ABSTRACT

“THIS ISN’T A FAIRY TALE”: AN EXPLORATION OF MARITAL EXPECTATIONS AND COPING AMONG MARRIED WOMEN

By Kandice Faubert

Holding unrealistic expectations is a significant risk factor for marital distress and divorce. Further exploration concerning these unrealistic expectations will provide greater understanding of which marital expectations are detrimental and how married individuals cope when their expectations go unfulfilled. Participants were 10 married women who had never been divorced or separated. In-depth interviews were used to explore participants’ descriptions of marital expectations, what expectations they identified as harmful and helpful and the ways they handled unmet marital expectations. An inductive approach to data analysis was employed. Data analysis resulted in the identification of multiple themes: Everything Happy, A Companion for Life, You Are Never Going to Have Perfection, Understanding We’re Normal, Expect to Work through it: Adjusting and Accepting, and Staying Connected through Communication. These findings demonstrate that initial marital expectations can be adapted to become more realistic through communication, acceptance, and willingness to adjust one’s marital expectations.
“THIS ISN’T A FAIRY TALE”: AN EXPLORATION OF MARITAL EXPECTATIONS AND COPING AMONG MARRIED WOMEN

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DEDICATION

It is with great joy and happiness that I dedicate this work to my companion for life and husband, Chad. You have been a constant support and help during this journey and for that I am ever grateful. You have never ceased to amaze me with your patience and devotion both to me and to our marriage. May we continue to mature as a couple and grow in love for one other. Thank you and I love you dearly.

I would also like to dedicate this work to all the couples who aspire and are working towards building a strong and successful marriage. To all of you, who are committed to learning to love and to be the best spouse you can be and serve as examples to all of us that a great marriage is possible and worth fighting for—it is to you that I give my utmost respect and express my deepest gratitude. Thank you!
I would like to express my appreciation to everyone that helped me with this project whether it was giving me an encouraging word, proofreading a manuscript, or participating in an interview. I needed it all and am very appreciative to everyone that played a part in my success. I did not accomplish any of this on my own. I would like to thank a few people specifically that had a part in this research. I would first like to thank the Lord, who teaches me to profit and has helped me through it all. I could not have done it but only by His strength and Spirit working in me. I would also like to thank and express my deepest thanks to Dr. Elise Radina, who was more than wonderful during this entire process. Her patience, wisdom, friendship, and experience were invaluable to me, and I want to thank her for serving as my chair. I could not have asked for better! In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Hennon and Dr. Kuvalanka for all their assistance and suggestions throughout this project. I would also like to express my gratitude to all the wonderful and inspiring women who shared part of their lives with me and were more than willing to tell their story. I am forever grateful to these women and hope that all their marriages will continue to grow in love and commitment. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends, who never stopped believing in me and continued to support me throughout my life and academic pursuits. I needed all of you--Thank you!
Introduction

It has been projected that 84% of men and women in the U.S. will marry at some point in their lives (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2004). Also, 93% of Americans report that having a happy marriage is one of their most important goals to achieve (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). At the same time, it is estimated that half of all first marriages will end in divorce (Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001), and one-fifth of those unions will do so within the first five years of marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). Second marriages have even greater divorcing rates with roughly 60% ending their marriage within the first five years (National Center for Health Statistics, 2002). Marital distress and divorce negatively affects adults, children, and the community (Gardiner, Giese, & Parrott, 2004), and the immediate and long-term personal and social consequences of divorce have been well documented in the literature (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2000; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wilson, 2005). Such research may be interpreted to suggest that divorce has been woven into the very fabric of American culture and continues to be a salient social problem (e.g., Hoffman & Duncan, 1988).

A growing area of research regarding marital divorce has involved identifying risk factors for divorce and incorporating skills for coping with these risk factors into the content of premarital and marital education (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995). At the same time, there has been increased advocacy for marriage preparation as a substantial measure for helping couples identify and potentially reduce risk factors associated with divorce (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Olson, 1983; Stahmann & Salts, 1993) and the important need for couples to participate in such educational services (McManus, 1993; Stahmann & Hiebert, 1997; Stanley, 1997). As Bruhm and Hill (2004) have argued, professionals need to “…help couples become better prepared for the overwhelming task of creating a happy, healthy, beneficial relationship” (p. 391). Thus, attention needs to be paid to assisting couples in starting their marriage with the skills they need to foster successful relationships.

The causes of marital distress continue to receive research attention. One of the more significant premarital factors contributing to divorce is unrealistic expectations that individuals bring with them into marriage (Larson, 1988; Laner & Russell, 1995; Sharp & Ganong, 2000).
Studies have demonstrated that what partners expect to receive from their relationships affects their assessments of those relationships (e.g., Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996; McNulty & Karney, 2002; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999). Research on unrealistically high marital expectations (e.g., Laner & Russell, 1995; Sharp & Ganong, 2000) suggests that the content of marriage preparation programming should be reality-focused with a special component on expectations (Risch, Riley, & Lawler, 2003), and how certain marital expectations can both negatively and positively impact couple relationships. Though there are programs available that address the negative effects of unrealistic beliefs on relationships (e.g., Preventive Relationship Enhancement Program; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994), there is insufficient research on how best to counsel and help couples modify and cope with their unrealistic beliefs (Larson, 1992).

With the need for improvement of coping with marital distress and reducing risk factors for divorce, it is appropriate to gain such understanding for use by marriage and family professionals. Such knowledge could be utilized to enhance preparatory education for those who are getting ready to marry. The present study is designed to further enhance marriage preparation and education by identifying helpful and harmful expectations. Moreover, the current study expands the literature on marital expectations, its effects on marriage quality, and also explores ways of coping with disappointment and disillusionment in marriage among married women.

**Literature Review**

Before individuals marry, they create ideas of what married life is suppose to be like and expectations for what they desire to receive from their marriage (Barich & Bielby, 1996). Individuals, particularly engaged couples, often hold distorted images of intimate relationships and have overly idealistic beliefs about marriage (Bonds-Raacke, Bearden, Carriere, Anderson, & Nicks, 2001; Larson, 1992; Larson & Holman, 1994). For example, couples will often approach marriage with the unrealistic belief that marriage will meet all of their needs including social, financial, sexual, and emotional, and will most of all, bring them happiness (Crooks & Baue, 1996). Multiple studies have demonstrated that young adults hold unrealistic beliefs about what comprises a normal, healthy marriage (e.g., expecting mind-reading and seeing conflicts as a relationship threat), and that such expectations lead to lack of fulfillment and disillusionment, and reduce levels of intimate relational satisfaction (Barich & Bielby 1996; Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Kurdek 1991, 1993; Larson 1992; Larson & Holman, 1994).
Marital Expectations and Married Women

For example, Demo and Ganong (1994) argued that “one of the most insidious factors undermining marital satisfaction and longevity is that individuals enter into marriage with unrealistic and romanticized notions about marriage” (p. 199).

Research has shown that high and demanding expectations on the marital relationship are difficult to meet and when not met often result in unhappiness (McNulty & Karney, 2004). Indeed, such standards are harmful to marital relationships because not only are they unrealistic but impossible to maintain (Wright, Simmons, & Campbell, 2007). Moreover, unrealistic beliefs have been positively associated with marital distress (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Eidelson, 1981), and negatively linked with motivation to sustain the relationship (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). Therefore, the more unrealistic one’s beliefs and expectations are concerning marriage, the more likely one is to become disappointed, disillusioned, and even distressed once married (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981).

Love and Romance as Prerequisites for Marriage

Multiple factors may contribute to the fostering of unrealistic martial beliefs. Most individuals do not receive formal training on, or engage in careful examination of, how to develop realistic expectations and beliefs about marriage. Instead, people learn what to expect by observing marriages (Baucom & Epstein, 1990; McDonald, 1981), being exposed to media images of intimate relationships that promote the “happily ever after” schema (Segrin & Nabi, 2002), and through the transference of cultural values and norms such as the need for love and romance in marriage (Sharp & Ganong, 2000).

Love is considered vital for marriage in America (Barich & Bielby, 1996; Simpson, Campbell, & Berschied, 1986) and is still regarded as one of the primary reasons for marriage (Sprecher et al., 1994). According to Barich and Bielby (1996), love and affection were identified as the most important elements of marriage and the primary expectation for a potential marriage. However, some individuals seem to hold extreme beliefs about love such as: idealization of the relationship and the partner, love conquers all, and love at first sight (Sharp & Ganong, 2000). Individuals who embrace such beliefs tend to later experience disillusionment and disappointment in marriage (Huston, Niehuis, & Smith, 1997) because any decrease in romantic love during the beginning of marriage could be perceived as a threat to the stability of the relationship. Empirical evidence has shown that declines in romantic love and affectionate behavior begin shortly following the wedding, with the most salient decrease occurring during
the first year of marriage (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986). As a result, researchers caution individuals to not have unrealistically, high romantic ideals due to the negative consequences that can follow such as marital conflict and divorce (Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Glenn, 1991; Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001).

Disillusionment in Marriage

Oftentimes individuals set themselves up for great disappointment by idealizing their partner and marriage. However, by idealizing one’s partner and focusing on the good as opposed to the shortcomings of their partner (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986; Miller, 1997; Murray & Holmes, 1993), individuals may actually find themselves falling in love with their own created image of who they want their partner to be and not who the person actual is in reality (Brehm, 1992). Kayser (1993) discovered this phenomenon following interviews with husbands and wives who believed that they had been disillusioned upon realizing that their partner did not match up to their “dreams, fantasies, and expectations prior to their marriage” (p. 32).

Disillusionment early in marriage has been found to lead to marital instability (Huston et al., 2001; Orbuch, Veroff, & Holmberg, 1993). In 1938, Waller was the first to contend that divorce may be a consequence of spouses’ disillusionment early in marriage. According to Waller, the period before marriage is a time when partners’ love and passion for each other is high and individuals place great emphasis on impression management in order to maintain the image they believe their partner holds of them. However, as interdependence and intimacy increases, partners become less motivated to engage in impression management and thus, the illusions about one’s partner are more challenging to sustain (Murray & Holmes, 1994; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). As a result, those who start their marriage with overly idealized images of their partner and the relationship may be more prone to experience a more acute disillusionment process than those who enter marriage with less idealized perceptions. Consequently, the relationship begins to erode; problems once overlooked now surface, leading couples down a path of disillusionment and, potentially, divorce.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interaction focuses on the symbolic (or interpretive) world that is shaped by people’s interaction with their environment (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959), the connection between symbols (i.e., shared meanings) and interactions (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). In particular, symbolic interaction can be used to guide the exploration of how individuals assign
meanings and values to the society and social world they live in (Blumer, 1969). According to this perspective, individuals are social beings that are continuously and actively involved in an interactive and dynamic process of reality construction by assigning meanings to situations and things in their social world (Knauff, 2006); thus situations and experiences are assigned meaning only through individuals’ interpretations and definitions. Meaning is a significant aspect of human behavior and is created in the process of interacting with others (Blumer, 1969). Individuals respond to something in their environment according to the meaning they have assigned to it. Therefore, as people interact with others, they come into contact with various and differing meanings and experiences, and through the interaction, they interpret what is being learned.

How individuals come to understand meaning is through social interaction with others. People are influenced by society and are socialized (e.g., the process by which one learns the symbols, beliefs, and attitudes of one’s culture) to learn the rules and values of society, to adopt a set of social norms or societal expectations about how one should or should not behave, and thus social roles are established that serve as unconscious guidelines for behavior (Blumer, 1969; White & Klein, 2002). However, roles, and the culture of which they are connected, are not fixed, but can change over time (Goffman, 1959; as cited by LaRossa & Reites, 1993). Individuals are able to both adjust meanings and create new meanings to bring about changes in their environment (Knauff, 2006).

Marriage is based on meaning. Specifically, the meaning a couple gives to their marital relationship, to themselves, to their roles, to the things they do and talk about, to how they relate, to their past experiences, and/or to their future. Meanings, however, are negotiated by the couple through their interactions with each other and the social world. Therefore, the present study uses symbolic interaction as a guide in order to explore participants’ initial definitions of marriage (i.e., ideas and expectations), their previous experiences, and the ways they have been socialized that might have an influence on their expectations for marriage, and the meaning of marriage for them, which include the expected roles of husband and wife. In order to explore these issues, this study involves interviewing women who have been married for varying lengths of time. This will help provide insight into how participants have redefined their meaning and interpretation of marriage and adjusted the roles of husband and wife over time.
Marital Expectations and Married Women

Statement of Research Problem

Marital adjustments, satisfaction, and perception of marital difficulties are more clearly understood when one takes into consideration the interplay between spouses’ perceptions and expectations in marriage (Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & Lee, 2005). With such empirical evidence, it appears advantageous to help individuals adjust their beliefs about love and romance in marriage in order to prevent decreases in relational satisfaction (Sabatelli, 1988; Sharp & Ganong, 2000). Knowledge of and understanding about what married individuals perceive as problematic expectations and beliefs may help other couples who are preparing for marriage by providing them opportunities to learn and discuss these issues before marriage. Although more premarital programs have begun to include a component of exploring expectations with couples, there is still a need to help couples more effectively identify and explore their marital expectations and more importantly, know how to modify their expectations so as to make them more realistic and rational (Larson, 1992). Therefore, it is critical to equip couples with the skills and education necessary to explore expectations and beliefs, and how those expectations can be adapted in order to attain marital success, prevent disappointment, distress, and potential risk factors for divorce.

According to the research literature mentioned previously, the content of premarital and marriage education should include identifying marriage expectations and beliefs to help couples experience a more satisfying relationship, and to help reduce risk factors for divorce. Thus, this study explored such expectations in order to provide empirical data upon which such programs may be based. The overall purpose of this study was therefore two-fold. The first was to describe and identify the expectations and beliefs that married women specifically believed to be helpful and harmful to marital quality and stability. This study focuses on the perspectives of married women because women have been found to have more unrealistic expectations of marriage than men, and that their failure to realize these unrealistic expectations causes them to have lower levels of marital satisfaction (Atchley 1992). The second purpose of this study was to describe how married women successfully coped when their marital expectations and beliefs were not met. Since most studies surrounding this topic have been conducted through quantitative means, this study employed a qualitative approach in order to gain a rich, detailed description about marital expectations and beliefs among married women that may not be well captured using quantitative methods. The research questions that directed this study are as follows:
RQ 1: What expectations do married women bring into marriage?
RQ 2: What expectations and beliefs do married women believe are the most helpful and most harmful to marriage?
RQ 3: How do married women cope when initial marital expectations and beliefs are not met?

The findings of the present study could be used to not only expand research on marital expectations but to enhance the curriculum on expectations in current premarital education programs available by helping couples better explore their expectations, create awareness for specific expectations that are considered harmful to marital success, and provide ways of successful coping when expectations are not met.

Methods

Sample Selection and Recruitment

This study utilized purposive sampling to recruit 10 married women from southwestern Ohio. All participants met the selection criteria for the study by being in their first marriage, currently residing with their spouse, and not considering separation or divorce. In recruiting participants, the researcher chose to include diverse marriage lengths among participants in order to enhance the richness of the data and to provide varying perspectives on ways in which married women coped with changes in marital expectations over time. Research has shown that marital satisfaction begins to decline following the first year of marriage (Kurdek, 1999). Thus, in order to participate, individuals also needed to be married at least one year. Similarly, the researcher determined that all participants needed to have been married for no longer than 35 years of marriage. This criterion was identified as a reasonable parameter because the researcher was mindful of the retrospective nature of this study and that the recounting and sharing of memories and feelings of years past could be difficult for participants to discuss in detail and recall with ease.

Participants were recruited for face-to-face interviews using posted flyers and snowball sampling. Information regarding the study was disseminated by obtaining permission to post flyers (Appendix A) at a church, an elementary school, and a university campus. Recruitment of participants occurred by snowball sampling (i.e., referrals from other participants in the study and by word of mouth). In order to ensure that all participants met the criterion, they were asked to undergo a simple screening process via phone, e-mail, or in person before being invited to complete the face-to-face interview. Screening comprised of a short survey that assessed the
participant’s current marital status, any past marital relationships, and if the participant was considering or in the process of divorce or currently separated from their spouse (Appendix B).

Participants

Nine of the participants were Caucasian and one was African American. Participants ranged in age from 24-49 years ($M=37.2$ years, $SD=8.59$). Eight of the participants had children ($M=2.75$ children, $SD=0.89$) and two had no children. The participants were fairly well educated with all having completed a high school education, two holding a master’s degree, three having a bachelor’s degree, and one having two associate degrees. Eight of the ten participants were employed outside the home with five holding a full-time position and three with a part-time position. Two participants described themselves as full-time homemakers. The length of participants’ marriages ranged from 6-32 years ($M=15.1$ years of marriage, $SD=8.76$).

Procedures

Since both the exploration of marital expectations and its impact on marital quality and stability is a new concentration of research, this study employed an exploratory methodological approach. This served to provide the rich and in-depth data that has been lacking in previous studies. Further, a qualitative research design allowed for greater understanding of marital expectations by giving participates the opportunity to be more expressive in their responses than by answering closed-ended questions typical of a survey or questionnaire. As other researchers have discovered, interview-based qualitative designs provide “windows” (Daly, 1992, p. 4) into insights and meanings that are not easily obtained through the use of other approaches (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992).

All participants took part in a one time, face-to-face interview (Appendix C). All interviews were semi-structured and open-ended in design to obtain information about the marital expectations and beliefs that married women believed and experienced to be harmful to marital stability and quality. In addition, the interviews also served to help describe and identify the ways in which the participants have learned to cope and adjust when initial expectations were not met as well as positive expectations that were identified as helpful to attain marital success and stability. Exploring these positive expectations was considered advantageous to understand in order to not only become aware of which expectations can be threatening to marital happiness,
but also which ones were considered beneficial to promote marital happiness and stability. By conducting interviews, the ability to assess the perspectives of the individuals interviewed was made available, and thus allowed the researcher to have a greater understanding of the participants’ views and experiences (Patton, 1980).

All participants were interviewed by the researcher. Interviews were digitally recorded, typically lasted between 60 and 80 minutes and were transcribed by the researcher. The interviews were guided by a series of questions (Appendix C) designed to help answer the proposed research questions. For example, some of these questions were: What did you imagine marriage to be like before you were married? What did you expect to gain from marriage? What have you found helpful in handling disappointments in marriage? Prior to the interview, all participants were sent a copy of the interview guide via e-mail in order to give them ample time to reflect on their experiences and prepare to share their answers with the researcher. All participants granted their permission to be audio recorded. Interviews took place either in a mutually agreed upon location or over the phone. Choice of location was based upon convenience for the participants and matters of privacy.

Protection of Study Participants

In order to protect participants, all information was kept confidential; no names or identifying information was used in any of the research, and all data gathered from participants were identified by pseudonyms in the field notes, transcriptions, and presentation of findings. Participants were informed of the study’s purpose as well as potential risks and benefits prior to the interview process. Participants’ signed consent forms (Appendix D) demonstrated their agreement to participation in the research. All data collected were stored in the privacy of the researcher’s home, and all computer files were password protected.

The Researcher

The author’s interpretation of the data was influenced by personal and academic experiences. The author is currently a graduate student in family studies and is a Certified Family Life Educator, with a special interest in teaching premarital education and marriage enrichment programs to couples. In addition, the author has recently become married and her experiences as a newlywed have enhanced her interest in the topic of marital expectations.
Therefore, the author recognized that both her experiences as a married woman and her education served to guide her as the researcher through data collection and analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Once transcribed by the researcher, the data underwent a two-stage analysis process based upon the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first stage of analysis consisted of examining all transcribed interviews and employing open coding. Specifically, this process involved repeated reading of all interviews and identification of preliminary themes (i.e., one must communicate to their partner when they are disappointed). The second stage consisted of focused coding while using the constant comparative method. This research methodology is compromised of refining codes through an ongoing comparison of specific units of analysis from one component of data or transcript to another whether in the same set of data or in another set (i.e., married women initially expected marriage to make them happy). This type of coding assisted in expanding and contracting themes by identifying more abstract codes under which the open codes were included. The emerging themes and sub-themes were continually compared until the researcher determined that conceptual saturation had occurred. This occurs when all possible themes have been identified from the data and there are no new findings (Emerson, Fretts, & Shaw, 1995).

**Ensuring Study Rigor**

Steps were taken to ensure rigor in both the methodology and analysis of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morrow, 2005). For example, Dr. Elise Radina, who served as the researcher’s thesis chair and has expertise in qualitative methods, reviewed the data, coding schemes, and field notes. Dr. Radina also offered feedback and her level of agreement with all themes and sub-themes that were found in the data. Dependability (i.e., internal reliability) in the current study was addressed by the researcher’s acknowledgement of being the research instrument and a recently married woman. The researcher was careful when interviewing participants that she was not influencing their responses by attempting to have the participants validate her experiences and perspective as a married woman during the interview. Thus, the researcher maintained a professional demeanor and remained emotionally distant while interviewing in order to prevent the interview from becoming two women talking about their marriages and sharing stories. The researcher also maintained an audit trail (in the form of field reflections, data analysis
summaries, and interview notes) throughout the duration of the study by keeping records of procedures, reflections, and potential biases influencing the findings generated from the data. This audit trail also served as a basis to provide thick description of the study procedures so as to ensure the applicability of the research findings.

Results

Data analysis resulted in the identification of multiple themes. For the first research question, What expectations do married women bring into marriage? two major themes emerged: (a) Everything Happy and (b) A Companion for Life. The second research question, What expectations and beliefs do married women believe are the most helpful and most harmful to marriage? had one predominate theme, You Are Never Going to Have Perfection. The final research question, How do married women cope when initial marital expectations and beliefs are not met? had three major themes: (a) Understanding We’re Normal, (b) Expect to Work through it: Adjusting and Accepting, and (c) Staying Connected through Communication. These themes will be explored in the following paragraphs.

Everything Happy

The first theme, Everything Happy, is related to the unrealistic expectation that married women believed marriage would bring them happiness and that they envisioned life would be wonderful once married. This expectation was identified and described by the participants as an unrealistic expectation. Of the ten participants, seven mentioned specifically that they expected to be happy and even believed life to become somewhat ideal after they married their partner—that they would live “happily ever-after.” The participants described their expectations of marriage as bringing them this sense of happiness because marriage would enhance their lives and bring them love and romance, as one woman describes:

“I thought marriage was going to be everything happy, everything great…happily in love…that we were gonna do better at our jobs and have this wonderful, happy little family and everything perfect… someone that…just for nothing buy me a rose…just the typical romantic life…” (Lisa; married six years)

Another participant with a very similar expectation explained how she perceived marriage would bring happiness and harmony and that she did not expect to have problems or conflicts in her marriage:
“I envisioned it would be happy, loving, and full of romance… little turmoil… I wouldn’t say that I expected life to be perfect per se… but I expected it to be full of love, full of affection… not a lot of arguing and fighting… just a lot of peace… and time to be with each other” (Sarah; married 9 years)

One participant even imagined a fairy-tale like marriage where life would be perfect; she would never feel alone again, her husband would always love her, and that they would always be in agreement:

“… your typical knight in shining armor… life’s going to be grand… be with the one who loves you unconditionally… till forever… never to feel lonely again… have someone to share the exact same dreams and goals and feelings that you do… I just think maybe [my] best friend always through everything.” (Heather; married 13 years)

A Companion for Life

The other theme, A Companion for Life, involved how participants expected marriage to provide them companionship with their partner. This expectation in particular was very significant for every participant in the study, for they all expressed this same hope from being married. The participants described the importance of having someone always there to experience and share life with them once married. This primary expectation of marriage the participants described was that marriage would provide them a constant someone in their lives, someone who would support and care for them, and who would always be there for them when they needed to talk or confide in someone, as expressed in the following responses:

“Having a companion for life… that person would be your ground, your rock… someone to lean on but also someone to push you on… when you want to hit a goal or if you want to do better in something… just someone to be there… always be there for me whenever I needed someone to talk to or someone to confide in… someone that is always going to show love and respect… someone to always show that they care for me…” (Lisa; married 6 years)

“Have somebody… you’d always have a companion—a constant companion, someone to talk to about anything, everything… someone who would always be there…
companionship—someone to be there, to do things with me...” (Kimberly; married 10 years)

“...Just having that friend, that companion, that supporter someone that you would support and someone that would support you as well...you knew that that wasn’t going to go away once you say, “I do” it’s like we are in this together and from that just building a life and...building a family with one another...” (Diana; married 11 years)

Some even described companionship as taking on the form of a partnership and that as companions they would become a team as husband and wife and work together as a married couple, as the following responses of two women explain:

“I had always viewed it as a partnership...just kind of the idea of having that person there... just somebody there who could be there to assist, help you out, almost kind of like that person to go along with you in your situations...working together as a team... Just having that person there, who is thinking of you, will take the time to do the nice things for you, the compliments, the surprises...just kind of the little things... listening to me if I had difficulties, just having that person who could be the sound bite if I was having a stressful situation or even just the fact of someone staying interested, you know “How was your day? How are things going? What can I do to help?” (Amanda; married 6 years)

“We would be a team....husband and wife would kind of be a team working towards the same goal which is making a home and a family... your husband can be your companion. I could see the two of us getting old together ... your friend, we do things together...” (Barbra; married 25 years)

Unlike the previous marital expectation, *Everything Happy*, this expectation was not considered unrealistic among the participants, but was very reasonable and necessary for them to have going into marriage. In fact, most felt this particular expectation had been met and fulfilled by their spouse.
You are Never Going to Have Perfection

The theme, *You Are Never Going to Have Perfection*, describes how all ten participants emphasized the importance of not expecting perfection from your spouse or from marriage and that one must accept and expect that nothing will ever be perfect when going into marriage. As Diana, married eleven years, explains:

“I think when you are getting married you are kind of giddy and “Oh, I’m getting married!” and you think you are so ready and so prepared for every bit of life situation that’s going to occur...I loved him, he loved me...what more could you want?”

This response represented how many of the participants felt going into marriage—that life was going to be great and that they were in love. But now after being married for many years, the participants believed that the marital expectation that life will be perfect is very detrimental to both marital quality and stability.

Conversely, having the marital expectation of the complete opposite was considered most helpful. The participants expressed how important it is for individuals to not expect perfection but to understand that life is full of ups and downs, as described in the following responses:

“You are going to have your good days and bad days...you are going to have your days where things aren’t perfect...I think if you had a perfect marriage, something is wrong with your marriage...I really do. I think if every day is a happy day, if every day is a perfect day, there’s no...birds chirping and everything, wonderful and great—there is something wrong...because you are going to have your disagreements” (Lisa; married 6 years)

“Definitely have the expectation that you are not going to be perfect all the time, you are going to have good days and bad days...don’t expect to be perfect because it is not going to be perfect.” (Angela; married 17 years)

“I was probably guilty beforehand of kind of having like the romance...everything is going to be perfect you know not as many struggles...reality has to hit sometime I mean nothing is ever going to be perfect... if you expect that, then you can pretty much expect to be let down...you are going to have...the times where they drive you nuts because they said they’d do the dishes and you come home and they are not done or how many times
do you say it time and time again, ‘Will you please pick your socks up off the floor!’ but they are still there... you are never going to have perfection” (Amanda; 6 years)

Another participant, Kimberly, married ten years explained, “Expect there to be problems...”

Heather, who has been married for thirteen years, confessed how she believed that she and her husband would always be in agreement and that they would not have conflicts: “You don’t anticipate that you would disagree or clash ...in the dating process you have so much in common and that’s why you are dating and it changes when you get married....” As the participants have discovered in their marriages, no marriage will ever escape conflict or problems because no one is perfect and that there is no such thing as a perfect marriage as demonstrated in the following responses:

“We have to realize that the person we are marrying is human and mistakes will happen. Some people go into marriage expecting it to be perfect. I have yet to meet a married couple who can honestly say that their marriage is the perfect marriage...” (Sarah; married 9 years)

“[Don’t] expect your spouse to be perfect...because you are not perfect yourself or I am not perfect, I can’t expect that he would be perfect...you know he can’t meet all my needs nor can I meet his needs...I can’t expect that from him....cause somebody can’t do that for you—that is putting too much on another person.” (Barbra, married 25 years)

Finally, the participants also stressed that things change and that what one wants is not always what one gets because marriage is a work in progress and takes both time and effort on the part of the couple as Caroline, who has been married for twenty-two years, explains:

“You might expect that life is going to be one way and it turns out to be very different and I think that is why a lot of people have a lot of unhappiness in marriage because they go in with high expectations and they have this thing that it is going to be this fairy tale...and that it comes automatically and it doesn’t...it doesn’t, it is something you have to work at...it is something you have to be conscious of all the time..”

Understanding We’re Normal

The first theme regarding coping strategies for handling unfulfilled expectations, Understanding We’re normal, involved four participants’ reports of realizing that they were not...
the only couple that had problems in their marriage. With this understanding, participants took courage and even felt relieved to know that it was not unique only to their marriage, but common and normal, as one woman describes:

“It is not just us...cause I think that that is especially with some marriages in the beginning you have the difficulties and...that there is some who just think that ‘you know we must be the only ones who are having this difficulty like this.’ I see some of these other marriages out there working, what in the world is wrong with us? Why are we having these problems? But just being able to see the fact that I am not the only person who’s gone through this…” (Amanda; married 6 years)

Another participant shared how seeing her friends’ marriages succeeding even though they were not perfect encouraged her and helped her marriage:

“Friends... to see those friends and it is not that their marriages are perfect but we are able to see the imperfections and how they are able to get along and that has really helped us a lot…” (Heather; married 13 years)

**Expect to Work through it: Adjusting and Accepting**

The second theme for coping strategies, *Expect to Work through It: Adjusting and Accepting*, related to how participants, particularly those who had been married for longer than ten years, believed they handled disappointments in marriage was that they had to learn to accept the disappointments and to accept their spouse for who they were as a person. Participants also expressed how they had to be willing to make adjustments concerning their marital expectations and to be committed to working through the disappointments and the conflicts with their spouse as Kimberly, explains:

“We made a pact that we would...always work things through and we have stuck to that...we have always worked through it and we’ve always talked and he won’t let it go...because he really feels and he has said many a times ‘we are in this together forever and I love you deeply and we have to get through this’...a lot of people don’t think about...how to handle disappointments, confrontations, and that you have to be willing to give, give both ways, and somebody has to acknowledge we have to address this issue before we move on or admit that you have a different opinion about this and not be angry about it...”(married 10 years)
Another participant, Caroline, also described the importance of not only being willing to adjust one’s expectations of marriage, but also one’s expectations of their spouse:

“\[I\] think…acceptance…accepting that sometimes they are going to disappoint you… because they don’t meet your expectations…they don’t behave the way you expect them to behave... you have this idea of what your spouse is going to be like and if you come to the realization that they are not going to necessarily fit that mold and you are O.K. with that… you do have to accept that things aren’t always going to be—that your spouse is not always going to meet the expectation… you have to be conscious... of how you are going to accept things and their behavior and personality and everything that goes along with it...and I had to lower my expectations in some regard and I think to some point you do...if you are always one of these pie in the sky thinkers and you never adjust your expectations then you are going to live a life of frustration and regret...” (married 22 years).

The response above demonstrates how wives must be willing to adapt to their spouses and allow them to be themselves, and not necessarily what one is expecting them to be, in order to avoid marital distress and remorse. In addition, this also highlights the fact that this is a process for individuals to consciously experience in their marriage—of making necessary adjustments to one’s expectations and of understanding and accepting what is reasonable to expect from their spouse. Nine of the participants described this coping mechanism to be both helpful and essential when handling disappointments in marriage.

**Staying Connected through Communication**

The third and final theme for coping mechanisms, *Staying Connected through Communication*, involved participants’ descriptions of the imperative need to communicate with one’s spouse. Every woman interviewed expressed the same significance of learning how to communicate and share one’s feelings and disappointments with their spouse. The participants believed communication was a critical way of coping because it prevented escalation of conflict and greater marital distress, as the following response demonstrates:

“\[W\]e talk about...our disappointments...we talk it out, communicate it and try to talk it out, as to how do we resolve this? ... because if you don’t talk things out, all its going to do is build up in your mind or build up inside you and you end up exploding one day...or
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have a huge argument when if you would have talked about it in the beginning it wouldn’t have escalated to that level.” (Lisa; married 6 years)

Another woman, who has been married for ten years, describes how she could not overlook the disappoints in her marriage and not share it, but that she had to let her spouse know how she felt as a way of averting greater hurt as she explains:

“I can think of times when he did something and I just didn’t say anything, he didn’t know I was upset…and it just kind of ate away at me…until it blew up…when something happen[ed] and if he does something that disappointments or that I didn’t expect or that I can’t stop thinking about it for whatever reason—talk about it…don’t let it fester because that is the worst thing you could do.” (Kimberly)

Another woman with a similar sentiment to the above response contends that one must communicate to their spouse what they are feeling in order to let the spouse become aware and come to an understanding of what they are experiencing and by doing so, the spouse is then able to help:

“Things may not go as planned, it may be something that your spouse has done and you got hurt by the way he handled the situation or…something may happen and you may hit a bump in the road and you are just hurt, upset, or angry… stressed or whatever it may be because your spouse may not know how it affected you and if there is not communication there, you can’t expect them to be there for you if you are not communicating why you are feeling that way because they may not have an understanding, they may see things differently... “(Sarah; married 9 years)

All the participants explained how learning to communicate effectively and openly with their spouse was not easy at the beginning of their marriage, but that over time they have been able to learn as a couple, and that it has become both easier and an invaluable skill in their marriage, as one woman describes:

“We didn’t know at the very beginning... how to effectively communicate...then we had to learn...it is valuable—extremely valuable... it’s just been a day by day, month by month, year by year...it has just been gradual growth...of becoming really good communicators...” (Diana; married 11 years)
One participant expressed how communicating with her husband helped them as a couple learn how to negotiate their expectations and come together as a couple to resolve problems in their marriage:

“Talking about it... being able to be straight forward and its actually one of the best things I think of...being able to go to that person...and being able to learn how to negotiate when it comes to expectations. I mean it might not always work one hundred percent of the way you want it to but being able to find a solution that you can both agree on...” (Amanda; married six years)

Finally, one woman, who really struggled at the beginning of her marriage because she did not know how to openly and effectively communicate with her husband, after many years of working through disappointments and difficulties, had this to say about the importance of communication in marriage:

“You have got to talk about it... open communication...if you think of it like an air traffic controller...if he didn’t say anything and he just assumed the pilot would know what he was doing...well the pilot is going to crash...but if he is telling him, “O.K. you are going to take a right here, you are going to take a left here...” in my mind it is kind of like that. If you are talking about it...you are staying connected.” (Angela; married 17 years)

Discussion

As a result of the rates of marital distress and its negative consequences, scholars and professionals alike advocate for better preparation for marriage (Bruhn & Hill, 2004). Family professionals have examined potential causes of unsuccessful marriages (Larson & Holman, 1994) in order to enhance and increase the effectiveness of premarital and marriage education resources available. Unrealistic expectations have been found to be a significant contributor to divorce (Larson, 1988; Laner & Russell, 1995; Sharp & Ganong, 2000). The present study was designed to improve marriage education by identifying helpful and harmful marital expectations among married women and to explore ways they have learned to cope when handling disappointments in their marriage.

As a whole, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of understanding that marital expectations are not fixed but are in fact dynamic and thus can be adapted and altered with time and effort. By using symbolic interactionism, this study provided evidence that the
initial meaning of marriage and the expectations these women held going into marriage was able to be renegotiated and adjusted through interactions with their husbands through the duration of their marriage (Berger & Kellner, 1994). These married women shared how the original meaning they had assigned to marriage and the role of husband and wife was unrealistic and needed to change but that it was a gradually process over time. As they have continued to interact with their husband, they have worked towards achieving a shared meaning of marriage with their husband.

For the ten participants in this study, the initial expectation of marriage was that it would bring them happiness, which has been identified in past research as an unrealistic expectation people bring into marriage (Crooks & Baue, 1996). In addition, the participants also believed marriage would provide them with a companion for life in their spouse. When identifying harmful marital expectations, the participants explained the need to not expect perfection from one’s marriage or their spouse because it was considered detrimental to the marital quality and stability, as past research has demonstrated (Barich & Bielby 1996; Demo & Ganong, 1994; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Eidelson, 1981; Huston et al., 2001; Larson 1992; Larson & Holman, 1994). In contrast, the most helpful marital expectations identified were to expect to encounter hard times, imperfection, and difficulties in marriage. This was believed to be beneficial because it was more realistic in what to anticipate from married life. Finally, participants described three significant ways of coping with disappointments when marital expectations were left unfulfilled: realizing that it is normal to experience difficulties in marriage, being willing to adjust one’s expectations and to accept their partner for who they are, and learning to communicate one’s feelings and disappointments to their spouse.

The current findings support research-based of the ways unrealistic expectations can impact the marital relationship by demonstrating that individuals and women in particular go into marriage with the belief that it will automatically make their lives better and happier and when this does not happen they become disappointed and disillusioned leading to marital distress (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981; Huston, Niehuis, & Smith, 1997; Huston et al., 2001; Orbuch, Veroff, & Holmberg, 1993). However, this study also furthered our understanding of unrealistic expectations by identifying ways married individuals have learned to adjust their unrealistic expectations, which has been expressed by scholars as a real need in order to
effectively help couples (Larson, 1992; Sabatelli, 1988; Sharp & Ganong, 2000). According to this study, initial marital expectations and beliefs are able to be adapted through communication and willingness to adjustment one’s expectations as needed.

Implications for Practice

These findings may be used by family life educators and professionals working with couples in preparatory martial education, marriage enrichment, marital counseling and/or therapy. Specifically, this research demonstrates that though individuals may enter into marriage with unrealistic expectations, it is possible for them to learn how to redefine their meaning of marriage, to adjust their expectations in order to make them more reasonable, and to cope when disappointments are experienced in the marriage. As this study has shown, premarital programs should help couples not only explore and identify their martial expectations, but also equip them with ways of coping when martial expectations go unmet. In addition, premarital education should also teach couples how to adjust their expectations in order to make their expectations more rational.

Moreover, in order for couples to learn how to cope and adjust their expectations effectively, relationship programs must equip couples with positive communication skills, which as this study and others have found, is a quality of enduring marriages (Robinson & Blanton, 1993) and a skill that can be developed (Halford et al., 2003). Though communication skills have been a salient component of marriage preparation programs, it has not been utilized in such a way as a coping mechanism when handling disappointments in marriage. It is therefore recommended that couples learn specifically how to communicate their expectations, feelings, and disappointments to their spouse in non-hostile and detrimental ways, so as to avoid conflict escalation and potential martial distress. Further, couples must also be taught how to effectively resolve difficulties together in their marriage as they come, with a particular emphasis on adjusting martial expectations. As this study has shown, it is a skill that can be acquired and it is imperative for couples to be able to engage in positive communication when coping with disappointments in their marriage in order to sustain a healthy and long-lasting marriage.
Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As with all research, this study has limitations. The first being to establish the fact that the researcher recognizes that the results of this study are not divorce proofing, but an attempt to help other women and individuals by submitting ways of coping with disappointment in order to reduce the risk factors that have been associated with divorce (i.e., unrealistic expectations). In addition the small sample size, though suitable for a qualitative approach, is a limitation in that it hinders the generalizability of the results. In addition, the sample was homogeneous in that the majority of women were Caucasian with only one being African American. In regards to future research, studies should explore martial expectations and beliefs with a larger, more diverse sample of women in order to understand and consider the potential role of culture and ethnic background on martial expectations. Another limitation of the research was that it was retrospective; some of the participants had difficulty recalling past experiences and remembering what they were feeling or thinking when they were first married. Thus, it is recommended that future studies explore among newlywed couples of five years or less in order to achieve a better understanding of initial martial expectations. This study also only focused on the experiences and viewpoints of married women. Therefore, the exploration of martial expectations among married men would seem necessary for future research in order to see if there are differences in expectations and coping with disappointments among the genders, which could be useful when helping couples prepare for marriage. Finally, future studies should utilize a longitudinal approach when exploring martial expectations among couples as it would be helpful to study couples during the first years of marriage and to see how couples adjust their expectations over time.
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The National Marriage Project.


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Appendices

Appendix A

Attention all Married Women:
Do you wish had known some things before you got married?

- Are you currently married and have never been separated or divorced?
- Do you want to share what you have learned about marriage that you want others to know?

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Appendix B

Screening Survey

The following questionnaire is to serve the research study in making sure this study is right for you so as to not unnecessarily take up any one's time who is not appropriate for the study. The following questions are concerning your marital status, how long you have been married, and any past marital experience.

*Please circle your answer for the following question:*

1. At the present time, are you legally married to your partner? **YES** or **NO**

*Please specify by either months or years for the following question:*

2. How long have you been married? _________________

3. Have you ever been divorced? **YES** or **NO**

4. Are you currently separated? **YES** or **NO**

5. Are you considering divorce? **YES** or **NO**
Appendix C

Interview Guide

At the beginning, I am going to ask you a few questions concerning what you envisioned marriage would be like and what you expected from marriage.

1. What did you imagine marriage to be like before you were married? What were some of your expectations of married life?
   - What were some of your expectations of married life?
   - What did you envision it to be like?
   - What were you looking for from marriage/being married?
   - What did you hope to gain from being married?

2. What did you expect from your partner?
   - What did you want him to be like as a spouse?
   - Certain behaviors, interactions?

3. How did you learn what to expect from marriage or what is was suppose to be like?

4. Can you share with me about a time when you were disappointed with your marriage?

5. How did you handle your disappointment(s)?

6. What do you do when your expectation(s) are not met?

7. What have you found to helpful in handling disappointments in marriage? Why?
   - Can you share with me an example?

8. What have you found to be harmful in handling disappointments in marriage? Why?
   - Can you share with me an example?
Now I am going to ask you some questions about what you wish you would have known about marriage.

9. What do you think the implications are for having high expectations about marriage?

10. Looking back what do you wish you would have known about marriage before you were married?
   -What do you think could have helped you to become better prepared for marriage?

11. What are some ideas or expectations about marriage that you have found to be helpful and good to have going into marriage?

12. What do you consider to be some of the biggest adjustments or struggles that you have experienced about what you expected marriage to be like in comparison to what marriage is/was actually like?

13. How did you make adjustments? What helped you as a couple?

14. What advice would you give couples before they get married?

Please fill out the following demographic information. You are not obligated to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering.

Age: ________________  Years of Employment: ________________
Ethnicity/Race of Spouse: ________________  Ethnicity/Race: ________________
Years of Marriage: ________________  Education of Spouse: ________________
Number of Children: ________________  Occupation of Spouse: ________________
Education: ________________  Age of Spouse: ________________
Occupation: ________________
* Has spouse been married before? (Please indicate with a yes or no answer in the blank) ________________.
  If yes, for how long ________________.
Appendix D

MIAMI UNIVERSITY
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Research Participant:

In recent years, growing interest has developed concerning divorce and its prevention. Emphasis has been placed on premarital education and its effectiveness in helping to achieve marital success. The purpose of this research project is to generate a better understanding of what couples need to know before they get married and what should be addressed in premarital and marital education regarding marital expectations and beliefs. Therefore, I am looking for married women who are willing to share what they entered into marriage expecting and in looking back what they wish they would have known prior to getting married. **If you feel that this study does not apply to you, please pass the survey and this letter on to someone else who may be interested.**

As a part of this research you will be asked a series of interview questions. The interviews will take approximately 45 minutes and will be audio-recorded. Your responses will be completely anonymous and to ensure your privacy your actual name(s) will not be used in the transcripts made from the interview or in any presentation. Your participation in this study and all identifying information will be kept completely confidential. As a participant, you reserve the right to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions during the interview.

If you have any questions about the study, information in the future regarding your participation or the study in general please contact me:

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Or my faculty advisor:
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By signing below I, ____________________ am stating that I understand what is stated above and agree to participate in this research study **and to be audio recorded.**

Signature: __________________________ Printed name: __________________________ Date: ______

OR

By signing below I, ____________________ am stating that I understand what is stated above and agree to participate in this research study **but do not want to be audio recorded.**

Signature: __________________________ Printed name: __________________________ Date: ______

Researcher’s Signature: __________________________ Date: __________