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Relationships Among Young Adults' Marital Messages Received, Marital Attitudes, and Relationship Self-Efficacy

W. Matthew Shurts and Jane E. Myers

The authors examined relationships among university students' marital messages received (MMR), marital attitudes, and romantic relationship self-efficacy (RSE). Results indicated that students' marital attitudes and romantic relationship status predicted their level of RSE. The authors found differences in MMR, marital attitudes, and RSE on the basis of gender, ethnicity, age, romantic relationship status, and family-of-origin marital status. Counseling implications, future research directions, and limitations are discussed.

Young adults (ages 18–25 years) who choose to attend college tend to be unmarried; experience college concerns such as academic, institutional, personal-emotional, and social adjustment; and confront developmental challenges that include career choice, identity development, and intimate relationship formation (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). Among these experiences and challenges, identity development and intimacy issues are especially salient; in fact, romantic involvement is seen as a normative experience for young adults (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003), and they tend to rate it as one of the most emotionally important aspects of their lives (Cantor, Acker, & Cook-Flannagan, 1992). Correspondingly, the ability to form and maintain such relationships tends to be one significant predictor of positive mental health and successful emotional adjustment among this population (Collins, Cooper, Albino, & Al-lard, 2002). Because intimate relationships carry such importance for young adults, we believe that dynamics that might inhibit successful relationship formation must be considered to be developmental risk factors. A review of the extensive literature examining undergraduate relationships suggests a variety of such factors. According to our review, three of these factors that have shown

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promise as dynamics that counselors can address to enhance college clients' relationship functioning are marital messages received (MMR; Larson, Benson, Wilson, & Medora, 1998), marital attitudes (Klein, 2006), and relationship self-efficacy (RSE; Bandura, 2001).

MMR AND MARITAL ATTITUDES

Individuals receive messages regarding the institution of marriage from a variety of sources, such as their families of origin, friends, the media, and societal institutions (e.g., religion, government). Because marital messages affect young adults' attitudes and feelings about their own future marriage as well as their perceptions of personal readiness for an intimate and important relationship such as marriage (Benson, Larson, Wilson, & Demo, 1993; Larson et al., 1998), we believe that they are important to understand. Furthermore, these messages and attitudes are especially salient for traditional-age college students, for whom the establishment of intimate relationships is a primary developmental task (Salmela-Aro et al., 2007).

According to Bandura (1997), individuals develop their attitudes based on a variety of experiences, including modeling within—and messages received from—their families of origin. Therefore, it is not surprising that attitudes and behaviors, both positive and negative, are often conveyed through generations within families in a process called *intergenerational transmission*. Although numerous studies have demonstrated a consistent intergenerational transmission process by which attitudes about divorce are conveyed (see Pryor & Rodgers, 2001, for an overview), findings from studies exploring the possible transmission of marital attitudes based on parental marital status (i.e., whether or not parents divorced) have been less clear, with studies both supporting (Akers-Woody, 2004; Segrin, Taylor, & Altman, 2005) and dispelling (Burgoyne & Hames, 2002; Clark & Kanoy, 1998) the intergenerational transmission of marital attitudes among individuals across the life span. Because of these apparent contradictions, follow-up research has begun to focus on the influence of other demographic factors and family dynamics, beyond parental divorce, on children's marital attitudes in adulthood (e.g., Burgoyne & Hames, 2002; Flouri & Buchanan, 2001).

Research on gender differences in marital attitudes among young adults has also yielded conflicting results. For example, Braaten and Rosén (1998) and Larson et al. (1998) found no differences in marital attitudes among young adults on the basis of gender, but Klein (2006) found that female college students' marital attitudes were more positive than those of their male counterparts. Still, some research involving the intergenerational transmission of marital attitudes has yielded more consistent results. For example, studies involving family-of-origin dynamics (e.g., conflict, closeness, triangulation) have consistently suggested that negative factors, such as high parental conflict,

low parental happiness, fusion, and triangulation, are related to more negative attitudes toward marriage (Larson et al., 1998; Valerian, 2002). In addition, Akers-Woody (2004) reported that positive parental and family dynamics were related to more positive marital attitudes.

Although the family has been found to be the most influential social unit and mechanism by which attitudes and values are formed (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), individuals, organizations, and other influences outside of the family also seem to be increasingly influential (Ji, 2001). For example, friends (Bourgeois & Bowen, 2001); mass media (e.g., television, the Internet, magazines; Segrin & Nabi, 2002); and societal institutions such as religious organizations, the government, and schools (Thomsen & Rekve, 2003) all have been shown to affect the attitudes young adults have toward a variety of behaviors. In turn, we believe that it is probable that these three influences are also potential sources of marital messages for young adults. Unfortunately, few empirical studies have been undertaken to explore the effect these various influences might have on marital attitudes. Instead, the preponderance of research investigating marital messages and marital attitudes has involved only familial influences. By examining the types of marital messages individuals receive regarding the institution of marriage, both within and outside of their families of origin, we believe that it might be possible to identify the impact of such influences on marital attitudes, as well as the impact of such influences on a related developmental factor, namely, relationship self-efficacy.

RSE

RSE, the belief that one possesses the abilities to perform the behaviors necessary to develop and maintain a successful romantic relationship, is theoretically based in Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory (Lopez & Lent, 1991). According to Bandura's theory, an individual's self-efficacy level, an intrapsychic construct, has an effect on his or her persistence toward external behavioral success in the everyday world. That is, people who believe that they can attain their goals are more likely to persist in their efforts and are thus more likely to achieve their aspirations (Bandura, 1997, 2001). According to the theory, RSE should operate in a fashion similar to self-efficacy in general, with efficacy beliefs affecting outcomes—in this case, in the domain of romantic relationship development. In other words, RSE should influence the accomplishment of goals regarding romantic relationships. Therefore, we believe that RSE may be an important factor in establishing and maintaining successful romantic relationships and marriages.

Although individuals' RSE has been hypothesized to affect success in romantic relationships (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Lopez & Lent, 1991), there has been very little research attention given to this construct (Perlman, 2001). In studies that have been conducted with populations across the life span, higher levels of

RSE have been shown to relate positively to relationship satisfaction (Bradbury, 1989; Lopez & Lent, 1991) and marital satisfaction (Dostal & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1997). In addition, according to two further studies, spouses' efficacy expectations for overcoming marital difficulties seem to be associated with their overall marital satisfaction (Arias, Lyons, & Street, 1997; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). More recently, Yu (2007) found that parental divorce might be associated with lower levels of RSE among young adults; however, Yu did not find this relationship to be statistically significant and merely reported exploratory findings. On the basis of these findings from the few extant studies examining relationship self-efficacy, we believe that individuals' RSE may affect the likelihood of developing and maintaining satisfying intimate relationships and that, conversely, lower RSE may have negative effects on both romantic relationship formation and longevity within such relationships (e.g., marriages).

THE CURRENT STUDY

This study was designed to examine the relationships among MMR, marital attitudes, and RSE within a sample of traditional-age, never-married, heterosexual undergraduates. Three exploratory research questions were posed:

Research Question 1: What relationships exist among MMR, marital attitudes, and RSE among young adults?

Research Question 2: What portion of the variance in RSE can be accounted for by MMR, marital attitudes, romantic relationship status, and age among young adults?

Research Question 3: What mean differences can be found in MMR, marital attitudes, and RSE on the basis of gender, ethnicity, age, family-of-origin marital status, romantic relationship status, and family-of-origin conflict among young adults?

METHOD

In this study, the population of interest comprised never-married young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 years. In the study, because the research variables we investigated had not previously been examined together, we chose to avoid possible confounding variables such as marital status, marital history, and sexual orientation; however, it will be important to include such variables in future studies with other undergraduates to accumulate evidence with additional, more diverse populations. Participants for the main study included college students enrolled in undergraduate business, counseling, electronics, or sociology courses at three southeastern U.S. universities. Institutional review boards at all three institutions gave us permission to conduct the study. We contacted instructors teaching undergraduate courses to explain the purpose of

the research and nature of the instrumentation. Testing was completed during class periods, and participants were given doughnuts and entered into a drawing for a \$50 gift certificate.

After respondents who did not match the population criteria (i.e., history of marriage, outside of target age range, and nonheterosexual sexual orientation) were screened out, the resulting sample totaled 211 students. The majority (58.8%, $n = 124$) of the sample was female, with 41.2% ($n = 87$) being male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years with a mean of approximately 20.31 years ($SD = 1.63$), and the majority of the respondents (91%, $n = 192$) were between the ages of 18 and 22 years. The sample was primarily Caucasian (49.3%, $n = 104$) and African American (44.5%, $n = 94$), with the remainder of the sample identifying as Asian (3.3%, $n = 7$), Hispanic (0.9%, $n = 2$), Native American (0.9%, $n = 2$), or other (0.9%, $n = 2$). (Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.) Fifty-three percent (53.6%) of the participants reported current involvement in romantic relationships. When reporting on their family of origin, more than half (60.3%) listed their parents' marital status as "intact," indicating that their parents were married at the time of birth and never divorced. Nearly half of the respondents (48.3%, $n = 102$) reported "low conflict" within their families of origin, whereas 50.2% ($n = 106$) rated their families of origin as either "moderate conflict" ($n = 82$) or "high conflict" ($n = 24$). Three participants (1.4%) did not respond to this question.

Instruments

Four instruments were used in this study: the Marital Messages Scale (MMS; Shurts, 2005), the Marital Attitudes Scale (MAS; Braaten & Rosén, 1998), the Relationship Self-Efficacy Scale (RSES; Lopez & Lent, 1991), and a demographic form.

MMS. The MMS was developed to measure the effect (e.g., positive, negative, neutral) of messages about marriage that individuals receive from various external sources and the overall perceived power of these messages. The scale is a 52-item self-report measure consisting of four sections, each focusing on different message sources (Family, Friends, Mass Media, and Other Organizations). It uses a semantic differential format, with each section containing 13 identical pairs of dichotomous adjectives (seven Evaluation pairs and six Potency pairs), which serve as anchor points for a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., 1 = *bad* vs. 5 = *good*).

The MMS is scored by summing individual item responses for both dimensions (Evaluation and Potency) within each source section (e.g., Family, Friends). This results in a total of eight subscores, with the possibility of total MMS scores for Evaluation and Potency as well. In this study, only Evaluation scores were used for each subscale and the total MMS scale. In addition, a linear transformation was performed to place all scores on a common range from 20 to 100, allowing for easier interpretation. In the current study, the alpha coefficients for the

Evaluation score for the MMS subscales and the total MMS scale ranged from .92 (total MMS scale) to .95 (Other Organizations subscale).

MAS. The MAS was developed for use with individuals regardless of marital status to assess “subjective opinion of the institution of heterosexual marriage” (Braaten & Rosén, 1998, p. 84). The MAS is a 23-item, self-report, unidimensional measure in which participants endorse their beliefs regarding statements of marriage on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*).

The MAS is scored by summing the 23 items, after correcting for reverse keying of negative items. Total scores range from 23 to 92, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward marriage. A linear transformation was performed to put scores on a range from 25 to 100. Research on the MAS has reported high internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$; Braaten & Rosén, 1998). In the current study, item–total correlations ranged from a low of .12 to a high of .64 and were all statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level, with an alpha for the total MAS scale at .84.

RSES. The RSES is one of three scales in the Relationship Efficacy Scales (Lopez & Lent, 1991). The Relationship Efficacy Scales were developed to assess categories of efficacy beliefs relevant to relationship maintenance: self-efficacy, other-efficacy, and relationship-inferred self-efficacy. All three scales (i.e., RSES, Relationship Other-Efficacy Scale, and Relationship-Inferred Self-Efficacy Scale) cover the same content and differ only in terms of their instructional sets. Thus, only the RSES was used for the current study. On this scale, respondents rate their confidence in their ability to perform 25 relationship behaviors, such as communication, conflict resolution, physical intimacy, and provision of social support. They provide these ratings on a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all sure*) to 9 (*completely sure*).

Numeric responses from all RSES items are summed, resulting in a single, unidimensional score of relationship self-efficacy. Total scores range from 25 to 225, with higher scores indicating higher levels of relationship self-efficacy. A linear transformation was performed to put scores on a range from 11.1 to 100, making for easier interpretation of the scores. Lopez and Lent (1991) reported alpha coefficients for the three Relationship Efficacy Scales ranging from .87 to .90. Because the RSES was normed on a different population (romantically involved college students) than the target population for this study (unmarried young adults who may or may not be romantically involved), it was important to confirm the instrument’s reliability with our sample. In the current study ($N = 211$), the alpha level for the RSES was .94.

Demographic form. A demographic form was used to collect information to describe the sample, to provide data to test several of the research questions, and to screen for participants who did not meet the criteria for the study (e.g., divorced, outside the age range of the study). Participants were asked to report their age, gender, marital status and history, ethnicity, sexual orientation, dating

status, length of current romantic relationship (if applicable), parental marital status, age at time of parental divorce (if applicable), primary caregivers during childhood, and perceived level of family conflict during childhood (i.e., “low conflict,” “moderate conflict,” and “high conflict”).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were calculated for MMR from family, MMR from friends, MMR from the mass media, MMR from other organizations, total MMR, marital attitudes, and RSE with only two anomalies noted. The scores for total MMR and marital attitudes were scores for which range restrictions occurred. In both instances, the lowest score ranges were not reported by participants; distributions were negatively skewed.

Research Question 1

Pearson product–moment correlations were computed to examine relationships among the variables. As shown in Table 1, marital attitudes was significantly and positively related to MMR from family ($r = .34, p < .01$), MMR from friends ($r = .26, p < .01$), and MMR from other organizations ($r = .19, p < .01$), but was not significantly related to MMR from the mass media ($r = .01$). Marital attitudes was also related to RSE ($r = .37, p < .01$), as were MMR from family ($r = .23, p < .01$) and total MMR ($r = .15, p < .05$). It should be noted, however, that the effect sizes of these correlations were low, ranging between .02 and .13 (effect sizes between MMR from family, MMR from friends, MMR from the mass media, and MMR from other organizations ranged from .32 to .43).

Research Question 2

Scatterplot representations and Pearson product–moment correlations were examined for possible linearity of relationships between RSE and the potential

TABLE 1

Pearson Product–Moment Correlations for Marital Messages Received, Marital Attitudes, and Relationship Self-Efficacy

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Marital messages received–family	.94						
2. Marital messages received–friends	.27**	.94					
3. Marital messages received–mass media	.07	.11	.93				
4. Marital messages received– other organizations	.20**	.22**	.15*	.95			
5. Marital messages received total	.61**	.66**	.57**	.62**	.92		
6. Marital attitudes	.34**	.26**	.01	.19**	.32**	.84	
7. Relationship self-efficacy	.23**	.09	.01	.04	.15*	.37**	.94

Note. Boldface values on the diagonal are alpha coefficients.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

predictor variables of interest (i.e., MMR, marital attitudes, gender, ethnicity, age, family-of-origin marital status, romantic relationship status, and family-of-origin conflict). The only variables that showed a possible relationship with RSE were MMR from family ($r = .23, p < .01$), marital attitudes ($r = .37, p < .01$), and romantic relationship status ($r = .17, p < .05$). Hence, only MMR from family, marital attitudes, and romantic relationship status were included in the regression analyses.

A stepwise linear regression model was estimated with the probability of F for entry set at the .05 significance level and the probability of F for removal set at the .10 significance level. With these criteria, only marital attitudes ($\beta = .36, p < .001$) and romantic relationship status ($\beta = -.13, p = .040$) entered the regression equation; MMR from family was nonsignificant ($\beta = .12, p = .086$). Results of the model summary ($F = 19.30, p < .001$) revealed that 15.7% of the observed variability in RSE scores was explained by marital attitudes and romantic relationship status, with marital attitudes accounting for the majority of the variance (13.9% out of the 15.7%).

Research Question 3

A series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were computed to examine within-group differences. MMR from family, MMR from friends, MMR from the mass media, MMR from other organizations, total MMR, marital attitudes, and RSE served as the dependent variables, whereas gender, ethnicity, age, family-of-origin marital status, romantic relationship status, and family-of-origin conflict were set as the independent variables. Only two of these independent variables were not two-group categorical in nature, necessitating additional grouping procedures prior to running the desired analyses. Specifically, family-of-origin conflict was a trichotomous variable with response choices being high, moderate, and low conflict. Given the small number of high-conflict responses, we chose to combine the high-conflict ($n = 24$) and moderate-conflict ($n = 82$) responses into one group. This was done after a comparison of the data in both the moderate-conflict and high-conflict groups suggested similar response patterns, suggesting that individuals who endorsed any conflict other than low shared similar characteristics. Thus, the variable was split into high/moderate conflict ($n = 106$) and low conflict ($n = 102$). For the age variable, we approximated the lower and upper quartiles to ensure that we would have some developmental differentiation among participants. This resulted in two groups of relatively equal size: 18- and 19-year-olds ($n = 77$) and 22- to 25-year-olds ($n = 51$). For the ethnicity groups, only Caucasian and African American participant scores were included. Although this excluded a small percentage (6.2%, $n = 13$) of participants who endorsed different ethnicities, it was determined that exclusion was more appropriate than grouping all minority respondents together or having drastically uneven groups (which is problematic for ANOVA analyses). The results are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Statistically Significant ANOVA Results: Marital Messages Received, Marital Attitudes, and Romantic Relationship Self-Efficacy by Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Within Group		
	F	p	η ²
Gender (Men vs. Women)			
Marital messages received			
Friends	12.48**	.001	.057
Other organizations	4.44*	.036	.021
Total	5.90*	.016	.028
Marital attitudes	12.84**	.000	.058
Ethnicity (Caucasian vs. African American)			
Marital messages received			
Friends	14.22**	.000	.068
Other organizations	11.95**	.001	.058
Total	12.90**	.000	.062
Marital attitudes	7.74**	.006	.038
Age (Lower vs. Upper Quartile)			
Marital messages received			
Family	5.24*	.024	.040
Other organizations	8.45**	.004	.063
Total	5.15*	.025	.039
Marital attitudes	11.84**	.001	.086
Family-of-Origin Marital Status (Intact vs. Other)			
Marital messages received			
Family	31.74**	.000	.134
Total	11.01**	.001	.051
Current Romantic Relationship (Yes vs. No)			
Relationship self-efficacy	6.37*	.012	.030
Family-of-Origin Conflict Level (High/Moderate vs. Low)			
Marital messages received			
Family	36.28**	.000	.150
Total	9.79**	.002	.046
Marital attitudes	7.91**	.005	.037

Note. Regarding interpretation of effect size (η²), small = .010, medium = .060, and large = .150 (Cohen, 1988). ANOVA = analysis of variance.
 *p < .05. **p < .01.

Statistically significant differences were identified for gender. More specifically, women scored higher in MMR from friends (women: *M* = 80.55, *SD* = 16.07; men: *M* = 72.27, *SD* = 17.58), MMR from other organizations (women: *M* = 82.12, *SD* = 14.74; men: *M* = 77.77, *SD* = 16.80), and total MMR (women: *M* = 77.52, *SD* = 9.84; men: *M* = 74.08, *SD* = 10.43) and had higher mean scores in marital attitudes compared with men (women: *M* = 77.26, *SD* = 7.16; men: *M* = 73.20, *SD* = 8.85). Differences between Caucasian and African American participants were found for three of the five MMR scores, with Caucasians scoring

higher than African Americans in MMR from friends (Caucasians: $M = 81.18$, $SD = 15.81$; African Americans: $M = 72.23$, $SD = 17.50$), MMR from other organizations (Caucasians: $M = 84.05$, $SD = 13.59$; African Americans: $M = 76.75$, $SD = 17.09$), and total MMR (Caucasians: $M = 78.52$, $SD = 10.31$; African Americans: $M = 73.47$, $SD = 9.31$). Caucasians also scored higher in marital attitudes (Caucasians: $M = 77.36$, $SD = 8.15$; African Americans: $M = 74.11$, $SD = 7.77$). A similar pattern of differences occurred for age groups, with younger students scoring higher than older students in MMR from family (younger students: $M = 88.50$, $SD = 12.97$; older students: $M = 82.40$, $SD = 17.11$), MMR from other organizations (younger students: $M = 83.24$, $SD = 14.21$; older students: $M = 75.29$, $SD = 16.47$), total MMR (younger students: $M = 78.04$, $SD = 10.85$; older students: $M = 73.62$, $SD = 10.67$), and marital attitudes (younger students: $M = 77.24$, $SD = 8.16$; older students: $M = 72.36$, $SD = 7.36$).

Only two statistically significant differences were identified by family-of-origin marital status. Individuals from intact families had higher mean scores than did those from divorced/other family types in MMR from family (intact families: $M = 89.28$, $SD = 11.70$; divorced/other families: $M = 77.39$, $SD = 18.53$) and total MMR (intact families: $M = 77.93$, $SD = 10.13$; divorced/other families: $M = 73.24$, $SD = 9.76$). Only one significant difference was found by romantic relationship status, with currently dating students scoring higher than nondating students in RSE (dating students: $M = 83.80$, $SD = 10.30$; nondating students: $M = 79.84$, $SD = 12.89$). Family-of-origin conflict differences were found for two of the five MMR scores, with students from lower conflict families scoring higher (more positively) than students from higher conflict families in MMR from family (lower conflict families: $M = 90.95$, $SD = 11.34$; higher conflict families: $M = 78.62$, $SD = 17.17$) and total MMR (lower conflict families: $M = 78.36$, $SD = 9.73$; higher conflict families: $M = 74.03$, $SD = 10.19$) and also in marital attitudes (lower conflict families: $M = 77.21$, $SD = 8.03$; higher conflict families: $M = 74.22$, $SD = 7.83$).

DISCUSSION

This study was undertaken to examine relationships among MMR, marital attitudes, and RSE among undergraduates. Correlations among these variables were primarily positive and statistically significant, although effect sizes were low. Marital attitudes explained approximately 14% of the variance in relationship self-efficacy. Significant within-group variation was evident, with women, Caucasians, and younger participants scoring higher in MMR and marital attitudes with varying effect sizes ranging from small to moderately high. We believe that these results have potential implications for counselors when they address the relationship development needs of undergraduates in general, as well as when they focus on the specialized needs of students who may be at greater risk for difficulties in the area of developing effective romantic relationships.

MMR, Marital Attitudes, and RSE

On the basis of our findings, it is evident that the three variables of interest involved in romantic relationships (i.e., MMR, marital attitudes, and RSE) are related to one another. However, the overall strength of these relationships was not as strong as hypothesized, as evidenced by the low effect sizes in the correlation results and low percentage (14%) of predicted variability found in the regression. It seems that students who receive positive marital messages from their families feel positively about marriage and have confidence in their ability to form and maintain romantic relationships, whereas those students who received negative messages feel more negative about marriage and have lower confidence in their relationship abilities. Of course, the reverse may also be true. Given the relationships among these romantic relationship variables, counselors are advised to consider assessing MMR and RSE with students who present with relationship issues. These are not necessarily areas that are standard during an intake or the course of therapy, but they may provide helpful avenues for treatment planning. For example, results showing a relationship between MMR from nonfamily sources (e.g., friends, other organizations) and marital attitudes are encouraging. The possibility of these additional, nonfamily influences provides support for the development of psychoeducational and counseling interventions to help young adults achieve more positive attitudes and expectations about marriage.

Differences in MMR, Marital Attitudes, and RSE by Demographics

The most clinically significant findings in the present study involve demographic differences among the variables, several of which yielded moderately large effect sizes. The finding that women scored significantly higher than men did on several of the study's measures is consistent with previous research in which female students have demonstrated more positive marital attitudes compared with male students (Klein, 2006). Perhaps because the majority of college friendships are same gender, women are exposed to individuals who feel more positively about marriage (i.e., other women) and are most likely to convey positive marital messages. The gender differences are especially relevant when working with heterosexual students (the population studied) regarding romantic relationship issues; our results suggest a high likelihood that a man and a woman involved in a relationship might not share similar marital attitudes. It would be beneficial for counselors to assess for potential issues concerning marital attitude differences within heterosexual young adult couples.

The pattern of higher scores for Caucasian participants was somewhat unexpected given previous research (e.g., Browning & Miller, 1999). Moderate effect sizes for MMR from friends, MMR from other organizations, and total MMR suggest that there is some clinical significance in these areas. It is not clear why African American participants perceived more negative MMR in these areas; however, given the pattern, intervention programs that include outreach

with African American students to directly address issues of marital attitudes and expectations may be most beneficial if peers are involved, perhaps through group counseling, or if organizations serving African Americans are the focal point for outreach and recruitment.

Somewhat surprisingly, younger students scored higher than older students on several measures in this study; however, only the differences in MMR from other organizations and marital attitudes reached the moderate effect size level. One possible explanation here is greater societal or familial pressure for older students to marry in comparison with younger students. Because none of the participants were ever married, they may be receiving covert or overt pressure from family members and societal organizations (e.g., religious institutions, government agencies) regarding marriage. It may be that such pressure has a negative effect on their attitudes toward marriage, thus accounting for the lower scores. Likewise, internalized pressure to marry could negatively affect attitudes and account for the moderate effect size in this area. These are only suppositions and warrant further empirical examination (as do the current findings regarding all demographic differences). Therefore, future research exploring the social pressure traditional-age undergraduates feel to marry, as well as the marital messages they received from various sources, is needed.

The findings that individuals from intact families and those who reported greater levels of family conflict had higher mean scores than did those from divorced/other family types and lower conflict families in MMR from family provide support for the process of intergenerational transmission. These differences accounted for the largest effect sizes in the study, suggesting that there are significant clinical differences, with students picking up on the positive or negative aspects of home life (e.g., divorce, conflict) through MMR from family. However, the present study suggests that individuals do not necessarily internalize familial divorce or conflict to the point of it affecting their own confidence in romantic relationships. Further research is needed to verify or refute the current findings. In particular, studies involving MMR, marital attitudes, and RSE, along with psychological hardiness, might produce results allowing insight into which factors help some students from nonintact or high-conflict families develop positive marital attitudes and RSE in the face of negative MMR from family.

Only one statistically significant difference was found for the variable romantic relationship status, with currently dating students scoring higher than nondating students in RSE. These results support the idea that students who are dating feel more confident about their abilities to establish and maintain romantic relationships. Also of interest is the lack of any statistically significant differences in MMR. One might think that students involved in romantic relationships would be more apt to receive or perceive positive MMR from various sources (e.g., “You two should get married some day, you make a great couple”). However, it seems that this is not the case and that MMR remained consistent regardless of participants’ romantic relationship status.

LIMITATIONS

A number of potential limitations should be considered in interpreting the results of this study. First, many of our findings, although statistically significant, reached only a low or moderate effect size level. This indicates that the clinical relevance of those differences may be minimal, thereby diminishing the potential counseling impact of some findings. Readers are encouraged to note and use our reported effect sizes when making judgments regarding the clinical impact of our findings. Second, generalizability is limited by the sample, which consisted of only heterosexual, never-married college students from a specific geographic location. Third, instruments with high reliability and validity were selected to minimize measurement errors; however, such errors may always be present, and errors inherent in self-report data must always be considered. In addition, both the MMS and the MAS use the term *marriage* throughout the instruments. In the states where the research was conducted, *marriage* is legally defined as a heterosexual-only institution, which may have affected the way students responded to this question. Last, the level of family-of-origin conflict was assessed using only a single global item on the demographic form rather than a separate instrument or series of questions. Therefore, the construct validity of this variable is not as strong as it would be with the use of a more robust assessment tool.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The findings from this study also have implications for future research. This study was the first to operationalize the MMR variable. Therefore, the research questions were primarily exploratory in nature, and future research is needed to confirm the findings, preferably with a more demographically varied sample of student and nonstudent young adults (e.g., geography, educational status, ethnic background). Similarly, it will be necessary for the newly created MMS to be administered to a wider, more variable group of individuals to gauge its utility across populations.

The present sample was limited to heterosexual and never-married students. However, as the frequency of same-gender unions and same-gender marriages rises, a need for studies examining the messages lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals receive regarding marriage and life partnerships is arising. Studies with students who have divorced may also provide valuable information to guide these undergraduates in developing more successful committed relationships in the future. In addition, studies using the current variables with non-traditional-age college students as well as adults who are not college students or graduate students (both single and married, in happy marriages and nonsatisfying marriages) could shed additional light on the meaning of the variables and the importance of examining—and perhaps challenging—MMR and marital attitudes over the life span.

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