a life course lens, however, opens up new avenues of inquiry. As shown in the four studies of this dissertation, these avenues yield potentially substantial implications not only for clarifying the link between attitudes and behavior during the transition to adulthood but also for revising core debates within sociology and for understanding the place and importance of marriage in the U.S. today. The core findings and implications of these four studies are discussed below.

GENERAL V. SPECIFIC MARITAL PERSPECTIVES

Marital horizon theory distinguishes itself in the attitude-behavior literature by focusing on life-course specific marital perspectives rather than general, or "public morality" (Hakim 2003), perspectives. The core proposition of the theory rests on this distinction, as life-course specific marital perspectives are thought to be better able than more generalized perspectives to differentiate young people's experiences across the transition to adulthood. As Carroll and colleagues (2007) write: "Although most emerging adults report that they personally hope to get married someday, this does not mean that marriage is of equal importance to all young people" (225). It is not the general desire for or importance of marriage, then, but the extent to which young people currently prioritize marriage that is expected to affect their behavior during the transition to adulthood. The findings of both Study 1 and Study 2 supported this distinction between general and life-course specific marital perspectives.

Both studies, for instance, revealed only weak-to-moderate correlations between marital salience, a life-course specific marital perspective, and marital costs, benefits, and importance, more general measures of marital perspectives. Such patterns are consistent with Hakim's (2003) argument that "there is only a weak link between public morality attitudes and personal preferences and goals" (340). The distinction between these two types of attitudes was further supported by the fact the majority of respondents in the Family and Community Health Study agreed that having a good marriage was "extremely important", yet less than a quarter prioritized marriage as they embarked on the transition to adulthood. Hence, just as Carroll and colleagues (2007) posited, most young people desire and expect marriage, but these generally favorable attitudes do not mean that marriage is equally salient to all young people.

In addition to their weak associations, general and specific marital perspectives were distinct in both their predictors and their effects. As shown in Study 1, although relationship and community contexts predicted general marital perspectives in ways suggested by past research, these contexts yielded little predictive power when it came to marital salience. As shown in Study 2, marital salience was the only marital perspective to predict prospectively educational, relationship, and risk-taking experiences across the transition to adulthood. Such findings lend support to Hakim's (2003) claim that life-course specific attitudes "are causal in relation to individual behaviour" while general attitudes, those tapping views on public morality, "are usually non-causal" (339-340).

Although lending credence to the core proposition of marital horizon theory, the findings of Study 1 and Study 2 highlight holes in sociological knowledge. Because much work on marital and other family-related attitudes has focused almost exclusively on

general perspectives, extant theories provide a lot of insight on the contexts producing variation in such perspectives. As Hakim (2003) has argued more generally, and as Carroll and colleagues (Carroll et al. 2009; Carroll et al. 2007) argue with particular reference to the transition to adulthood, these general perspectives do not offer much in the way of forecasting future behaviors. Hence, as a discipline, we seem to have developed a much better understanding of those types of attitudes that yield little insight into how individual life courses play out. As Hakim notes, this work has given rise to the flawed assumption that “all attitudes and values are moulded by experience or the contemporary situation, and that none have independent causal powers” (Hakim 2003:339). Although Study 1 and Study 2 appear to refute this assumption and hence support Hakim’s arguments, they do not go as far as to suggest that it would be futile to theorize about the unique contexts or circumstances that give rise to life-course specific perspectives, like marital salience. Rather, models specified in Study 2 would only be improved and the causal effect of marital salience only be bolstered if contexts known to produce variability in marital salience were able to be taken into account. For it is quite possible that life-course specific marital perspectives are also molded by experience and circumstances, as indicated in Study 3, as well as structural positions, but it is apparent that such experiences and circumstances may be quite different from those generally attended to in attitudinal research.

PRO-MARRIAGE ATTITUDES: FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE

Efforts to promote marriage in the United States assume that marriage has become less valued, particularly by African Americans, the poor, and, more recently, “middle America” (Avishai, Heath, and Randles 2012; The National Marriage Project 2010; Trail

and Karney 2012). For instance, states receiving funds from the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Initiative may use these funds not only for relationship skills training, pre-marital counseling, and “marriage mentoring” but also for “public advertising campaigns on the value of healthy marriages” and “education in high schools on the value of marriage” (Administration for Children and Families 2012b). Given that these efforts and their underlying assumptions are based on little scientific evidence, sociologists have exerted a lot of effort testing the validity of such assumptions. Much of this effort has served to debunk notions that African Americans and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds value marriage less than other people (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Trail and Karney 2012; Tucker 2000). In addition, sociologists have debated the extent to which, even if group differences in marital values were found, marriage is an adequate solution to poverty (Avishai, Heath, and Randles 2012; Bartlett 2014; Cherlin 2003). Implicit in both marriage promotion policies and sociological arguments against them, however, is the assumption that holding pro-marriage attitudes can be nothing but beneficial. That is, in both public policy and mainstream sociological research questioning its logic, negative attitudes toward marriage have been, often implicitly, equated with dysfunctionality or deviance.

The findings from Study 2 and Study 4 in this dissertation problematize this association. Although Study 2 suggests that marital salience during the transition to adulthood might deter participation in health-risk behaviors across this transition, it also suggests that the prioritization of marriage at this point in the life course might deter educational endeavors. Likewise, Study 4 suggests that the salience of marriage may serve to sustain low-quality relationships and to place young women in particularly

vulnerable positions within these relationships. Taken together, these studies compel us to rethink our implicit assumption about marriage-friendly perspectives always being positive forces in the life course. This assumption is not one shared by critical scholars, who have been calling our attention to the potentially detrimental impacts of marriage politics and marriage anxieties in the lives of women of color for decades (Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Jenkins 2007; Moore 2011). The results of Study 2 and Study 4 add quantitative support to their claims in suggesting that, during the transition to adulthood, when it is nonnormative to prioritize marriage, doing so may have detrimental implications for the life chances of young Blacks. Such a possibility is an important avenue for further research, as the “stakes” of “missteps” during the transition to adulthood appear to be much greater and less reconcilable today than in the past (Settersten and Ray 2010a). For young Blacks, already less privileged during the transition to adulthood (Settersten and Ray 2010b), such missteps may serve to maintain or exacerbate existing inequalities.

Efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of the Healthy Marriage Initiative have produced bleak results. As summarized in a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* the government’s most recent report on the effectiveness of its own initiative indicated results that “were nothing short of bleak: The programs, the study concluded, did not make couples more likely to stay together or get married. They did not increase the amount of time fathers spent with children. The parents were not more financially stable. Their children were not more emotionally secure” (Bartlett 2014). In fact, the government reported that “Despite the scale of the grantees’ programs, virtually none of the primary analysis variables show a statistically significant impact” (Bir, Lerman,

Corwin, MacIlvain, Beard, Richburg, and Smith 2012:5-15). Despite evidence regarding its lack of effectiveness, the Healthy Marriage Initiative continues to receive funding (Public Law 111-291). Although not a test of the effectiveness of the initiative, the results of Study 2 and Study 4 in this dissertation encourage sociologists to consider the potential effect that public advertising campaigns and government initiatives to promote marriage might have not only on the likelihood of marriage or divorce, marital quality, and parental involvement but also on the salience of marriage in young people's lives and, hence, on various life course domains. Expanding the outcomes of interest in this evaluation research beyond those directly related to marital behavior will likely provide insight into the potentially unanticipated consequences of the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Initiative.

THE "MARRIAGE EFFECT"

A long line of research in the life course tradition has found a link between marriage and desistance from criminal and deviant behavior (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Sampson and Laub 1990; Warr 1998). This "marriage effect" has persisted even after accounting for selection processes through propensity and genetically-informed models (King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007; Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006), country context (Bersani, Laub, and Nieuwbeerta 2009), different types of crime (Bersani, Laub, and Nieuwbeerta 2009; Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005), and different classifications of offenders (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Sampson and Laub 2003). In their explication of marital horizon theory, Carroll and colleagues (2007) argue that support for the theory challenges the literature on "marriage effects" by suggesting "that changes in lifestyle patterns previously assumed to be associated with the transition

to marriage may in fact be initiated when young people anticipate marriage in their near future” (219). In other words, some of the marriage effect may actually be attributable to the anticipatory socialization practices prior to marriage. Although the studies in this dissertation could not test this proposition directly, they do suggest that young people who view marriage as salient are indeed modifying their behavior in conventional ways long before they marry. Nonetheless, the extent to which these findings imply that the marriage effect has been overestimated rests upon the assumption that marital salience predicts marriage relatively well. That is, if marital salience leads to marriage, then the effects of marital salience would be conflated with those of marriage. If marital salience is not strongly related to marriage, however, marriage effects would not be conflated with those of marital salience.

In the sample of African American young people used in the four studies of this dissertation, the latter seems to be the case, as marriage was so uncommon among this group of young people by the age of 24 that marital behavior could not even be examined. In fact, 92% of those respondents who viewed marriage as salient at the age of 18 were not yet married by the age of 24. Rather than suggesting that the marriage effect might actually be attributable to anticipatory socialization behaviors, as Carroll and colleagues (2007) do, the current findings provide an additional explanation for why the marriage effect has been shown to be less robust among African Americans than Whites (Harris, Lee, and DeLeone 2010; Piquero, MacDonald, and Parker 2002). General marital attitudes and marital expectations have already been linked more strongly to behavior among Whites than among Blacks (Manning and Smock 1995; Tucker 2000). If the same is true for the link between marital salience and marital behavior, the unmarried

Black population, more so than the unmarried White population, would contain a substantial portion of individuals who view marriage as salient and may be adjusting their behavior accordingly. Such possibilities might be examined in future work that takes marital salience into account when quantifying the marriage effect.

STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

Social structure and human agency have long been concepts of debate within sociology (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Giddens 1979; Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011; Sewell 1992; Sewell 2005). Research on family-related attitudes and their association with subsequent behavior has been central to these debates. The findings from this dissertation highlight several ways that such debates might be revised. First, life-course specific attitudes must be incorporated into these debates. Second, life course principles might be used to extend our understanding of agency to include anticipatory socialization behaviors across multiple life domains. Finally, the reality of linked lives, one overlooked in both structure/agency debates in general and attitude-behavior research, in particular, holds the potential to yield new controversies within structure/agency debates.

As Hakim (2003) has argued, general attitudes have taken center stage in this research and have therefore privileged social structure. Her work, as well as that of this dissertation, suggests that research on life-course specific attitudes hold the potential to revise these debates substantially, as their seemingly tighter association with behavior might lend more support for human agency. Such support, however, does not necessarily diminish the role of social structure, as structural effects have proven independent predictors of experiences during the transition to adulthood, as well as throughout the life

course (Furstenberg 2008; Furstenberg Jr. 2010; Settersten and Ray 2010b). Further, structure versus agency debates have transformed over time to allow for more nuanced understandings of structure, agency, and the interplay between them. For instance, Johnson-Hanks and her colleagues (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011) argue that although “Identity resembles an individual-level counterpart to ‘structure’ in many ways,” “structure shapes people in profound ways, inculcating them with particular habits, hopes, and views of the self” (14). Hence, “all aspects of identity are shaped by, and ‘embody’ structure in some way” (Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan, and Kohler 2011:14). Continued life-course-informed research on marital horizon theory may provide insight into this interplay between structure and agency, particularly with reference to life-course specific marital perspectives.

The findings of this dissertation encourage not only the incorporation of life-course specific attitudes into structure and agency debates but also the reconsideration of human agency and how it has been operationalized, more broadly. In all of the studies of this dissertation, marital perspectives were of primary interest, yet marital behavior was never examined. Marriage was so rare among the respondents of the Family and Community Health Study, as it is among young Blacks in general (Payne 2012), that an examination of marriage was untenable. If we limit our understanding of agency to that exhibited in the link between marital attitudes and marital behavior, as has largely been the case thus far, we would be left to conclude that the young people investigated here demonstrated none. Such a conclusion seems unfair and erroneous, however, in the face of findings suggesting that the young people in the Family and Community Health Study very much appear to have altered their behavior across multiple life domains in

accordance with how they prioritized marriage. That is, they did so with an orientation toward the future and the present (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). These apparent expressions of agency provide new avenues of inquiry for scholars seeking to understand the intersecting roles of structure and agency across the life course.

In addition to being limited in terms of its breadth, structure/agency debates have been limited by the study of attitudes and behavior at the individual level. Although this individualistic focus may not be problematic for non-family related attitudes, the gendering of courtship and marriage proposals (Sassler and Miller 2011) suggests that this individual focus is indeed problematic when marital attitudes and marital behavior are of interest. In drawing upon the life course principle of linked lives, Study 4 provided evidence of the relational nature of marital perspectives and their effects. In this study, marital expectations and relationship dissolution were much more dependent upon the salience of marriage in men's lives than the salience of marriage in women's lives. Relational examinations of marital perspectives in the area of marriage and family make tangible critical scholars' claims regarding gender as social structure (Risman 2004). Such gendered relational effects must be contended with in the attitude-behavior research that informs structure/agency debates. Ignoring the (gendered) interdependence of human lives neglects core sociological principles and leaves us with an incomplete, at best, and erroneous, at worst, understanding of how marital perspectives shape young people's lives and relationships.

RELEVANCE AND MEANING OF MARRIAGE

Demographic changes in the timing and experience of the transition to adulthood have led scholars to assume that marriage is largely irrelevant during this period in the

life course (Carroll et al. 2007). The current study not only focused on this developmental period but it did so with a sample of young African Americans. Young Blacks have the highest age at first marriage (Payne 2012) and rates of nonmarriage that exceed those of all other racial groups (United States Census Bureau 2010; Ventura 2009). If marriage is assumed to be generally irrelevant to young adults, it may be perceived especially irrelevant to young Blacks. The studies of this dissertation, however, counter both of these assumptions. They suggest that marriage looms large over the lives and relationships of the unmarried, as critical scholars have pointed out for years (Chasteen 1994; Clarke 2011; Collins 1998; Jenkins 2007; Moore 2011; Sharp and Ganong 2007; Sharp and Ganong 2011), and consistent with marital horizon theory's core proposition (Carroll et al. 2007), point to the continued relevance of marriage in structuring young people's lives today.

The ways in which marriage proved to be relevant during the transition to adulthood provides some insight into the role expectations attributed to marriage and the meaning of marriage, more generally, among young people today. Young people who viewed marriage as salient during the transition to adulthood reduced their involvement in risk-taking behaviors across this transition. Such findings suggest that role expectations within marriage are still associated with conventionality. Hence, although such roles may no longer be institutionalized with regards to gender (Cherlin 2004; Cherlin 2009), there appears to be some degree of institutionalization of these role expectations in other domains. In addition to the general conventionality associated with marriage, it is clear that, particularly for women, marriage is seen as distinct from other romantic relationships, including cohabitation. Rather than making marriage irrelevant or

less salient, cohabitation reoriented both young women and men toward marriage. Such findings provide support for arguments made by Stanley and colleagues (2006) and by McGinnis (2003) that cohabitation changes the context in which marital decisions are made and are wholly inconsistent with concerns that cohabitation may be serving as desirable alternative to marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). For the young people in the Family and Community Health Study, marriage was distinct from and made more salient and desirable by cohabitation.

GENDER AND MARITAL PERSPECTIVES

The symbolic value of marriage, and of relationships in general, has been one that has been assumed to be gendered in much research to date (Chasteen 1994; Sharp and Ganong 2007; Sharp and Ganong 2011). That is, the symbolic value of marriage has been considered greater for women than for men, and given the racialized politics of respectability surrounding marriage, perhaps particularly great for women of color (Clarke 2011; Collins 1990; Collins 1998; Collins 2005; Jenkins 2007; Moore 2011). To the extent to which marital salience is any indication of the symbolic value of marriage, these claims appear to go unsupported. The young men and women in the Family and Community Health Study viewed marriage as equally salient at the beginning of the transition to adulthood, and when they differed in salience at later waves, young men actually prioritized marriage more than women.

Such descriptive findings may be misleading in their simplicity, however, as other patterns of effects support critical qualitative scholars in their assertions that marriage holds more symbolic value for women than for men. Consistent with Sassler and Miller's (2011) findings that cohabitation is often seen by women as a less legitimate relationship

status and as potentially countering their marriage goals, Study 2 showed that young women who viewed marriage as salient were far less likely than their male counterparts to cohabit across the transition to adulthood. Further, relationships in which women were dissatisfied were less likely to end if these relationships held the potential for marriage, as indicated by men's marital salience. Such findings suggest that women may be more likely than their male partners to privilege the *status* of the relationship (marriage) over the *quality* of the relationship. This interpretation is supported by findings suggesting that men's marital salience appears to be much more "logical" in the sense that it was more strongly associated with the perceived benefits of marriage and with current relationship quality than was women's. These patterns of results are indicative of the gendered symbolic power of marriage, one potentially fueled by respectability politics. Nonetheless, in order to reconcile the equal (and sometimes greater) salience of marriage among men with the patterns of results indicating gendered effects of this salience, the inclusion of men in future research, particularly in the critical qualitative tradition, will be vital.

It is important to note the gendered effects discussed thus far were only found for relationship domains. Effects across other domains, like that of education and risk-taking behavior, were not gendered. The fact that anticipatory socialization behaviors for men and women proved similar suggests that role expectations of husband and wife may be trending toward parity.

COMMON LIMITATIONS

Study-specific limitations were addressed in each of the four empirical chapters, however there are some limitations common to all studies that affect their collective

contribution. First and foremost is that the measure of marital salience utilized through this dissertation was unidimensional and hence did not capture separately the three dimensions of marital horizons explicated by Carroll and colleagues (2007). Nonetheless, this measure was intended to test the core contention of the theory and to measure the underlying construct of marital prioritization implied by the three dimensions of marital horizons. Finding support for the theory's core claim with a single-item measure of marital salience not explicitly created for marital horizon theory provides construct validity to the measure utilized here and provides support for theory itself. In fact, given that recent work (Johnson, Anderson, and Stith 2011) has suggested that marital horizons, as operationalized in the explication of marital horizon theory, are conflated with general measures of conventionality, the measure of marital salience available in the Family and Community Health Study may be a better indicator of young people's "marital horizons" than the three dimensions offered in the theory itself.

Second, none of the studies in this dissertation were able to examine marriage as an outcome. Hence, it remains unclear the extent to which the processes highlighted here have implications for marital behavior. Relatedly, the last complete wave of the Family and Community Health Study was collected in 2011, when respondents averaged around 24 years of age. Although this age is typically considered the upper end of the transition to adulthood, or "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2000), the truncating of the data at this age does not for an examination of the entire transition to adulthood. Nor does it allow for an examination of the implications of this transition across the remainder of the life course. Future waves will provide insight into the extent to which experiences during this period affect those across multiple domains throughout the life course.

Third, the four studies of this dissertation drew upon insights from a life course framework. Some measures that would be relevant to this framework, however, were unavailable in the FACHS data and would be useful for future research on the development of marital perspectives and their implications across the life course. For instance, measures of parents' marital perspectives as well as respondents' marital perspectives prior to late adolescence will provide insight into the intergenerational transmission of marital perspectives and the unfolding of these perspectives over time. Likewise, more nuanced measures of parents' marital history and respondents' relationship history may help to explain more variance in marital perspectives during the transition to adulthood. Lastly, longitudinal community-level measures that can assess changes in community and cultural context may prove important in understanding the embeddedness of individual attitudes in larger ecological settings.

Fourth, the race and age homogeneity of the Family and Community Health Study provides no insight into the role of marital salience at other points in the life course or for other racial/ethnic groups. Race comparisons of the effects of marital salience may provide a greater understanding of the implications of respectability politics in the lives of young people today. Further, understanding what marital salience might mean at other periods in the life course may help to elucidate the extent to which the "culture of marriage" (Carroll et al. 2007) during the transition to adulthood is indeed unique to this transition. Despite this race and age homogeneity, the results of all four studies in this dissertation reveal "diversity, variation, and heterogeneity where researchers might have assumed singularity, sameness, and homogeneity" (Moore 2011:216).

Finally, and relatedly, the politics of respectability surrounding marriage that were highlighted throughout the chapters of this dissertation were used primarily as a backdrop informed by critical qualitative scholarship. Explicit tests of these politics might be better attended to by studying the role of marital salience in the lives of people living outside the United States, particularly those living in countries in which nonmarital relationships, both same-sex and different-sex, are socially and legally legitimated (Badgett 2009). The symbolic value attached to marriage in the United States appears to be somewhat unique (Cherlin 2013; Cherlin 2005; Cherlin 2009), and comparative research would be able to address the everyday impact of this cultural ideology on individual lives and relationships more directly. As indicated above, it might also be tested more explicitly by examining race differences in the effects found through this dissertation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Taken together, the four studies of this dissertation address conflicting representations of the import of marriage in the lives of young African American. Larger demographic trends and racialized rhetoric about the declining significance of marriage suggest that marriage matters very little for this population, while scholars of inequality argue that marriage, or at least the prospect of it, is a central organizing principle in the lives and relationships of young Black. This work attended to these divergent claims by embedding marital horizon theory within a broader life course framework to examine how African Americans come to view marriage as they embark on the transition to adulthood and how these marital perspectives shape their experiences across this transition. In doing so, this work suggests that marriage is not simply a relevant but a *central* organizing feature of young African Americans' lives. The ways in which this is

the case provide insight not only into how young Blacks experience the transition to adulthood but also into ongoing sociological debates on the link between family-formation attitudes and behavior and, more broadly, between structure and agency.

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