ABSTRACT

100 YEARS TO LIVE: MARITAL EXPERIENCES AND ADVICE OF OHIO CENTENARIAN WOMEN

by Kayla Sue Danford

The Ohio Department of Aging (2007) estimates that Ohio was home to 1,910 centenarians in 2000. Using secondary analysis of research conducted on behalf of the Ohio Board of Regents and the Ohio Long-Term Care Research Project, the present study examined the marital accounts and advice provided by centenarian women. The secondary analysis of these data involved a constant comparative method guided by the framework of symbolic interaction. Several themes emerged from the analysis of the participants’ interviews: Family Influences, We Always Worked Together, Something Old, Something New, Know Thyself, and For Better and For Worse. The present study is intended to shed light on the subject of marital satisfaction and start a path towards better understanding the advice these individuals can provide--which will allow all couples, young and old, to engage in healthy and fulfilling marital relationships.
100 YEARS TO LIVE: MARITAL EXPERIENCES AND ADVICE OF OHIO CENTENARIAN WOMEN

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, I would like to dedicate this work to my husband, Nick. I am humbled when I reflect upon our time together as a married couple and the experiences we have shared. It is my wish that this is only the beginning of a very long and successful journey as husband and wife. One day, perhaps we can be the ones to impart our experiences and wisdom to future generations as to what can make successful marriage a reality.

I also cannot forget to praise the women in this study for sharing their stories. Each of you is truly an inspiration to younger generations as to what can be accomplished during the short time we each have. May your experiences and insights continue to bless those around you and serve as a model of how to make marriage an enriching experience for future generations of women.
This thesis was, indeed, a long labor of love for me and many others involved. While I am both excited and relieved to complete this phase of my academic journey, I must also acknowledge those who helped me to achieve the accomplishments of this work.

I would first like to thank my husband, Nick, for his tireless support of my efforts both in and out of academics. I could not have asked for a stronger partner to both encourage and guide my life pursuits. I would also be amiss not to acknowledge the help of Dr. Elise Radina, who inspired me to “finish what I started” to make my studies come to completion. Thank you for not only your assistance during this process, but also your infinite patience and faith in me! In addition, I also express my appreciation to both Dr. Bush and Dr. Slotten for their help in making this project come to fruition.

Last, but not least, I would like to acknowledge the unconditional support of my family and friends. You are truly the reason behind everything that I strive to accomplish. I hope that I will serve you well, and have my work be something you can look upon with pride. I love you!
Introduction

The Ohio Department of Aging (2007) estimates that Ohio was home to 1,910 centenarians in 2000—with 41 of these individuals having reached at least 110 years of age. While these numbers are impressive by themselves, they are only a highlight of the growing number of individuals reaching the benchmark of living 100 years. Several advances in health and medicine have led to the increased longevity of our oldest members of society, and projections are showing half of all children from industrialized countries may now expect to reach their 100th birthday (Christensen et al., 2009; Olshansky et al., 2009). The projected number of centenarians living in the United States by the year 2050 is expected to be close to 800,000 (Krach & Velkoff, 1999). Much more impressive, however, may be the rich perspective that these individuals can provide to both researchers and younger age cohorts about important events in the human life course.

Among the most valuable life events for which centenarians may provide their insights could be marriage. With nearly half of all marriages ending in divorce (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001), many researchers, therapists, and families are seeking any advice or information that may help to make marriage a more satisfying experience for all involved. Even more alarming is the decrease in marital satisfaction among younger marital cohorts—with increased stressors in their daily lives, such as work-family demands, these couples continue to report less fulfilling marital relationships (Rogers & Amato, 2000). With an increasing centenarian population, and the majority of these adults (79%) being widowed/once married, their “eyewitness” accounts can be a valuable asset in expanding our current knowledge of marital satisfaction (Krach & Velkoff, 1999). Of those centenarians that are currently married, there are some (27.3%) whom have been married more than once (Davey & Takagi, 2011). The purpose of the present study is to examine such accounts, as provided by centenarian women, to determine how they describe marital satisfaction, provide marriage advice, and construct meaning related to their experiences as married women.

Even greater interest is generated when exploring how marriage among older adults is further compounded by gender issues, namely the experiences of women. While marital quality has shown similar impacts upon the physical and psychological health of men and women (Barnett & Brennan, 1994; Umberson et al., 2006; Umberson & Williams, 2005), women demonstrate impacts in several aspects of their overall well-being as a correlation between
gender roles, perceptions of support, and satisfaction in their marital relationships. While perceptions of inequality lower the marital quality of marriage for women throughout the life course (DeMaris, 2010), those who recount more egalitarian relationships cite greater flexibility, improved communication, instrumental support, and emotional support (Mickelson, Claffey, & Williams, 2006; Rhoden, 2003a; Rhoden, 2003b).

While several research studies review both the factors and implications of marital quality among women, the meaning construction in which they engage—as displayed in the personal accounts of their marriage and advice to younger age cohorts—is yet to be explored. In addition, the previous literature lacks a qualitative perspective to effectively capture how the experiences of these older women shapes both their personal attitudes on marriage and the qualities they believe to be most salient in successful marriages. Building upon previous quantitative literature on marital satisfaction and outcomes among older women, the present study attempts to provide a descriptive lens through which to explore their experiences. Attention also focuses on expanding the current research on marital satisfaction among older women, and the potential for their experiences to shape prevention and intervention strategies that may facilitate the development of successful marriages.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Marital Satisfaction and Well-Being in Women

The negative effects experienced by adults in unsatisfying marriages are numerous. Several studies find a correlation between negative marital quality and psychological distress (Barnett & Brennan, 1994). Stronger emotional and social loneliness is observed, especially in women, among those who report poor marital quality—citing issues such as spousal health problems, lack of emotional support, non-frequent/poor communication, and unsatisfying sexual relationships (DeJong, Van Groenou, Hoogendoorn, & Smit, 2009).

It is often women who face both the greatest challenges and consequences in their marital relationships. These consequences are especially harmful when women find themselves in unsatisfying relationships. Spousal relationships have been found to serve as either a buffer or additional risk to the mental health outcomes of women (Walk & Luscz, 2009). Wives who report low marital quality often exhibit poorer mental health, higher levels of burnout, and sustained health problems when compared to their male counterparts (Kulik, 2002; Miller et al., 2004; Tower & Kasl, 1996b; Umberson & Williams, 2005).
Gender Roles and Marital Satisfaction

Gender differences may also have an impact upon how women define satisfaction in their marriages. While men experience a greater benefit to their mental health due to their marital status, women are much more likely to have a direct correlation between mental health and the quality of the marriage (Faulkner, Davey, & Davey, 2005; Williams, 2003). In addition, while men focus strongly on the content of the marital relationship (i.e., communication, sexual relationship) as a gauge of their satisfaction, the marital satisfaction of women is determined primarily by their overall perception of psychological well-being (Cohen, Geron, & Farchi, 2009). The general findings of these studies conclude that while marital satisfaction for men is more token-based, the perception of satisfaction for women is based more on their feelings of emotional connection to their marriage partner.

The perception of gender equality is also an important factor in determining marital satisfaction for women. Kulik (2002) argues that the perception of social equality in marital relationships is critical to the perception of satisfaction in marriage. However, equality must also transfer to the perception of equal exchange and support in the marriage. If the feeling of unequal contribution to the marriage is present, women may experience lower marital satisfaction, regardless of the duration of the marriage (DeMaris, 2010). Types of support that are provided to the marriage partner, however, must also be viewed according to the gender roles at play in the relationship. While both instrumental and emotional support were favored by egalitarian women and traditional men, women adhering to more traditional gender roles place a stronger emphasis on the presence of emotional support (Mickelson, 2006).

Finally, consideration must also be given to how different age cohorts view the concept of gender equality. While older women may not be as concerned about equity as women in younger marital cohorts, they are often sensitive as to how equitable their relationships appear to others (Pillemer, 2008). While those who feel that they received more from the relationship than they gave would express guilt, resentment is common among women who felt that they received less benefit. These feelings often present themselves throughout important events in the life course (e.g., transition to parenthood, retirement, adjustment to widowhood, etc.) and may color the perceptions of their relationships.
**Indicators of Successful Marriage**

As indicated previously, the factors leading to the development of successful marriage is one of the most pursued findings in the field of family studies and marital counseling (Lambert & Fruhauf, 2011). While conditions exhibiting a causal relationship to marital quality have yet to be ascertained, there have been some clues provided in previous literature. For example, when women in long-term marriages display a high commitment to their spouses, several benefits are reported—high marital quality, satisfactory sexual interactions, and low mood disturbance (Bischoff, 2003). Low relationship stress and a high level of positive communication are also cited as critical to the success of marriage, as it allows for more positive interactions among these couples (Ledermann, Bodenmann, Rudaz, & Bradbury, 2010).

Consideration must also be given to the impact of gender roles and attitudes present in the marital relationship. Several research studies debate whether the subscription to more egalitarian relationships among men and women, or a more “traditional” assignment to gender roles, lends itself more to successful marital relations. Relationships in which couples develop a more equal perspective to their roles and contributions have reported greater flexibility, improved communication, instrumental support, and emotional support than their traditional counterparts (DeMaris, 2010; Mickelson, Claffey, & Williams, 2006; Rhoden, 2003a; Rhoden, 2003b). However, Wilcox and Nock (2006) posit that marriages are most satisfactory to women when the couple balances both gender equality and an adherence to traditional gender roles.

**Older Adults and Marriage**

The examination of marriage and older adults is an increasing focus in the field of family studies. Due to a growing population of aging adults, demand has been expressed for information sensitive to the needs of older couples. Marital quality now ties health-related issues as one of the most presented problems in relation to aging (Lambert & Fruhauf, 2011). Ignoring the specific needs of this population may also have profound consequences on these adults. Much like younger couples, the quality of marital relationships among older couples affects both their psychical health and psychological well-being, regardless of education, socioeconomic status, and age (Tower & Kasel, 1996a). Much more critical is the need to explore the long-term implications of marital quality as it relates to older adults. While previous research is often guilty of exploring the needs of younger age cohorts over older couples, marital quality is an issue that is present throughout the life course.
Researchers must also exercise caution to examine these relationships in a broader perspective than found in previous literature. Focusing predominately through the context of caregiving burden (Lambert & Fruhauf, 2011), research has been limited in addressing marital quality in older adults—highlighting only the marital distress caused by caring for a declining partner. The challenge issued for future studies is to examine older couples through a more dyadic approach, focusing on interactions throughout the life course. Examples of research gaps that must be explored include issues of marital quality, adjustment, and the accounts of long-term marriages among these couples.

Finally, Walker and Luszcz (2009) urge that further research is needed that explores the strengths of these marriages, namely what older adults define as factors contributing to successful partnerships. While the literature focuses mainly upon the experiences of older couples that are currently married, researchers must also be careful to not exclude individuals who were once married. The retrospective accounts of widowed or divorced women are equally salient, and can provide valuable insight to the concept of marital satisfaction. It is with these needs in mind that the present study will attempt to fill some of the gaps found in the research of older adults and their perspectives on marriage.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study utilized a symbolic interaction framework in order to interpret the experiences and process of meaning construction for centenarian women reflecting upon their marriages. In order to negotiate the experience of being a married woman, the individual must construct meaning from the influences of both her social surroundings and her interactions with others (White & Klein, 2002). The married woman is considered to be an active agent in the way she defines her experience, with her interactions and the social values to which she is exposed being utilized as tools in how she constructs the meaning behind her marriage.

The present study focuses not on the fact that these women are married, but rather the meaning they derive from the experience of having ever been married (Lynch & McConatha, 2006). It is from understanding the influence of these interactions that interpretation of individual experience may be conducted. Crooks (2001) argues, “we need to understand what women know; see what they see; understand what they understand; learn what they think is important; learn how they define their situation; learn how they act in the present, applying both past experiences and future plans; and learn how they solve problems” (pg. 16). Through
understanding how marriage affects the actions and attitudes of older women, researchers can develop a richer understanding of how marital satisfaction can be fostered in married couples.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM

The present study investigates the descriptions of marital satisfaction, marriage advice, and the meaning making related to marital experiences present in qualitative interviews of centenarian women. The study is guided by the research questions: (a) Which factors contribute to the perception of marital satisfaction in the participants’ marital experiences? , (b) What differences exist in the experiences and marital advice provided by the participants? and (c) What supports do these participants believe facilitate the creation of successful marriages?

METHODS

Primary Study

The present study is secondary analysis of research conducted by Groger and Leek (2008), completed on behalf of the Ohio Board of Regents and the Ohio Long-Term Care Research Project. The original study resulted in the recruitment of 16 centenarians (13 female, 3 male) residing in the Midwest, generated from Ohio Area Agencies on Aging, long-term care facilities, and the Cleveland Library for the Blind. Of these participants, thirteen were Caucasian and three were African-American. The majority of participants reported experience in marriage, with only one participant listed as never married, while thirteen were widowed, one divorced, and one still married. In addition, eleven of the sixteen were considered highly functional in their daily lives. Living arrangements for these participants ranged from independent homes, living with children, and facilities providing differing degrees of long-term service delivery.

The life experiences of these centenarians were collected in the form of one-time, face-to-face interviews focusing upon the participants’ life reflections (past, present, and future), the challenges they face as a result of their age, advice for others on aging/life experience, and reports of their daily routines. These interviews (see Appendix for Interview Guide), conducted by the original researcher, were based upon a semi-structured format with probing questions and focused upon the primary research question: “What does it feel like to have reached your age?” (Groger & Leek, 2008, pg. 5). Interviews with participants typically lasted between one to two hours. However, one interview lasted approximately six hours. In addition, demographic information such as the participants’ date and place of birth, ethnicity, level of education, work and family history, and levels of support (formal and informal) utilized in their daily lives.
Secondary Analysis

Data reported in the present study utilized a subset of the original study participants, focusing upon the 12 centenarian women interviewed who had been married at least once. Participants who did not meet the above criteria were excluded from the proposed study in order to provide an accurate reflection of the marital experiences and meaning construction engaged in by these centenarian women. As described above, the research questions to be answered in the present study focused upon uncovering perceptions of marital satisfaction, identification of supports that foster successful marriages, and the interaction between social attitudes and meaning making related to the recollection of marital experiences.

Analysis of the data from the present study was conducted using the constant comparative method, guided by the assumptions of symbolic interaction (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Transcribed interviews first underwent a round of open coding in which they were examined for the presence of preliminary themes. When these preliminary themes were uncovered, the researcher began a second stage of analysis in which coding focused upon developing more specific themes and sub-themes present in multiple sets of data (i.e., commonalities in transcripts, emergence of repeated experiences, etc.). The data was continually examined and cross-referenced, with the feedback and assistance of the thesis chair to provide level of agreement, until conceptual saturation occurred and the extraction of all themes and sub-themes found in the data set had been exhausted (Emerson, Fretts, & Shaw, 1995; Merriam, 1988).

Protection of Study Participants

Several measures were taken in the present study to protect both the confidentiality and well-being of study participants. All data collected during the original study received approval from the researchers’ affiliated Human Subjects Review Board and maintained compliance with their standards. In addition, participants were de-identified through the use of pseudonyms known only to the researcher’s thesis chairperson. These pseudonyms were also utilized in the event of using participant quotes as exemplars. The researcher completed all research compliance training required through the educational institution, and received study approval from the Human Subjects Review Board prior to analysis of study data. Finally, study documents (i.e., transcribed interviews, field notes, etc.,) were stored privately in the researcher’s home and computer files password protected.
The Researcher

In order to ensure internal reliability of the study findings, several factors influencing the researcher’s perspective must be acknowledged. As a married woman and current graduate student in Family Studies, the researcher has developed an interest in the effects of marital satisfaction on the well-being of older women. The researcher also acknowledged that, having a professional background in education, she intends for the results of this research to be applicable to the practices of her fellow colleagues in family life education. It is her primary goal for the results of this research to yield potential prevention and intervention strategies to address the issue of marital satisfaction in all age cohorts. It is with these influences in mind that the researcher approached the research and data analysis conducted during this study.

Ensuring Study Rigor

In order to ensure appropriate rigor in the present study, the researcher implemented several measures during data analysis. These steps were necessary in order to verify the trustworthiness of the data and potential findings in the proposed study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Dr. Elise Radina, the thesis chair of this proposed study, assisted the researcher in completing a peer audit of the data analysis by reviewing the researcher’s analysis notes and providing feedback on the validity of the themes extracted from the data (Merriam, 1988).

The researcher also, as described above, made acknowledgement of herself as an instrument in the research and the perspective she brings to the data analysis in order to limit study bias. The method of secondary analysis is ideal, as the researcher did not have the opportunity to influence participants’ responses or interject her experiences into the data collected. Finally, audit trails in the form of analysis notes and summaries were maintained and available for review by the thesis chair. This trail aided in the development of thick description in the study, ensuring that analysis was applicable for future research and development of prevention/intervention strategies for family professionals (Emerson, Fretts, & Shaw, 1995).

Finally, the researcher also engaged in negative case analysis of participants’ interviews. This strategy allowed her to examine the reflections of these women upon marriages that weren’t successful during their life course, and to utilize the findings as evidence of what factors hindered the marriages from being successful. As Barusch, Gringeri, and George (2011) posit, “rather than accepting without question the dominant pattern that one observes, a negative case is selected with which to compare analytically the cases in the emerging pattern” (pg. 13). Such
analysis was beneficial to the primary focus of the study as it provided critique to the emerging findings in the data, and allowed richer description of what factors have positive and negative influence on the participants’ level of marital satisfaction.

RESULTS

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the participants’ interviews. For the first research question, Which factors contribute to the perception of marital satisfaction in the participants’ marital experiences, the themes Family Influences and We Always Worked Together were identified. The second research question, What differences exist in the experiences and marital advice provided by the participants, focused upon the primary theme of Something Old, Something New. Analysis of the final research question, What supports do these participants believe facilitate the creation of successful marriages, resulted in the development of two major themes: (a) Know Thyself and (b) For Better and For Worse. All themes emerging from the data are explored in the next few pages.

Family Influences

The first theme, Family Influences, recounted the influences that the participants’ relationships with family (namely their parents) had upon their marriages. Two sub-themes also emerged from the examination of these family influences, namely supportive versus non-supportive roles which the family played in the participants’ selection of marriage partners. The quality and type of interactions participants shared with their parents often impacted their selection, and ultimately their relationship with their spouses. Of the twelve women, five cited examples of how their parents played a role in their selection through providing marriage advice and feedback on their choices. These women often described such feedback as having an influence on their choice of potential partners. Kathleen (103 years old, widowed, married once) recounted both the advice her father gave about dating, and his involvement in her selection of mates:

When I reached high school age when you think about dates, well, my father did not tell me now, do not do this or do not do that. He explained to me the results. He said you have only one reputation and that is judged by what your neighbors see and he said if you lose that reputation, you will never get it back. […] When I was dating, if dad, my father was not there, I could not have a date. […] So there was one time I had a date with one of
the football heroes, and my father was at home so he came. The boy came and we talked and my father monopolized the whole evening by explaining the functioning of a steam engine. I could have killed him.

The experience of dating, and mate selection, for Kathleen was one in which she had to form a decision utilizing the influence of her father’s approval, the social conventions of acceptable behavior for women, and the potential consequences she may face for making a poor choice in a dating/marriage partner.

Patrie (103 years old, widowed, married once) also explained how her role as a primary helper in her household had an impact upon the conversation between her father and future husband when he asked for his permission to marry. As she recounted, “I know when Vernon come and asked for me from my dad, he says well, you are just ruining me. You took my main worker.” While the couple developed a successful marriage, the quote above illustrates that the marriage had to be negotiated into Patrie’s role as the caregiver to her family of origin.

Mary (102 years old, widowed, married once) also mentioned that she observed the marital interactions of family members, and viewing marriage as a means to the development of her own family, as being a source of inspiration for her decision to marry:

…My older ones [siblings] were getting married and my brothers were all older. They were married and I wanted to get married, have my own family, my own home, and my own children. […]I was only 22 and I knew that day I would not have to worry about anything. It would all happen and it did.

By viewing the marriage of her older siblings as a pathway to family creation and the development of her personal life, Mary developed the perception of marriage as a means of personal satisfaction and encouragement to the pursuit of a marital partner.

However, it is also worth mentioning that parental relationships also impacted these women’s marriages when the interaction was not as positive as the cases described above. Two participants explained how they defied their parents in order to be with their partners, taking the negative relationships they had observed as a case study of what not to do in their marital relationships. One of these participants, Beth (104 years old, widowed, married once) recounted
how the disapproval of both her parents and in-laws impacted the expectations she and her husband brought to their marriage in 1926:

We eloped because he was German and Protestant and I was Catholic and an Italian and in those days, they discriminated people […] So my mother-in-law was against me and my father was against my husband, but we loved each other so dearly. When we had the money saved, I rented a sewing machine and I bought a bolt of material. I made my own sheets and pillowcases. I made my wedding dress and we eloped and went to Lawrenceburg, Indiana and got married. […] When we got married we made a vow that no matter what anything did to us, we would stick together and love each other because our parents did not love us as we were growing up…that we were not going to do what they did.

In Beth’s case, she and her husband were able to develop a successful marriage in spite of their parents’ disapproval, using the lack of support was a rationale for them to be additionally supportive in the marital relationship.

Gladys (101 years old, widowed, married three times) also shared how her family disapproved of the relationship between her and her third husband. Although they knew each other as young adults and were in love, it was her family’s disapproval which discouraged her from marrying. It was only after two failed marriages, and a chance meeting in their later lives, that she eventually married her first love and enjoyed a successful marriage. As she explains:

Everybody complained because they said he was lazy. Well, my god, he was only 17! My friend and I had gone together so many, many years when we were kids. He never married. We got back together and got married and finished our life out together.

While family influence may have a positive impact upon helping women make informed decisions about their marriage partners, the account of Gladys also cautions that family members may not always have the best decisions about who their children should marry. It was only in defying her parents’ influence that she was able to choose a marriage which was successful, albeit years later. Family input can be helpful in choosing successful marriage partners, but the
experiences of Gladys and Beth highlight that it must ultimately be the decision of the
individuals considering marriage about what is best for them.

_We Always Worked Together_

The second theme, _We Always Worked Together_, describes how participants viewed their
spouses as partners in their life experiences, and played active roles in encouraging each other’s
personal development. By seeing their spouses as a companion and a source of personal
enrichment, these women expressed that they felt satisfaction in their marriages. The five women
who recounted such a view also credited it as an aid that helped them endure hardships in their
marriages. As Beula (102 years old, divorced, married twice) described her relationship with her
first of two husbands, who was seventeen years her senior:

> He was grown and he taught me how to live and I did not know how. Just like you take a
> child and teach it something. He taught me how to live and how to get a long on the little
> bit that we had.

Though their relationship was short lived, and Beula was soon widowed, her first husband had
significant impact upon her as both a guide and teacher. Their partnership also served as a coping
resource to the financial hardship they endured, as she could depend upon her husband to help
her negotiate these challenges.

The perception of partnership in the marriage also transferred to serving as support to the
partner’s relationships with family. Two participants explained how their husbands served as an
ally to them as they assisted family members enduring hardships:

> When he took 4 of my brother's kids to raise, you know […] I would not have taken them
> without he said okay. And I know, at first, his family did not like it a bit. Because they
> thought, being my family, you know. But, they sort of realized later that it was okay. But
> at first they did not like it. (Mrs. Turner, 102 years old, widowed, married once)

> Me and Vern really took over and raised their family (her parents’ family). We was living
> up here and we would go home and we would just fill our car full of groceries and take
> them down there and then mother did not need me to go out and get groceries that much,
you know. We would just take a whole bunch down....me and Vern. Both of us was working, you know. So that is one thing. I had a good husband that he really was crazy about my mother and dad both and so he did not mind it. He did not say one word. He was in for it as much as I was to help them out. (Patrie, 103 years old, widowed, married once)

In addition to marital partnership being beneficial to the dyadic relationship, both cases above illustrate that the benefits of such a relationship can expand to improve the interactions among other spheres in these women’s lives (i.e., with their family of origin).

The perception of companionship in the marriage also fostered a need to encourage their marriage partner’s personal and professional enrichment. Whether it was in the enjoyment of hobbies, or providing advice on how to advance professionally, the value of companionship in these marriages led to each partner contributing to the improvement of their significant other. Beth (104 years old, widowed, married once) described how her advice and encouragement assisted her husband in finding both a job and career path during the Great Depression:

The Depression came and the shop....my husband started working there. He went there just to help as a sweeper and they had an ornamental iron department and all that kind of stuff. I said to him, watch them when you're sweeping. Do not let them know that you are watching them… concentrate and someday maybe they will ask you would you like [to] put your hand at it. So he did that for the longest time until finally the manager....he got sick and Mr. Davis said Charles would you like to try your hand at the work? He said yes, I will try it. So that is how he learned his trade.

In serving as a facilitator to Charles’s career development, Beth succeeded in helping to improve the satisfaction both partners felt from the relationship. However, this view of partnership appeared to be most powerful when both partners benefitted from having assistance from their spouse. In return for her assistance, Beth also recalled how working together on improvement projects for their church gave her a sense of satisfaction and respect for her husband. It was the teamwork in their marriage that also stressed the importance of communication and companionship:
My husband was like that. If I did not do it, he did it and he was so helpful to me. We worked hand in hand. If I was doing something, he would help me. If he was doing something, I helped him. A marriage is a complete companionship. You do things together. [...] if you do not communicate, you do not get anywhere. When you are married, things are together.

In order for the marital relationship to develop a strong sense of partnership, strong communication has to be present. The examples illustrated have demonstrated that the ability of the couple to communicate their needs and encouragement to their partners is an important resource in developing a sense of commitment and partnership in the marriage.

Finally, Kathleen (103 years old, widowed, married once) recounted how the support of her husband encouraged her to continue pursuit of her hobbies when she was ready to give them up. She cited her husband as a source of support and a motivator which pushed her to continue expanding upon her interests, which she believes to be an important quality in the selection of a marriage partner. As she explains:

He stuck to me and he had seen to me. That is one thing. He saw to it that I did everything that I was capable of doing and when I started to draw and so forth with the adult education class down here, while I answered that ad for famous artist school and the man came here. The course cost $400 and I said oh, well, this is just a hobby. I do not want to spend that much money on a hobby and he gave it to me for Christmas. But he saw to it ....and this song that goes now, You are the Wind Under My Wings, that is my husband exactly. He sacrificed, he did everything under the sun and he is the one who kept me going. So if you want to give advice, tell them to be sure they pick their mate well.

All of the reflections above indicated that having a marriage partner which served as a partner to both the personal and professional interests of these women helped them to feel a sense of satisfaction in their marriages. These partnerships also impacted the relationships’ levels of companionship and communication, with each participant crediting the encouragement of their partners as having a positive influence on their success in marriage.
The third theme, *Something Old, Something New*, reflected the contradictions between lived experiences of the participants and their attitudes toward gender roles as married women. Many of these women appeared to value an adherence to traditional gender roles in marriage. In fact, several of the participants stated that they feel a lack of focus upon these roles, and a lessening of the commitment to marriage, may be a cause for some of the marital strife experienced by younger age cohorts. However, a few of these women engaged in non-traditional roles (i.e., work outside of home, single parenting) while stating the importance of the former attitudes. As explained by two of the participants:

Now the way that the young people are today they get married thinking well, if it does not work out in a few months I can get a divorce. So you did not believe in things like that then or do them. (Lucy, 102 years old, widowed, married once)

Today people live so extravagantly. They go out to eat. They do not cook at home. Young girls do not know how to cook. Years ago when I was a girl at school they had cooking lessons. They had sewing lessons. They do not know how to sew. They do not know how to do anything today and then when they get married, their marriage will fail because they want this and they want that and their husbands cannot provide it and if they earn any money, they earn more than their husbands and they hold it against them. They did not do that in my day. We were satisfied with half a loaf of bread. Today they want the whole loaf. […] If a man has a clean home and has got a good place to come home to, he will not go anywhere. He is satisfied. (Beth, 104 years old, widowed, married once)

While some of these women interviewed had experiences in working outside of the home, and other non-traditional gender roles for their time period, they still view having a strong adherence to the traditional tasks and behaviors of their gender to be an important factor in developing a successful marriage. The insights and experience they provide, while not advocating one viewpoint over the other, appear to highlight that there must be a flexibility and balance between roles in order to negotiate the changing landscape of the marital experience.
Even more interesting with these contradictions is the advice of some of these participants to delay marriage. While only two of the participants had the opportunity to attend college, they urged young women to focus upon education before they committed to a marital partner, as illustrated by the advice given by Gladys (101 years old, widowed, married three times):

You cannot get by in this world today without education and money and the jobs that people can get now without an education do not pay anything. You are smart to finish school and get your education before you marry. […] A lot of things I would do different. I would not get married so young.

While the advice Gladys provided appears to be pointed more towards education as a necessity in today’s world, it also demonstrated that she may have felt it beneficial to have pursued such opportunities herself had they been available at the time of her marriage.

In addition to encouraging young women to focus on the pursuit of education, Hallie (105 years old, widowed, married once) added some valuable advice about having a sense of independence and ownership over personal possessions. Having witnessed her mother experience one unsuccessful marriage in which abuse was frequent, her daughter assisted in reflecting upon the relief of being able to have a sense of freedom after leaving her husband:

Interviewer: So what were some of the good things that happened in her life other than you?
Daughter: Ha, ha. To get away from my dad and you know, being able to do what she wanted to. Spending money when she wants. How she wants to spend it, you know, and just enjoy life. Freedom.

Through the examination of this unsuccessful marital relationship, the need for personal freedoms and independence emerged as being important resources to marital satisfaction. The absence of such independence may be a plausible explanation, among others, as to why Hallie was unable to develop a perception of satisfaction in her marriage. The above cases, in which successful relationships were described, suggested the importance of traditional gender role
adherence balanced with the independence of being able to engage in non-traditional behaviors when they benefitted the marriage or the individual. Hallie’s experience, as a negative case analysis, demonstrated that such a balance is preferable to strict gender roles with no flexibility.

Finally, Beth (104 years old, widowed, married once) also recounted how her views and advice on sexuality were impacted by the gender roles and attitudes during the course of her marriage. Throughout the course of her marriage, her husband had never been intimate without the lights off and she confessed to always being shy about being seen nude by him (which was rare). When discussing her son’s marriage, and her shock at witnessing a teenage girl’s romantic encounter at a family wedding, Beth mentioned a preference for conservative sexual attitudes:

I taught my son to be a good boy and I know he was a virgin when he got married. [...] She was mauling all over him. He was kissing her. Hugging her. Only 16 years....they are asking for trouble and then they wonder why the girls today get pregnant. They are sexual.

Beth’s description of the incident above is further evidence as to how these women have shaped their views of both marriage and gender (sexuality) through both their lived experiences and the social attitudes of their time period. In turn, these attitudes also impacted the advice provided to younger cohorts about what they feel is appropriate behavior in their mate selection.  

**Know Thyself**

Upon investigating the supports which facilitated successful marriage among the participants, the theme **Know Thyself** explains how these women recounted experiences, both positive and negative, in which they acknowledged the importance of not attempting to change their spouses and to have knowledge of their own identity to strengthen the marriage. The understanding of one’s own identity also becomes critical to assist her in engaging in meaning-making as she evaluates her satisfaction in her marital partnership. Four of the participants shared experiences in which they stressed the importance of self-identity or were involved in lifestyles contradictory to their personal identities. As a result, these challenges placed additional hardship on the marriage as the couples negotiated the role strain. As recalled by Gladys (101 years old, widowed, married three times), the strain felt by her second husband as he changed occupations ultimately resulted in the failure of her marriage:
I married a railroader and my father owned two farms and he offered him a job ...a nice house and everything. Offered him a chance on the farm and I was hoping he would not take it because he was a railroader and you cannot take a man out of the city working and put him in the country and have him satisfied… we left the farm and we moved away into another house somewhere. He picked up work wherever he found it and that went on for about five years and he was so dissatisfied that we finally went back home to my folks. He did the chores and did the work, but he was unhappy. He wanted to be back railroading.

Gladys’s story illustrated how attempting to engage in a personal identity which was inauthentic caused strain to not only her husband, but also their marital relationship. The couple, as she admitted above, might have been much more satisfied in their marriage if they had negotiated roles which were more in tune with their personal values and interests.

Although the marriage above was unsuccessful, such challenges can be overcome when the couple utilizes coping strategies, such as patience and flexibility, to lessen the impacts of marital strain. Lucy (102 years old, widowed, married once), who had to travel frequently as a result of her husband’s coaching career, provided insight as to how they maintained their marriage despite these hardships:

We moved a great deal and I think moving to different cities and trying to get acquainted...I think that was the most difficult thing in my life because we moved umpteen times and always in cities and really I was never a city girl. I was more of a small town girl really… He had a lot of patience. He would have to have a lot of patience to live with me.

These frequent moves were, indeed, challenging for Lucy. However, they did not have as negative an impact as the prior case because she and her spouse developed coping strategies to combat any strain which occurred in their relationship. By her husband expressing patience as Lucy endured the challenges of frequent moves, and she demonstrating flexibility despite the hardships, they were able to work through their hardships together and maintain their level of marital satisfaction.
Finally, Kathleen (103 years old, widowed, married once) also discouraged other women from attempting to change their spouses during the marriage, and acknowledging that the couple ultimately must be free to make the decision as to what works best for them:

Well, when I worked as a nurse, I worked hard at it and studied and went on and did exactly what I wanted to do and then another thing, if they marry, do not try to reform your husband […] I married him as he was and I never tried to change him in the least and he never tried to do that to me.

The participants above have both lived, and understood, the importance of entering into marriage with a firm sense of self-identity and the appreciation of their spouse’s identity. Being able to identify their own needs and wants is an important factor to developing the marital relationship, as well as appreciating the unique characteristics that their partner contributes. Overall, these reflections highlighted the importance for the marriage to be satisfactory from not only a dyadic perspective. Each individual must be secure in his or her identity, and have the opportunity for authentic self-expression, to make the marriage successful.

For Better and For Worse

The final theme to emerge from our analysis of the interviews was *For Better and For Worse*, which explained the coping strategies utilized during hardships in the marriage. While seven of the women recounted enduring difficult times during their marriages (i.e., financial hardship, poor health, etc.), they were often abated by the couple’s love for each other and the willingness to endure them. One strategy shared by two participants is that they separated the hardships they faced from the strength of their marital bonds. Even though they faced hardship early in their marriages, they did not let that confuse their feelings for their husbands or make them feel materially deprived. Having difficulty in the marriage from time to time was seen as a natural experience, and had been accepted. As they share:

I had a hard life, but I did not let it interfere with my marriage. When I was first married, I did not have a washing machine. I used to wash on a wash board in the bathroom. I knelt on the floor and then had lines hanging in the bathroom. We did not have electric. We had gas lights. I did not have a telephone until I was married 13 years. I did not have
Many of the women, like Beth and Patrie, expressed challenges and hardships throughout the course of their marriages. However, they did not let these obstacles interfere with the relationships they experienced with their spouses. They accepted that hardships were a natural part of the marital relationship, and that there would occasionally be conflict. However, their commitment to their marital partners served as a buffer to these challenges and helped them to maintain feelings of satisfaction in spite of these hardships.

Of the hardships that these couples faced, the common challenge that many faced involved money. However, this is not a surprising find in the research as many of these couples were newlyweds during the course of the Great Depression. It was through recounting these hardships that these women demonstrated the strength that overcoming such adversity had instilled in their marriage, along with the coping strategies of humor and problem-solving, as seen in the reflections of Goldie, Buela, and Mary below:

He was a sweetheart (her husband) [...] He worked for the electric company. [...] First time....well, I do not remember that marriage because it did not last too long, but I remember my Walter. He worked for the electric company and we all were flood monkeys.

Interviewer: I see. Were you married a lot of years?
Yeah. And fought a lot of years. (Goldie, 102 years old, widowed, married twice)

He fixed the parts of the people's car. He fixed...he bought the parts and fixed the car and sometimes they would not have the money or did not want to take it at that time so...Then we were short ourselves. (Beula, 102 years old, divorced, married twice)
My husband was an office worker and he was good. We were the same age. He graduated from Central and I graduated from East High, but here is the thing...we went through the depression and was married the last month of 1928 and it was pretty awful, we did not have any money for one whole year. I do not know how we lived when we married. […] My husband worked for Don, a realtor. He had lots of real estate […]. He took in two grocery stores in order to keep those Italians in business and then he would send the people from his office that he owed...that he should pay a salary to. My husband was the main one because he did all the stenographer work, and we would go there and we would get our groceries and then they would put it down so much a week. (Mary, 102 years old, widowed, married once)

The hardships each of these women described challenged both of them, and their spouses, to seek creative strategies to overcome the hardships they experienced and maintain their relationships. These examples highlighted that these couples were able to complete these tasks by looking for unique solutions to their troubles, remaining strong in their commitments to each other, and being able to endure such challenges with a sense of humor and faith that they would endure.

Finally, caregiving was also cited as a challenge for two of the participants in their marriages. Although she struggled several years with many different illnesses, Edith (103 years old, widowed, married once) was fortunate to have a spouse who attended to her needs and did not view her as a personal burden:

[…] he was, he was so good to me. And with all the illnesses I had, he was never cross and when I said to him one time, I was sorry that I was so expensive and he said he was just glad he had (money) to do with.

Although her husband could have viewed caring for a frequently ill wife as a hassle, the commitment these two shared abated these feelings and allowed them to maintain a positive relationship.

Another participant also shared her account of how caring for an ailing spouse was made less stressful due to a satisfactory marriage. Despite being perceived as a bad patient by their son,
Mrs. Moore (102 years old, widowed, married once) did not see caring for her husband to be such a burden because of her emotional connection with him. As she stated, “I understand though. I understood him and I... it was not hard.” In addition, the interviewer offered that such an understanding occurred “because she loved him”. As summarized by the interviewer’s comment, the hardships that were faced by these couples were often reduced by the perception of their satisfaction in the marriage and the love that had developed between the couple. While each couple endured a variety of hardships during the course of their marriages, several expressed that they were able to overcome these challenges when they had a happy marriage, and the coping strategies they had developed as a couple, as a resource to weather the storms.

DISCUSSION

With many couples suffering from the negative impacts of marital strain, professionals in several fields have been searching for ways to help improve the relationships of married couples in order to make marriage a more satisfactory experience (Barnett & Brennan, 1994; Lambert & Fruhauf, 2011). Although neglected by much of the current research on marital satisfaction, older adults can serve as a valuable resource to help examine which factors can help all age cohorts to develop successful relationships (Lambert & Fruhauf, 2011; Walker & Luszcz, 2009). The present study was intended to expand current research on marital satisfaction among this age cohort and to discover factors which have helped these women to develop a sense of satisfaction in their marital relationships. Of those who had experienced unsatisfactory marital relationships, examination was also given as to why these women felt their marriages did not succeed.

The findings in this study indicate that these women play more of an active role in their perceptions of satisfaction than we as researchers may credit them. By focusing on their accounts through a symbolic interaction lens, this study indicates that these women have generated their perceptions of satisfaction not only through the quality of personal interactions with their spouses, but also underlying social and family influences which have influenced their perspectives of the marital relationship (Lynch & McConatha, 2006; White & Klein, 2002). These influences were captured by having these women recount, in their own words, their experiences throughout their married lives and examining how their discussions about family, gender, and hardship influenced how they evaluated the success of their partnerships. It is only through understanding their experience through all of these factors that we may begin to see how
they have come to define which conditions and criteria they have determined to be an aid or hindrance in their establishment of marital relationships.

While most of the women who recounted their experiences shared positive feedback about their marriages, it must be cautioned that this does not indicate that there was an absence of trials in their experience as married women. In fact, it is the resiliency and coping strategies displayed by these women which further illustrated that strong marriages can be established through the overcoming of hardship. The results in the present study support that it is a combination of the coping strategies, external influences (i.e., social, family, gender), and personal meaning-making of these women that can equip them to overcome the trials of married life and emerge with a perception of personal satisfaction in their marriages. The goal of the present study is primarily to view these items as tools in the building of satisfactory marriages, and to see which of these factors were perceived as most useful to those who have created successful marriages.

The present findings support the idea that marital satisfaction is attainable among couples through the use of flexibility in the relationship and commitment to the partnership provided in marriage. The women interviewed in this study have shared that viewing their spouse as a “partner” during the marriage assisted them in enduring hardships, along with having an adherence to traditional gender roles while allowing flexibility to negotiate these roles as necessary throughout the marriage (DeMaris, 2010; Mickelson, Claffey, & Williams, 2006; Rhoden, 2003a; Rhoden, 2003b; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). In addition, this study also furthered our understanding of the individual components that the couple brings to marriage in order for successful partnerships to take place. These women were most successful in their marriages when they came to them with a secure sense of self-identity and the ability to remain consistent to their individual values, along with displaying flexibility and patience to adjust those values if necessary.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Certain limitations must be taken into consideration when reviewing the results of this study. While these results provide evidence as to which factors may lead to a greater perception of marital satisfaction among couples, they are not intended to be utilized as a panacea method to reduce marital strain or to create a “one size fits all” approach to improving the interactions between married couples. Professionals in the field of family studies must carefully review all
factors leading to marital strain in the relationship before creating or applying intervention strategies, on a case by case basis.

Several factors must also be considered when examining the sample utilized in the present study. While the sample size was ideal for qualitative research, the small number of participants creates a limitation to the study in that the results cannot be generalized to the larger population of older adults and married couples. The homogeneity of the sample (13 Caucasian, 3 African-American) also limited the ability of the researcher to examine the effect that cultural values had on the meaning construction in which these women engaged. Future research in this field may benefit from a larger, more diverse sample of participants in order to gauge the effects of cultural viewpoints on meaning construction in marriage, as well as provide a greater source of information from which to generalize findings.

Another limitation to the research is that it focused upon solely the view of older women when examining marital satisfaction. While it was the intent of the researcher to target the view of women in this present study, the male perspective on marital satisfaction may also yield valuable findings as to what can help couples succeed in creating enduring marriages. Future research may wish to explore similar research from the perspective of both individuals in the marital relationship, taking into account the unique experiences of each gender and how their interaction impacts the commitment to the marriage.

Finally, the fact that the data collected from participants was retrospective in nature must also be considered. Although the majority of our participants were still considered highly functioning, it is plausible that they may be forgetting important information about their marriages or engaging in selective recall of events which they feel may be more positive for the researcher. While those with negative or average satisfaction may be more realistic in their accounts of marital satisfaction, women who report very high levels of marital satisfaction may have a tendency to engage in selective recall—avoiding accounts of negative events in their marital relationships (O’Rourke & Cappeliez, 2005). While exciting to hear glowing accounts of a “perfect” marriage, the researcher must be careful to examine such reports with “a grain of salt” in favor of more realistic reflections. Being that this research was also conducted through secondary analysis of previous data, the current researcher was also limited to what was found in transcripts in order to draw conclusions about the participants’ marital satisfaction, and was unable to contact original participants for follow-up on their responses. Future research can still
be conducted in order to focus in depth upon the perspective of older adults on marriage, but the present study is intended to shed light on the subject of marital satisfaction and start a path towards better understanding the advice these individuals can provide which will allow all couples, young and old, to engage in healthy and fulfilling marital relationships.

**Implications for Practice**

Several of the findings in the present study may be useful to professionals in the field of family studies, as well as those who work with married couples, as they assist individuals in developing satisfying marital relationships. Research has consistently shown that effective communication and flexibility are critical to the success of marital relationships (Bischoff, 2003; Ledermann, Bodenmann, Rudaz, & Bradbury, 2010). As this study has shown, the women interviewed felt the most success in marriages that focused upon the aspects of partnership and working with the spouse to negotiate experiences throughout the course of their marriage. While they did advocate a more traditional approach to gender roles in the relationship, they were also flexible enough to adjust these roles (i.e., working outside of the home, raising children alone during extended absence, frequent relocation, etc.) when necessary for the marriage to succeed. Such information could be utilized in pre-marital counseling or intervention strategies in which the couple is challenged to examine their own roles in the household and negotiate adjustments to solve problems, while focusing upon effective communication strategies between the individuals in the relationship.

In addition, strategies may also be targeted at helping the individual to gain further understanding of their own personal identity, and how it may contribute to the interactions of the marital relationship. The present study suggests that having a strong sense of self-awareness served as an aid to the marital relationship, while causing hardship in those relationships in which the individual encountered strain from attempting to negotiate roles which were not authentic to their individual values. It is recommended that time also be given in counseling and intervention to aid each individual in gaining further awareness of their own personal identity, including their values and perspectives they will bring to the marriage, and provide opportunity for these to be communicated and negotiated with the marriage partner. As shown in the present study, these factors all play a critical component to not only resolving some of the strain that these women encountered, but may also serve as important resources to all married couples as they work together to create a marital relationship in which both can experience satisfaction.
REFERENCES


Interview Guide for Centenarian Study

Questions we explored in this study included, but – true to the qualitative paradigm – were not limited to, the following – with appropriate and individually variable probes (and not necessarily in this order, depending on where the participants took us with their narratives):

- What does it feel like to have reached your age?
- What’s the best thing about having lived so long?
- What’s the most difficult thing about having lived so long?
- How do you think about the future?
- Describe an event from any part of your life that stands out – that had great impact on you.
  (Probe: positive or negative?)
- Describe for me a typical day.
- Are there things you’d like to do differently? How? Why?
- What do you worry about?
- What advice would you give a younger person concerning old age?
- Do you think about death? How?
- Is there anything I didn’t ask you but should have asked to understand your life story?

In addition, we collected basic demographic information such as: date of birth, place of birth, educational attainment, work history, residential history, marital status, family history, geographic proximity of offspring and other kin, and need and use of services.