

# What Does Marriage Mean to Us? Marital Centrality among Newlywed Couples

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## Abstract

With marriage now delayed until later in the life course, developmental and young adult scholars have increasingly focused on how relational and marital beliefs of unmarried young adults influence developmental and relational trajectories. Yet little research has explored how these same perceptions and beliefs may alter adult relationships and marriages. Using a national U.S. sample of 1,755 newlywed couples, we explored how beliefs about the centrality of marriage were associated with marital quality and commitment. A common-fate approach that simultaneously allowed for both individual and couple-level analyses was used. Results suggested that higher marital centrality beliefs separately for each partner and jointly as a couple were strongly associated with higher interpersonal commitment to one's spouse and the general level of commitment in the relationship. Significant indirect effects found for husbands, wives, and at the couple-level suggested that higher marital centrality beliefs had an indirect association through commitment with higher relationship satisfaction, less instability, and higher reports of positive communication. Marital beliefs around the centrality of marriage appear to be strongly connected to the establishment of commitment and relationship quality among married couples. Results

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call for the expansion of the marital and relational belief literature into the context of adult relationships.

**Keywords**

newlyweds, marital attitudes, dyadic relationship/quality/satisfaction, commitment, paradigms

First marriage is now delayed until the late 20s or early 30s among most segments in the United States (Johnson & Dye, 2005; Lee & Payne, 2010). However, marriage remains an important goal and expectation for the majority of the single population (Hymowitz et al., 2013; Willoughby & Carroll, 2015) and most young adults will still marry at least once in their lifetime (Hymowitz et al., 2013). With delayed marriage creating an expanding period of singlehood for most prior to marriage, scholars interested in marital trajectories have recently focused on how single adults view and conceptualize future marriage. Such scholarship on the marital attitudes and beliefs of young adults has suggested important links between such beliefs and risk-taking behavior (Carroll et al., 2007; Clark et al., 2009), and the probability of eventual union transitions (Clarkberg et al., 1995). As recently noted by Willoughby and Carroll (2015, p. 292), "Although marriage may never occur or be sought out by some emerging adults, the implications for how emerging adults situate marriage into their long-term plans appears to shape the very nature, context, and length of emerging adulthood itself."

While scholarship focused on marital beliefs and the young adulthood developmental period has been expanding, marital belief scholarship focused on adults or married couples has lagged behind. This has likely been due to two underlying assumptions made by many scholars. First, scholars may assume that marital beliefs are primarily important in terms of how they inform premarital relational decision-making and future marital trajectories. This assumption would naturally place the focus on those individuals who have yet to transition to marriage. After marriage, or later in the life course when marriage is less likely, such beliefs would appear to hold less relevance. However, recent research has suggested that marital beliefs may be associated with varying relational processes in both cohabiting couples (Brown, 2004; Murrow & Shi, 2010) and married couples (Moss & Willoughby, 2016). These studies have suggested that marital beliefs held by individuals in committed relationships may shift relational effort, engagement in the relationship, and satisfaction. However, this scholarship is still limited and needs both replication and extension.

Specifically, no study to date has sought to explore such associations within a dyadic context or explored why marital beliefs may be important to relational processes among married couples. All research to date on marital beliefs within committed couples has been conducted at the individual level, failing to address a couple-level phenomenon with couple-level data. Such explorations are not only missing but also are likely vital to understanding how marital beliefs among couples produce both actor and partner effects, and common-fate associations with relational outcomes produced by jointly-held beliefs. The present study sought to extend this line of research by, for the first time, exploring how marital beliefs may be associated with relational well-being and processes (measured by satisfaction, instability, and positive communication) among newlywed couples in a nationally representative sample of couples. Specifically, we explored how the belief in marital centrality, or how central one expects the spousal role to be in their life compared to other responsibilities, may be associated with interpersonal commitment and a range of relational well-being indicators. Scholars have recently argued that marital centrality beliefs may be particularly relevant to married couples and function as a distinct internal perception that differs from interpersonal commitment (Willoughby, 2015). Links between marital centrality and commitment, communication, and relationship satisfaction were explored at the individual level and couple level, utilizing a common-fate framework to explore pathways from marital centrality to couple well-being.

## **Marital Paradigms**

As noted, dozens of studies in the last decade have now shown that marital beliefs, or the internal ways that individuals conceptualize and think about marriage for themselves and others, are associated with differing behavioral and relational decision-making during adolescence and young adulthood (see Willoughby & Carroll, 2015 for a review). As empirical links have continued to suggest the importance of marital beliefs to young adult relational trajectories, theoretical development has likewise accelerated. One of the first attempts to explain such associations was Marital Horizon Theory, proposed by Carroll et al. (2007). This theory suggested that unmarried young adults each possess a marital horizon based on their beliefs about future marital transitions. Such a horizon would affect both current and future behavior as young adults move toward or away from their ideal marital transition. Relevant to the present study, such ideas were expanded and generalized in Marital Paradigm Theory (Willoughby, Hall, & Luczak, 2015). Expanding the focus on marital beliefs beyond young adulthood, Marital Paradigm

Theory suggests that all individuals possess a collective paradigm centered on marriage given the important historical and institutional significance of marriage in most societies. Split across six interconnected dimensions and drawing from the theoretical concepts of symbolic interaction theory, one's marital paradigm was suggested to influence one's decisions in a variety of contexts as well as one's interactions with others. Specifically, Marital Paradigm Theory argued that one's general beliefs about marriage would shift one's intentions to engage in behavior, and thus be associated with the probability of engaging (or not engaging) in a range of individual and relational behaviors. Recent research focused on marital paradigms has suggested that such beliefs do appear to be predictive of a wide variety of relational and individual behaviors (Barr & Simons, 2012; Leonhardt & Willoughby, 2018; Nelson et al., 2017).

Despite the recent theoretical developments in the study of marital beliefs, several important theoretical limitations remain. Among the largest is the fact that the vast majority of data supporting both Marital Horizon Theory and Marital Paradigm Theory have been based on samples of young adult college students. Such samples may be biased and be producing unique results that are not generalizable to other moments in the life course. Further, given the focus on young adulthood in this body of scholarship over the last decade, virtually no evidence of the importance of marital paradigms exists for those who are not in the young adulthood period or those who are married. This is despite claims that the Marital Paradigm Theory should apply to all individuals, including those who are already married (Willoughby, Hall, & Luczak, 2015).

In one of the few studies to explore marital beliefs among couples, Willoughby (2015) explored marital beliefs in a U.S. sample of committed couples and noted that marital beliefs might be relevant to couples by being closely associated with commitment levels. As individuals view marriage in a more favorable light, their commitment to building a successful long-term marriage with a partner may increase. Other studies have also noted that marital beliefs can influence relational patterns of cohabiting couples (Murrow & Shi, 2010; Willoughby & Belt, 2016). While some marital beliefs (for example, those about ideal marital timing) may be less salient for married individuals, beliefs about how central the marital role will be or is being in one's life have been suggested to be an important correlate of healthy marriages. However, data to support this theoretical assertion are currently limited.

While limited research has suggested that specific marital beliefs may be an important element of establishing and promoting positive relational behavior among married couples and an understudied element of marital well-being, very little specific discussion of how or why such links may

occur currently exists within the scholarly literature. While scholars have long noted that the development of commitment within romantic relationships is tied to perceptions of one's relationship (Ogolsky et al., 2016; Surra & Hughes, 1997), there exists a dearth of research exploring how generalized beliefs about marriage and one's marital role may play a role in developing relationships. While such research is limited, we draw on the literature that does exist, as well as a more general scholarship on relational functioning and well-being to propose two reasons for why marital beliefs centered on marital centrality may be important to relational scholars and have a potential association with marital quality.

### *Commitment Development Model*

One potential reason why marital centrality beliefs may be associated with marital quality is through the development of commitment. Commitment has a long history within the relational and marital scholarship (see Stanley et al., 2010; Surra & Hughes, 1997). Commitment is generally understood to be the fundamental aspect of a long-term relationship's success (Stanley & Markman, 1992) and a motivator to engage in proactive efforts to sustain one's relationship (Whitton et al., 2007). In a marital context, commitment is often argued to facilitate healthy marital processes (Carroll et al., 2006; Fincham et al., 2007). Empirical research has backed up this claim and suggested that higher commitment is linked to increased relationship stability (Impett et al., 2001), relationship adjustment (Rhoades et al., 2010), and a higher likelihood to forgive one's partner (Finkel et al., 2002). While newlyweds tend to be highly committed to each other (Veroff et al., 1998), variations in commitment or loyalty among newlyweds likely have important implications for the short-term and long-term relationship quality and dynamics (see Hall & Adams, 2011).

Much of the research on commitment within romantic relationships draws on interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and relational investments. Rusbult (1980) assumed that the development of commitment was based on relational investments where an individual invests personal resources into the relationship over time. Commitment then develops due to both the perception of this investment as well as the perception of resource loss that would accompany ending the relationship. Often viewed as bidirectional, investments in the relationship fuel the creation of commitment, and commitment drives further investment in the relationship. In perhaps the most prevalent model of commitment in the relational science area, Stanley and Markman (1992) expanded on these ideas to propose two types of commitment: the dedication that comes from an internal desire to improve the

relationship and the constraint that involves commitment based on barriers to exiting the relationship.

While much work has been done on the correlates and basic theory of commitment, some questions remain unclear. What makes someone invest in a relationship in the first place if such investment creates commitment? In a marital context, what motivates someone to continue to invest and be proactive in positive relationship behaviors? Does commitment exist in a conceptual vacuum or do other larger values and paradigms influence its development? Some scholars have suggested that commitment within new marriages likely develops through the interaction of couple process, individual perceptions of one's relationship, and more broad views of relationships (Ogolsky et al, 2016). Relevant to the current study and in one of the only empirical studies to link general marital beliefs and commitment, Ogolsky and colleagues found among a sample of almost 400 dating couples that an individual's worries about marriage were associated with different commitment patterns over time. These limited findings, when paired with the basic assumptions of the Marital Paradigm Theory, suggest that commitment itself may be viewed as an intention to engage in positive relationship behaviors. Stanley et al. (2010, p. 245) recently described commitment as “. . .an intention to be together in the future,” while Fincham et al. (2007) argued that commitment likely is derived from deeper meanings held by individuals within a marriage. If marital beliefs affect intention, perhaps it is one's generalized beliefs about marriage that serve as the instigator of commitment in newlyweds by creating a desire to invest in one's relationship. From this perspective, positive marital quality would be a by-product of positive marital beliefs through the establishment and maintenance of higher commitment to one's spouse. We will refer to this as the *commitment development model*.

### *Joint Relational Environments during Marriage*

While some evidence would suggest the commitment development model is a viable pathway from marital beliefs to marital quality, the development of commitment previously outlined is an individual framework meant to address the internal perceptions of one partner. However, recent marriage and health research has also suggested that research on couples should explore the potential of shared experience and environment as unique predictors and correlates of relational quality (Meyler et al., 2007). Specifically, Meyler et al. (2007) note that physical health, mental health, and health behaviors are often correlated among spouses, suggesting that concordance is due to assortative mating (Lillard & Panis, 1996), contagion (Goodman & Shippy, 2002), or shared environments (Waite, 1995). These same principles can be applied to

marital beliefs because individuals tend to marry people with similar views of marriage (e.g., assortative mating), views of each spouse may influence their partners' views (e.g., contagion), and partners share the same or overlapping social networks, financial resources, and living environments.

Couple concordance has been examined in a number of different substantive areas using various methodological approaches. From a substantive standpoint, scholars have recently explored partner concordance in relation to coping with cancer (Chan et al., 2017), sleep behaviors (Gunn et al., 2015), mental health disorders (Wang et al., 2017), use of tobacco products (Roberts et al., 2017), and sun protection (Manne et al., 2016). From a methodological standpoint, scholars have used similarity indices, actor/partner models of interdependence, and common-fate approaches, among others, to examine couple concordance (Galovan et al., 2017; Kenny et al., 2006; Ledermann & Kenny, 2012). The development of substantive research on partner congruence and of methodological approaches to address these issues suggests an increased acknowledgment that couple perspectives are often overlapping and even shared.

## Present Study

Both of the previous pathways suggest that underlying marital beliefs may be associated with relational quality and may in particular be associated with interpersonal commitment. While a true exploration of either mechanism would require a large longitudinal representative sample of couples at various stages of relationships, the first step in understanding if such theoretical assumptions are valid is to explore if cross-sectional associations between marital centrality, commitment, and relational quality exist across both individual and couple constructs. Given limited evidence that marital centrality beliefs may be particularly salient for married couples and previous scholarship suggesting links between marital beliefs and commitment among couples (Willoughby, 2015), the current study focused on exploring links between beliefs about marital centrality and commitment among newlywed couples. Using a large and nationally representative sample of newlywed couples, we first sought to replicate links between marital centrality and indicators of marital quality (satisfaction, instability, positive communication) established in previous convenience samples. Given previous research linking higher marital centrality with positive relational functioning, we propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Higher marital centrality among newlywed couples will be associated with higher marital satisfaction, lower instability, higher commitment, and more positive communication.

We next sought to establish preliminary cross-sectional evidence that commitment might mediate associations between marital centrality and marital quality. While cross-sectional mediation certainly can never show directional causality, previous research has suggested that generalized beliefs about relationships may provide a template through which commitments to a specific partner might develop. Given that previous scholarship suggests that this effect may occur at both the individual and couple levels, we utilized a common-fate model (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012) to explore both dyadic and individual effects. At the individual level, and again anticipating positive relationships, we next tested the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* Individual commitment will mediate relationships between individual marital centrality and individual marital satisfaction, instability, and positive communication for both husbands and wives.

This exploration also allowed for an examination of if pathways between variables of interest varied by gender in our opposite-sex couples. Gender dynamics have been shown to have an influence on relational and marital processes (Lamont, 2014; Sassler & Miller, 2011). Gender also appears to alter how commitment processes operate in romantic relationships, with some scholars noting gender differences in associations between commitment and well-being (Curran et al., 2010). One daily diary study found that male and female partners slightly differed in terms of how daily sacrifices impact feelings of commitment (Akçaboza et al., 2017). By exploring individual associations between centrality, commitment, and well-being across both husbands and wives, we were able to explore if such associations appear similar for males and females.

Finally, we also tested the joint marital context model by estimating how couple-level centrality predicted couple-level satisfaction, instability, and positive communication both directly and indirectly through couple-level commitment. We, therefore, tested the final hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3:* Couple marital centrality will directly and indirectly (through couple commitment) be associated with couple relationship satisfaction, instability, and positive communication.

## Method

### *Sampling Procedure*

Participants for this study were respondents in the CREATE Project. The (blinded for review) is a nationally representative survey of newly married



young couples. The study was approved by all appropriate IRB bodies. Participants for the study were recruited using a two-stage cluster stratification sample design, with the first stage involving a sample of counties and the second involving a sample of recent marriages within those selected counties. Counties were selected based on a probability proportion to size (PPS) design. Selection was based on county population size, marriage, divorce, and poverty rates, and the racial-ethnic distribution of the county. The number of marriages selected per county ranged from 40 to 280, depending on these five characteristics.

In the second stage, marriage record information was used, with assistance from publicly available databases to locate couples and invite them to participate. To be included in the sample, respondents had to (a) be married and selected into the sample frame (since some marriage applicants did not end up marrying), (b) have at least one partner between 18 and 36 years of age at the start of the study, (c) be in a first marriage for at least one of the partners in the dyad, and (d) be living within the United States. The majority of couples in the study were married during 2014 (90%), with the remainder in 2013 (4%) and 2015 (6%).

Participating couples were given a \$50.00 Visa gift card upon completion of the survey. A total of 2,187 marriages were recruited into the study. Of the 2,187 marriages, data from both members of the dyad were received in 1,889 (86%) cases, and data from one member of the dyad were received in the remaining 298 (14%) cases. After removing couples who provided data for only one partner, same-sex couples with indistinguishable dyads, and those who did not provide data on any of the variables for this study, the analytic sample size for this study was 1,755 newlywed heterosexual couples. A multi-step weighting process enabled inferences to the population of married couples in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Among the unweighted dataset, husband and wives were generally in their late 20s (husband  $M = 29.82$ , wife  $M = 28.03$ ). The most common racial category was White (husband = 65.4%, wife = 65.5%), followed by Latino (husband = 12.8%, wife = 13.2%). About half of all participants (husband = 46.0% wife = 55.5%) reported some type of post-secondary degree. The most common religious denomination was Protestant (husband = 48.3%, wife = 49.7%) followed by none (husband = 24.4%, wife = 22.1%). As noted above, all analyses reported used the weighted dataset where demographics matched U.S. proportions.

## Measures

**Marital centrality.** It was assessed with a four-item assessment, adapted from a measure developed by Kerpelman and Schvaneveldt (1999) and utilized in

previous research on marital centrality (Willoughby, Hall, & Goff, 2015). This scale assesses perceptions of the importance of current or expected roles in one's life moving forward. Participants were asked to indicate how much importance they currently place (or would place if not currently relevant) on the following aspects of their life: marriage, parenting, career, and personal leisure/hobbies. Instructions were clear that participants did not need to be currently engaged in a role to place importance on it. For example, non-parents were still invited to report the relative importance they placed on parenthood as a life role, even if they had yet to transition to parenthood themselves. Those who were not currently employed were also still instructed to rate how relatively important career roles were or would be in their life, regardless of current employment status. Participants' responses were forced to equal 100. For the current study, marital centrality was assessed based on the percentage being placed on one's spousal or marital role now and moving forward into the marriage. Higher scores represent a higher priority being placed on one's spousal role compared to one's role in the workplace, as a parent, or based on leisure activities. Values ranged from 0 to 100 ( $M = 39.78$ ,  $SD = 17.66$ ). While a one-item measure, albeit one assessed in relation to three other items, such one-item assessments of marital attitudes and beliefs have been shown to be robust predictors of behavior and outcomes among both young adults and adult couples (Willoughby & Carroll, 2015).

**Marital quality.** Four separate measures of marital quality were assessed. Some items were reverse coded so that total scores represented higher marital quality indicators. *Relationship satisfaction* was measured using four items from the Funk and Rogge (2007) relationship scale. Respondents were asked to rate "how satisfied" they were in their relationship, "how rewarding" their relationship was, and whether or not they had a "warm and comfortable" relationship with their partner; these items were measured on a six-point scale with 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*completely*). They were also asked to select their "degree of happiness" on a scale from 1 (*extremely unhappy*) to 7 (*perfect*). The scale showed good internal reliability in the present sample ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

*Marital instability* was measured using five items developed by (Amato et al., 2009). The respondents were asked to consider times they thought their marriage "might be in trouble," if they have spoken about divorce or have been in communication with an attorney. The responses were recoded on a six-point scale that ranged between 1 (*never*), 3 (*yes, within the last 3 years*), and 6 (*yes, within the last month*). Internal reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha = .87$ ). *Commitment* was measured using eight items from the Stanley and Markman (1992) commitment scale. Sample items included "I want this relationship to stay strong" and "I like to think of my partner and myself

more in terms of “us” and “we,” than “me” and “him/her.” These items were rated in categories from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). Internal reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha = .79$ ). *Relationship positive communication* was measured using four items that asked what the respondent thought of themselves when it came to relationship behaviors such as listening and communication. Items came from the validated RELATE positive communication scale (Busby et al., 2001). Question stem for each item was “How are YOU in your relationship?” Example items included: “I am able to listen to my partner in an understanding way,” and, “In most matters, I understand what my partner is trying to say.” The responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Internal reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Controls.** Several characteristics were controlled in our statistical models based on their established relationships with both marital beliefs and marital quality<sup>2</sup>. Race for both partners was coded as white = 1, other = 0. Education was assessed with one item asking about the highest level of education completed, with responses ranging from 1 (*less than high school*) to 7 (*advanced degree, JD, Ph.D. etc.*). Previous relationship history was assessed with two items. One asked if the participant had been married before their current marriage. Responses from both partners were recoded so that 0 = no previous marriages and 1 = any previous marriages. Cohabiting history with one’s spouse was assessed with one yes/no item (0 = no cohabitation; 1 = cohabitation history with spouse). The presence of any children was based on one item asking each participant if they had any children (yes = 1, no = 0).

## Results

We first conducted a preliminary analysis to confirm that marital centrality and relational commitment were indeed separate constructs in our sample. Prior research has suggested they are distinct (Willoughby, 2015) in that marital centrality assesses the general importance one places on the marital role and commitment assesses one’s specific sense of loyalty to a specific romantic partner. However, given the potential cognitive overlap of the two among newlyweds, we sought empirical evidence that these variables should be treated separately prior to our main analyses. This analysis provided evidence that centrality and commitment were related but distinct constructs within the current data. The centrality item and the commitment scale were only moderately correlated ( $r = .215, p < .001$ ). In addition, when the centrality item was added to the commitment scale, reliability dropped to .224 for wives and .222 for husbands, suggesting that the centrality item did not reliably fit with

other commitment items. These results suggest that although marital centrality and relational commitment are empirically correlated, they are conceptually distinct.

To examine Hypothesis 1, bivariate baseline associations for all variables were examined (Table 1). Confirming Hypothesis 1, both higher husband and wife marital centrality beliefs were significantly associated (all  $p$  values  $< .01$ ) with better relational well-being reports. All effect sizes were generally small. Higher husband marital centrality was significantly related to higher husband ( $r = .20$ ) and wife ( $r = .11$ ) commitment, higher husband ( $r = .18$ ) and wife ( $r = .12$ ) relationship satisfaction, less wife instability ( $r = -.06$ ), and more husband ( $r = .12$ ) and wife ( $r = .11$ ) positive communication. Higher wife marital centrality scores were significantly associated with higher husband ( $r = .12$ ) and wife ( $r = .20$ ) commitment, higher husband ( $r = .11$ ) and wife ( $r = .18$ ) relationship satisfaction, less wife instability ( $r = -.07$ ), and more husband ( $r = .10$ ) and wife ( $r = .14$ ) positive communication.

To examine our second and third hypotheses, we modeled dyadic associations between predictors, mediators, and outcomes. Although many researchers use an “actor/partner” approach to dyadic data analysis, that approach is not ideal when partner scores are highly correlated. An alternative approach that captures the shared variance in a construct across partners, and therefore capitalizes on within-couple correlations, is called a common fate-approach (Ledermann & Kenny 2012). Ledermann and Kenny (2012) suggest that this type of approach is helpful when partner scores correlate at .40 or higher, and therefore risk issues with multicollinearity. In the current study husband and wife marital centrality were correlated at .41, relationship commitment was correlated across husband and wife at .50, and relationship outcomes were correlated above .4 (husband and wife relationship stability  $r = .69$ ; husband and wife relationship satisfaction  $r = .60$ ; husband and wife relationship communication  $r = .44$ ). The type of common-fate model that we estimated included not only “common-fate” latent variables but also latent “unique” variables that represented the portion of variance not shared across partners. Both common fate and unique latent variables were included as predictors, mediators, and outcomes in our analyses.

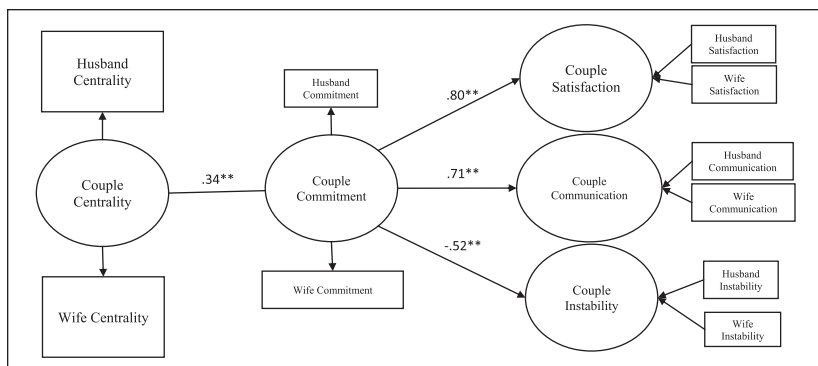
As seen in Figures 1 and 2, marital centrality scores for husbands and wives were used to create both a latent common-fate centrality score and husband and wife unique centrality scores. While Figures 1 and 2 both represent the same model that was run together, we have split the results into couple-level findings (Figure 1) and individual-level findings (Figure 2) to ease in interpretation of these findings. The common-fate marital centrality variable predicted common-fate variables for commitment, relationship satisfaction, and

**Table 1.** Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Main Study Variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Husband marital centrality	38.72	18.55	–									
2. Wife marital centrality	40.36	18.39	.41**	–								
3. Husband commitment	5.96	.88	.20**	.12**	–							
4. Wife commitment	5.95	.87	.11**	.21**	.50**	–						
5. Husband satisfaction	4.17	1.01	.18**	.11**	.60**	.42**	–					
6. Wife satisfaction	4.13	1.11	.12**	.18**	.46**	.61**	.60**	–				
7. Husband instability	1.67	1.13	–.04	–.01	–.42**	–.32**	–.57**	–.48**	–			
8. Wife instability	1.23	1.23	–.06**	–.07**	–.33**	–.42**	–.47**	–.63**	.69**	–		
9. Husband positive communication	4.07	.75	.12**	.10**	.50**	.33**	.59**	.47**	–.39**	–.36**	–	
10. Wife positive communication	4.17	.73	.11**	.14**	.34**	.44**	.60**	.59**	–.29**	–.40**	.44**	–

Notes: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Descriptive statistics based on averages for all scales.

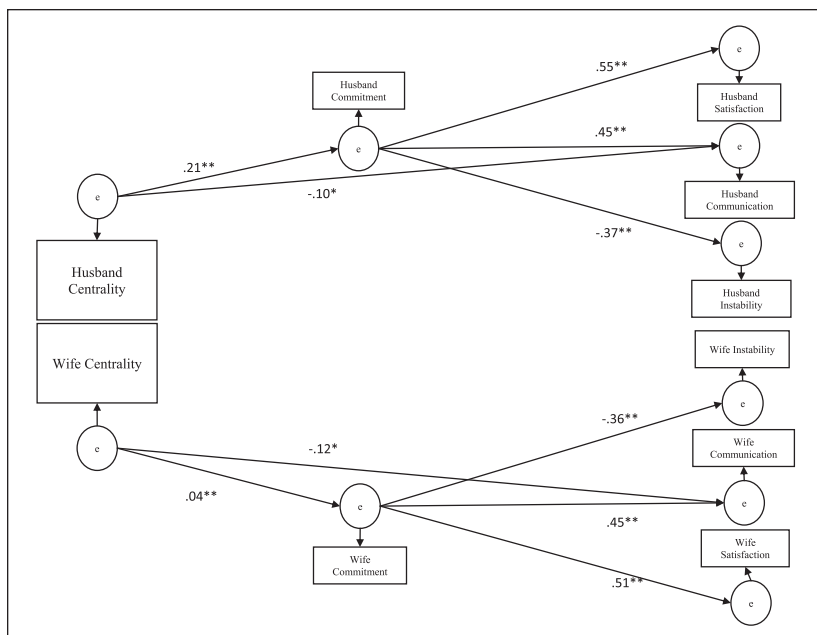


**Figure 1.** Common-fate model of marital centrality, commitment, and relational quality.

Note: Estimates calculated in the same model shown in Figure 2. Only significant pathways are shown in the model. Controls included race of both partners, if cohabitation occurred prior to marriage, education of female partner, and number of total children for both partners. Overall model fit:  $X^2(875) = 2625.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .04, CFI = .93, SRMR = .05.

relationship stability. Likewise, male and female unique variables of centrality predicted male and female unique scores of commitment, satisfaction, and stability. Indirect pathways from marital centrality to relationship satisfaction and stability through commitment were also examined. Originally, models controlled for both partners' reports of education, race, previous marriages, and age, along with whether couples cohabited prior to marriage and the presence of children. Preliminary analyses suggested that having a previous marriage and age were not significantly related to any central part of the model and lowered overall model fit, and so were eliminated. Additionally, husband and wife education were highly correlated ( $r = .59$ ), and so to reduce multicollinearity, only wife education was retained in the final model. Preliminary measurement models were also explored and all factor loadings for latent variables were adequate (ranging from .39 to .95).

Overall this model showed adequate fit to the data ( $X^2(875) = 2625.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .04, CFI = .93, SRMR = .05). Common-fate variables were generally significantly associated with each other. Higher couple marital centrality was significantly associated with higher couple commitment ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There were no direct relationships between marital centrality with relationship satisfaction ( $p = .97$ ), relationship stability ( $p = .18$ ) or couple positive communication ( $p = .58$ ). However, higher common-fate couple commitment was significantly associated with higher couple satisfaction ( $\beta = .80$ ,  $p < .001$ ), lower couple instability ( $\beta = -.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and higher couple positive communication ( $\beta = .71$ ,  $p < .001$ ).



**Figure 2.** Individual associations between marital centrality, commitment, and relational quality.

Note: Estimates calculated in the same model shown in Figure 1. Only significant pathways shown in the model. Controls included race of both partners, if cohabitation occurred prior to marriage, education of female partner, and number of total children for both partners. Overall model fit:  $X^2(875) = 2625.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .04, CFI = .93, SRMR = .05.

Once couple common-fate variables were accounted for, individual husband and wife unique centrality variables also had some associations with unique relationship well-being variables. For husbands, higher unique reported marital centrality was significantly associated with higher unique husband commitment ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and lower positive communication ( $\beta = -.10$ ,  $p = .013$ ). Husband unique centrality scores had no other significantly direct relationships with unique relationship satisfaction ( $p = .85$ ) or instability ( $p = .81$ ). Higher husband unique commitment was significantly associated with higher husband unique satisfaction ( $\beta = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ ), lower instability ( $\beta = -.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and higher positive communication ( $\beta = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

For wives, higher wife unique marital centrality was significantly associated with higher wife unique commitment scores ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and lower positive communication ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $p = .016$ ). No direct relationship

was found between wife unique marital centrality and wife satisfaction ( $p = .85$ ) or instability ( $p = .81$ ). Higher wife unique commitment had a significant association with higher wife unique satisfaction ( $\beta = .51, p < .001$ ), lower instability ( $\beta = -.36, p < .001$ ), and higher positive communication ( $\beta = .43, p < .001$ ).

Table 2 summarizes all indirect effects. Because Mplus does not allow bootstrapping when using sampling weights, indirect effects were first explored with weights and then estimated again without weights to provide 95% confidence intervals with bootstrapping. On the individual level, higher husband unique centrality scores were significantly associated indirectly with higher husband satisfaction ( $\beta = .11, p = .009$ ), lower husband instability ( $\beta = -.08, p = .018$ ), and more husband positive communication ( $\beta = .09, p = .022$ ) through husband commitment. For wives, higher wife unique centrality scores were significantly associated with higher wife satisfaction ( $\beta = .15, p = .003$ ), lower wife instability ( $\beta = -.10, p = .012$ ), and higher wife positive communication ( $\beta = .12, p = .001$ ) through wife commitment, confirming Hypothesis 2.

The common-fate centrality score had a significant indirect association with all three relationship well-being variables through commitment. Specifically, higher scores on the common-fate centrality variable were significantly associated indirectly with higher couple satisfaction ( $\beta = .27, p < .001$ ), less couple instability ( $\beta = -.17, p < .001$ ), and more positive couple communication ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ) confirming Hypothesis 3.

## Discussion

While recent scholarship on marital beliefs and attitudes has suggested several distinct correlates between beliefs about a future marriage and relational decision-making among young adults (Carroll et al., 2007; Clark, et al., 2009), results from the present study provide some of the first evidence that the impact of such beliefs persists beyond marital transitions. While several scholars (Hall & Adams, 2011; Willoughby & Carroll, 2015) and the Marital Paradigm Theory (Willoughby, Hall, & Luczak, 2015) have suggested that marital beliefs remain relevant for married individuals, to date little evidence for this claim exists. Results from the present study suggest that marital beliefs, specifically marital centrality beliefs, remain an integral correlate of relational quality and function, at least among newlyweds who have recently undergone the marital transitions. While effect sizes were generally small to moderate, how newlyweds continue to conceptualize and think about the role of marriage in their lives appears relevant to overall marital well-being. Bivariate relationships suggested that higher marital centrality was linked to



**Table 2.** Standardized Indirect Effects Connecting Marital Centrality and Relationship Outcomes.

Indirect effect	$\beta$	SE	Lower 2.5% CI	Upper 2.5% CI
Couple Centrality → Couple Commitment → Couple Satisfaction	.27**	.05	.01	.27
Couple Centrality → Couple Commitment → Couple Instability	-.18**	.04	-.27	-.10
Couple Centrality → Couple Commitment → Couple Communication	.24**	.05	.04	.12
M Centrality → M Commitment → Male Satisfaction	.11**	.04	.03	.09
M Centrality → M Commitment → Male Instability	-.08*	.03	-.07	-.02
M Centrality → M Commitment → Male Communication	.09*	.04	.02	.05
F Centrality → F Commitment → Female Satisfaction	.15**	.05	.01	.29
F Centrality → F Commitment → Female Instability	-.10*	.04	-.25	-.01
F Centrality → F Commitment → Female Communication	.12**	.04	.01	.34

Notes: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

95% confidence intervals were based on 2,000 bootstrap draws and unweighted data. Total indirect effects were based on standardized total effects with weighted data. All patterns of significance were equivalent across weighted and unweighted analyses although coefficients and confidence intervals did not always overlap.

better reports of relationship satisfaction, positive communication, stability, and commitment for both husbands and wives.

Full model results provided additional evidence that marital centrality is related to underlying relationship quality. First, strong evidence suggested joint couple centrality is significantly associated with positive relationship function via the establishment of joint commitment. Such results complement previous research which has suggested that the development of commitment is tied to appraisals of one's partner and general relationship perceptions (Ogolsky et al., 2016; Surra & Hughes, 1994). It is important to note that the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents a definitive causal sequencing of these constructs to be developed. It appears clear, however, that higher interpersonal commitment and a joint sense of the central position of one's marriage in relation to other adult roles are associated with healthy relationship well-being and process. Higher couple marital centrality in the common-fate model was indirectly related to better reports of couple satisfaction, less instability, and more positive communication through joint commitment. Results from the present study suggest that marital centrality may be one important factor that develops, likely bidirectionally, alongside interpersonal commitment. More generally, this may suggest that not only is it important for married couples to develop a sense of obligation and commitment to each other but also to the larger institution of marriage and the centrality of their spousal role within it.

It should be noted that our measure of commitment was largely tapping into dedication commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992) and not other forms of commitment. Marital centrality may also be associated with other forms of commitment, including the accumulation of constraints. Higher centrality may make both partners engage in behaviors (childbearing, financial entanglement, etc.) that may build barriers to leaving the relationship. While the associations in the present study were largely positive, if centrality is also associated with constraint commitment, centrality may lead to negative associations with both individual (Burke & Segrin, 2014) and relational (Rhoades et al., 2010) well-being. In addition, it is possible for couples to hold such high commitment toward their relationship that they develop unhealthy dependency (Nock, 1995). As such, results should not be interpreted to mean that higher marital centrality and higher commitment are likely to universally be related to positive relational outcomes.

The unique common-fate approach of our analysis also allowed for an exploration of individual husband and wife effects after accounting for the joint effects of each construct. Here, we found evidence of the same indirect pattern for both husbands and wives in that higher individual marital centrality was associated with higher individual commitment to one's

spouse which in turn was associated with better outcomes. Although some previous studies have suggested gender differences when exploring interpersonal commitment (Akçaboza et al., 2017; Curran et al., 2010), our results appeared largely stable across gender. While serving to provide additional evidence of the important role of marital centrality, one unique individual finding was also found. This was a direct and negative association between individual marital centrality and positive communication for husbands and wives. While any interpretation of this distinctive finding is merely speculative, it may be that after accounting for joint couple centrality within the model, unique individual variance may be attributed to extreme or unrealistic views of marriage and, by extension, one's spouse. Some research has suggested that idealizing one's spouse or holding extremely romanticized views of relationships may undermine healthy relationship development (see Lemay & Venaglia, 2016 for a review). Perhaps some spouses hold marriage to be so central to their lives, their partners cannot possibly live up to their lofty expectations. This may lead to elevated conflict and unhealthy communicating. There are likely other possible explanations for this association and scholars should consider how higher marital centrality scores may have both positive and negative influences on relationship well-being.

As noted previously, general associations between marital centrality and marital well-being may be due to several potential factors. It is possible that positive marital beliefs help foster the development of interpersonal commitment. It is also possible that the joint relational environment created by both marriage partners placing a high value on marriage helps create an environment where positive relational outcomes can emerge. Of course, it is also possible that positive relationship quality may help foster both stronger commitment and a more positive perception and belief about marriage both personally and institutionally. While the specific mechanisms of these associations will need to be further examined in future longitudinal studies, the significant links found in the present study are an important step forward in this area of literature and provide essential information regarding future questions that need to be explored in order to understand the links between marital beliefs and relational functioning among newlyweds. While directionality should not be implied by these results, the small but significant links between marital centrality and key factors underlying healthy marital functioning suggest that further explorations of general beliefs about marriage among married couples may be warranted.

Several limitations should be taken into account when interpreting these results and before generalizing findings. First, the timeframe of the current study only captures the newlywed stage of marriage. It is possible that as

marriage develops, marital beliefs become less relevant to underlying couple well-being and process. As noted, longitudinal studies are also needed to explore specific pathways between marital centrality, commitment, and outcomes. While we took a unique common-fate approach to our research question, traditional actor-partner models (APIM), especially done longitudinally, may provide additional insights into associations between centrality and commitment. It is also important to note that in the current study only marital centrality was explored, one of six dimensions of the Marital Paradigm Theory. While marital centrality has been hypothesized to be the most relevant to married couples, beliefs about marital processes, including beliefs about gender roles, intimacy, and finances, are likely also relevant to married couples. Future studies should continue to explore other types of relational and marital beliefs that may have relevance in the process and well-being of married couples. Beliefs about marital salience (the important of marriage) may also be important to explore.

Related to measurement, some caution should be noted given that some participants may not have transitioned to become parents or may not currently be involved in a personal career. While the marital centrality item asked participants to consider these roles even if they may happen in the future and they were allowed to assign a relative importance of zero in any category, some measurement error may occur based on different participants interpreting and answering this item slightly differently. Future studies may wish to explore in more specific ways if measurement differences in centrality measures differ by parental status or other life circumstances and further explore potential measurement invariance across such groups. Finally, due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, we note the distinct possibility of bidirectional effects, since post-marriage relational variables could also influence marital centrality. This question should be addressed once longitudinal data are available.

Overall, results provide important evidence that marital beliefs are relevant cognitions, even after marriage occurs. While the majority of marital beliefs and attitudes scholarship has focused on adolescence and young adulthood, results from this study call for an expanded approach to marital beliefs. In a culture marked by shifting trends and views of marriage, how individuals and couples conceptualize the ever-changing institution of marriage appears to be an important aspect of how they approach their relationship with each other.

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## Notes

1. Full details on weighting procedures are available from the authors
2. If the couple was in an interracial relationship and if both partners were working were also originally considered as controls. However, neither control was significantly associated with most outcomes and the pattern of results and the significance of results did not change in models with or without these controls. To retain the most parsimonious model, these controls were dropped in final models.

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