Marriage Plans: A study of marital expectations of 19-24-year-old women

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Abstract. There is a gap in sociological research on the topic of young women's perceptions and expectations of marriage in the context of societal shifts in marriage as an institution. The aim of this study is to address the question of how young women perceive marriage, what their marital expectations are, and what factors they perceive to influence these ideas of marriage. Data from six semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women from Vancouver, B.C., who are between the ages of 19 and 24 is used as the basis for this analysis. The main findings include that the respondents consistently express a desire for an even distribution of labor in their potential future marriages but define this differently in terms of how they expect labour would be divided and how evenly they expect to share the household labour with their partner, that media and parents are commonly cited as primary influences on marital perceptions and expectations, and that respondents shared a sense of a common timeline of certain steps (such as getting married or having children) they are expected to take in life, which adds pressure on women to get married. While the results of this study are not generalizable to a broader population, it may provide a starting point for further discussion on women's marital expectations and perceptions that includes the voices of women.

Introduction

As the landscape of expectations placed on young women changes alongside the evolution of family and marriage as institutions, there is a gap in sociological knowledge regarding women's marriage expectations for themselves compared to institutional norms, as well as the factors that they believe impact these expectations in a Canadian context rooted in qualitative research. Smith's (1993) concept of the standard North American family ("SNAF") as a heteronormative one with "a legally married couple sharing a household,"

to which the husband provides the financial support and the wife's "primary responsibility is to the care of the husband, household, and children", has been widely accepted as the "normal" family portrayed and referenced in common North American society for many years (p. 52). The SNAF may be critiqued for relying on the exploitation of women's physical and emotional labour in the household (including household work and childrearing) to be upheld by families. In particular, in families with both parents working, it is common to see mothers performing Hoschild's (1989) concept of the "second shift", in which they are expected to work their career-jobs, and then perform additional labour when they come home to maintain their family (a burden which tends to fall on mothers rather than fathers) (Hays, 1996). Despite SNAF having been adopted as the expected family form, it is important to develop a strong body of research on the lived experiences of individual marriages and family forms to better understand how individual women interact with this dominant ideology of the SNAF. As cohabitation and common law unions are seen as more acceptable than before in Western society, and with changes in laws surrounding same-sex marriage (as SNAF assumes heterosexuality), it is important for us to maintain understandings of how marriage as a concept is being perceived given shifts in society and in academic discourse.

As we seek to improve our understanding of marriage, it is imperative that we include the voices of the individuals our theories center on. Including the standpoints of those being studied means researchers may draw attention to the "alternative constructs, paradigms, and epistemologies" that people who may be subjugated have and allow research to empower research participants more than if their voices are neglected (Collins, 1991:372). My intention has been to involve women's voices in research about their perceptions and expectations, but I am unable to determine whether the respondents truly felt empowered through their participation in this study. In an attempt to include the standpoints of the respondents in this study, a central goal in this research has been to use feminist methodology through which I both "notice women and their concerns", and "reveal both the diversity of actual women's lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible" (DeVault, 1996:32). It is important to note that my attempt at this feminist methodology is limited in that the scope of this study centers around women in a North American context only and does not involve women with a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds, among other social inequalities not accounted for in this study. Despite attempting to apply an intersectional lens to this study and analysis, there are a multitude of social intersections that were not addressed due to the difficult nature of accounting for all possible intersections.

The aim of this study is to address the questions of how young women perceive marriage, what their marital expectations are (specifically in terms of gender roles and the division of labour within their potential future marriages), and what factors women perceive to have an influence on their perceptions and expectations of marriage. I hope to develop a further understanding of whether the women interviewed perceive marriage to be undergoing a process of deinstitutionalization.

Through six semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women between the ages of 19- and 24-years old in Vancouver, B.C., I aim to develop an analysis that involves the voices of the research participants. Majority of the scholarship on marital expectations that were reviewed for this study, with the main exception of Gerson's (2011) work, were based on survey research as the primary methodology. I hope to expand on the existing, largely quantitative, body of knowledge surrounding the perceptions and expectations young women have around the topic of marriage by providing a nuanced analysis based on rich data from qualitative research.

Definitions

Throughout this analysis, I will be using terms such as *marital expectations*, *perceptions*, and *opinions*. The term marriage will be used in this study to refer to the legal and personal commitment that two individuals make to one another, and their relationship throughout the rest of their union. Marriage may be discussed as an institution, meaning that it "governs the organization of household production" and "intimate relationships, assumed to be sexually exclusive and, at least at the onset, permanent" (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010: 60). I use the term *marital perceptions* to encompass the beliefs and associations that women hold about marriage as an institution and as something they may personally experience one day. *Marital opinions* is used synonymously with marital perceptions.

When discussing marital expectations in this study, I intend to focus specifically on women's expectations for gender role performances in their marriage. I am interested in understanding if the women interviewed aim to have what are often considered more traditional gender roles (as described by Smith's (1993) SNAF) or a more egalitarian division of labour between themselves and their potential future spouses. The participants of this study were asked about how they anticipate dividing the labour associated with marriage. This marriage work (or labour) is referring to household labour, childcare, and any other work or labour that is commonly associated with a marriage (this meaning was communicated to the women during their interviews).

Literature Review

From frameworks for understanding the value individuals place in marriage, to predictors of individuals' expectations of marriage, to studies of expectations individuals have for marriage, there is a large body of literature dedicated to understanding marriage in Western societies.

Frameworks

Existing literature in the field of marital perceptions and expectations focus heavily on the expectations that have been placed on women by society. There is less discourse centered around what women perceive is expected from them in terms of marriage.

This analysis will approach the topic of marriage expectations through a symbolic interactionist lens, through which behaviours are seen as having symbolic meaning in society (Blumer, 1969). Individual women's perceptions of marriage will be seen as the meanings given to the abstract institution of marriage, and the ways these meanings have been formed through social interaction with others and "modified through an interpretative process" on an individual basis (Blumer, 1969: 2). In this way, while individuals may start out with certain perceptions or understandings of marriage, "they are consistently altering their views and perceptions of marriage" as they continue to have diverse experiences throughout their lives (Willoughby, 2013: 205).

Life Course Theory will also be employed in this analysis. This framework outlines how individual's paths in life are situated within their historical context, and that individual lives are interwoven into similar life trajectories (Elder, 1985). While individuals may have linked lives – that is, an "interaction between the individual's social worlds over the life span" – they also have a level of agency that is demonstrated through the variety of responses individuals have to similar social circumstances (Elder, 1985: 6). In the context of marital expectations and perceptions, Life Course Theory can be used to theorize the general trend of whether women can expect to get married or not and the general path their lives may take in terms of marriage and family development. However, we can still expect to see women employing their agency in terms of their own specific expectations and timelines for their potential plans and expectations of marriage. In addition to this sense of agency, individuals can be seen exercising their sociological imagination – that is, their ability to understand individuals' positions within the broader social-historical context (Mills, 1959). As addressed in the *Timeline Pressures* section of this analysis, the sociological imagination may be limited when individuals conceptualize their own experiences and agency within the life trajectory they share with their cohort.

As a study rooted in women's experiences, a feminist lens will also be applied to this analysis. In light of the progression of the feminist movement towards one that prioritizes equality on a personal and public level, egalitarian relationships (in which both partners are seen as performing equal levels of labour) have become a common goal. As discussed by Deutsch et al. (2007), women's increasing focus on having a successful career has created a stronger need for a more egalitarian distribution of labour between themselves and their partners. However, there does not seem to be any commonly accepted specific division of labour. This lack of defined egalizarianism may be tied to Choice Feminism, a form of feminism that sees "every decision a woman makes as potentially feminist, if

given thought and made with a political consciousness" (Thwaites, 2017: 57). Wilcox & Nock's (2007) analysis on women's and men's happiness in marriages following the gender revolution found that the rise in popularity in Choice Feminism indicates that even feminist women may "feel free to "opt out" of the labor force or let their husbands take the lead in breadwinning if either of these options look best for them and their families" (108-109). However, Choice Feminism has been criticized for allowing individuals to "shy away from engaging politically and critically with the unequally gendered world in which we live" by considering any critique or discussions over a women's actions as un-feminist (Thwaites, 2017: 66). Choice feminism is particularly relevant in the context of life course theory, as it provides women with more freedom to follow in existing trajectories, even if they support the SNAF ideology or unequal labour division, without facing judgement from other women. In this way, choice feminism has the potential to enable the furthering of unequal marriages.

Marital Horizon Theory is a separate framework that can be useful in approaching the study of marital expectations. A "*marital horizon* refers to a person's outlook or approach to marriage in relation to his or her current situation," and it focuses on how highly individuals prioritize marriage as a goal, how they want to time marriage in their lives, and how they determine their own readiness for marriage (Carroll et al., 2007:221). In the context of this study, the women participating in the interviews seemed to perceive their marital horizons to be quite distant, often describing marriage as not on their own or their friends' "radars" yet. Their marital horizons appear to be influenced by their peers' expected life trajectories, in that their expectations for marriage are tied to their expectations of when individuals in their age group will be marrying. This is discussed further in the *Timeline Pressures* finding below.

The Institution/Deinstitutionalization Debate

It is difficult to approach the literature surrounding marriage without coming across the institutionalization/deinstitutionalization debate. Cherlin (2004) began this discussion by claiming that marriage is being deinstitutionalized as it shifts towards individualization through the "weakening of the social norms that define people's behaviour in a social institution such as marriage" (p. 848). Cherlin (2004) states that marriage "remains important on a symbolic level" and is still "a marker of prestige", despite being less dominant than it has been in the past (p. 858). Lauer & Yodanis (2010) counter Cherlin's (2004) claims by questioning his definition of institutionalization, stating that studying "deinstitutionalization should more accurately focus on the weakening of the formal and informal rules and assumptions of the institution itself", rather than focussing on the changes of the rules and regulations within marriages (p. 61). Studies such as Skrbis et al.'s (2011) and Hall's (2006) analyze the meaning young adults and youths give to marriage, demonstrating that although some of the norms within marriage are evolving (such as the shift

toward more egalitarian gender role division), marriage is still held as a valuable symbol in Western society. As Elder (1994) outlines, there is a life trajectory that individuals in any given socio-historical context follow, with marriage being an important step in the common life trajectory. . The present study demonstrates that the institution of marriage – as a universally recognized symbol of commitment and partnership – is still often held as a life goal for women.

Marital Expectations

In line with the evolving expectations of marriage, there is a growing body of academic work dedicated to understanding what expectations individuals have of marriage, as well as what factors can help predict how individuals perceive marriage, primarily in an American context. This literature often approaches studying either what marital expectations individuals have, or what factors influence individuals' expectations. According to Holman & Dao Li (1997), existing discourse suggests that "perceived readiness for marriage is part of a socially constructed developmental transition into marriage for most young adults" (p. 124). This ties heavily to Life Course Theory, and individual's sense of being on a life trajectory that is shared with their peers, drawing attention to the role which individual's perceptions of their social networks may influence their expectations of their own lives based on what they understand to be the "normal" steps to take in life. Hoffnung (2004) analyzes how women's intentions to have careers, marriages, and children actually relate to their "career and family outcomes" (p. 711). Hoffnung's (2004) study demonstrates that women often want careers, marriage, and motherhood, but that the relationship with the three can be complex when careers are financially necessary for the women, and that women may choose to delay getting married in order to establish their careers first. Other studies such as that of Gerson (2011) look at a combination of how one's family experiences while growing up impacts their expectations, perceptions, and values placed on their own existing or potential marriage. Gerson (2011) places emphasis on individual's marital expectations and the way they perform gender roles in their marriages in the context of the societal shift in gender roles. Through Gerson's (2011) analysis, we see patterns emerge of individuals taking cues from their parents' divisions of labour to determine their own expectations of gender roles in marriage. With these contributions in mind, I aim to understand the respondent's perceptions of their marital expectations in context of broader society, and whether respondents express shifts in gender roles over time having an influence on their personal perceptions of marriage.

As referenced in the institutionalization-deinstitutionalization debate, increasing rates of divorce are commonly seen as a symbol of a shift in marriage and marital expectations in Western society. Barich & Bielby (1996) analyze how expectations of marriage evolved from 1967 to 1994, finding that love and affection are primary expectations individuals hold for potential marriages, in addition to an expectation of economic secu-

rity (among other, more instrumental, previously emphasized expectations for marriage). Ellison et al. (2004), on the other hand, analyse the intersection between religious involvement and marital expectations of individual, college-aged women, finding that individuals who feel strongly about their religiosity and have adopted religious family values and norms are associated with having a strong commitment to getting married, and value marriage as a goal. Maintaining a personal feminist identity is studied as being a potential influence on women's desire for marriage and children in Hartwell et al.'s (2014) analysis. Hartwell et al. (2014:102) find that "non-feminists desired marriage and children more than did feminists", and that within the category of feminists, women who identify themselves as feminists could be predicted to have a lower desire for marriage than women who did not self-identify as feminist but are deemed to hold feminist beliefs. This study aims to address whether the respondents perceive these factors (economic security, religiosity, and/or feminist ideologies) in relation to their marital expectations and perceptions.

Methodology

The method of research for this study is semi-structured, in-depth interviews based on an interview guide. I conducted six interviews between thirty and sixty minutes long with six women. Five of the interviews were conducted in person, and one was conducted over Skype. The target demographic for participants were self-identified women who are between the ages of 19-and 24-years-old. Nineteen was chosen as the minimum age in order to ensure that respondents would have graduated high school, and in order to maintain the age of consent. The maximum age was chosen as 24 in order to limit the study to individuals who are typically "college-aged" (StatsCan, 2010). In this way, I ensured that the scope of the study focused on individuals who are often considered young (those who are likely to be currently studying or recently having joined the workforce). Recruitment for this study was primarily conducted through Facebook posts calling for participants. The only criteria for participating was that respondents were from Kamloops or Vancouver - (as logistically, these were locations that were accessible to the researcher), that they identified as women, and that they were between the ages of 19- and 24-years-old.

The respondents who were selected to participate were all between the ages of 20- and 23-years-old. Three of the respondents are mixed-race, one is South-East Asian, one is West Asian, and one is White. Although all respondents came from a mix of racial backgrounds, all had grown up in North America (either in the USA or in Canada), and all had lived in Vancouver for over two years. Three of the respondents were currently working full time and had graduated with their undergraduate degrees in the last year, and the other three respondents were currently working towards their bachelor's degrees. Of those who had graduated, two respondents had degrees in commerce, and the third

in the humanities. The remaining three respondents are studying commerce, land and food systems, and social sciences. Five of the respondents currently reside in Vancouver, and one is living outside of Canada for a school program but has lived in Vancouver for the majority of her life and will be returning to reside in Vancouver within the next six months. I did not ask the respondents about their sexuality, partly in order to see if they felt that it was relevant to how they perceive marriage and their expectations of marriage. One of the six respondents mentioned that she is bisexual, and another one mentioned that she had gone through a period of questioning her heterosexuality, but none of the respondents drew explicit ties between their sexuality and how they perceive marriage. Two of the six respondents mentioned their religiosity in their interview. Two of the respondents explicitly referenced having feminist ideologies, and a third stated that she holds strong beliefs in gender equality.

The questions asked in the interviews focused primarily on expectations women have in terms of gender role division in marriage, and how they perceive their social ties to influence their marital expectations and perceptions. Each interview began (after asking the respondent to introduce themselves) with asking them what the word "marriage" makes them think of in order to try to gain an understanding of what associations and perceptions they have of marriage. I asked each respondent where they think their ideas of marriage come from, at first immediately after they explained their association with the word "marriage", and again in a more holistic way at the end of the interview (asking where they think their ideas, expectations, perceptions, and/or opinions of marriage come from). There were questions of whether they would like to get married, and how they expect to divide the labour associated with marriage (such as household work and childrearing) between them and their spouse if they do get married. After this line of questioning, the questions shifted to how the respondents perceive their social ties and society to influence how they see and think of marriage. Questions focused on how the women perceived their parents', siblings' (if applicable), and friends' relationships or marriages as well as how they perceived these relationships to influence their marital perceptions. The last topic covered in the interviews was how the respondents perceived social pressures and expectations (if they perceived any) of marriage placed on themselves as individuals and women their age. I also asked them how they perceived their personal views of marriage to fit in relation to their view of broader societal marital expectations. The interviews completed with an opportunity for the women to discuss anything they thought was important that had not been covered in the interviews, and for them to ask me any questions they had. Audio recordings were made of each of the interviews, which were then transcribed and analyzed. The interview transcripts were analyzed after being coded by hand through a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2012). The analysis of this study used inductive reasoning, and was rooted in the responses given by participants, rather than being based on previous theories and discourse in an attempt "to learn participants' implicit meanings of their experience" (Charmaz, 2012:4). Each respondent has been assigned a pseudonym that is used in this analysis.

It is important to note my positionality in the context of this research. I am a 22-year-old woman who lives in Vancouver, and it is likely that my identity as someone who also fits into the target demographic of my study played a role in the responses elicited in the interviews. The women interviewed all had some level of connection to me, mostly through mutual friends or other social connections. As I belong to the same gender and age group as the respondents, it is possible that they answered my questions differently than they would have had I been a man, a different age, or someone with no social ties to them. I developed rapport with the respondents by explaining why I am interested in studying the topic of marital expectations, and it seemed as though they were quite comfortable discussing their thoughts and experiences with me, often using colloquial language and occasionally making jokes and laughing throughout the interviews, potentially because I am going through a similar stage of life as they are. While my positionality may have made me more relatable and trustworthy, it also may have influenced how the women responded to my questions. It is possible that they may have (consciously or subconsciously) edited their answers to my questions based on what they thought my expectations were. For example, they may have emphasized gender equality more than they actually believe in it if they perceived that I hold feminist ideologies. Because the recruitment process was done primarily through Facebook, it is possible that respondents had access to my personal profile and may have developed a perception of me as a person that could have influenced their answers in this way. Specifically, they may have seen that I hold intersectional feminist beliefs personally through the posts and people I interact with online, and that I have been involved in a number of groups that support social justice causes. I, as a researcher, am invested in the topic of this study because it does relate to my own life. I am not married, but I do have personal beliefs about marriage, and expectations for my own potential marriage that surely influenced the way I approached developing the interview guide and conducting the interviews for this study. In order to mitigate my own biases on the topic of marital perceptions and expectations, I am attempting to ground my analysis in the women's voices by basing my analysis on the written transcripts of the audio recordings of their interviews. In light of my own identity as a researcher, my hope is that I am able to offer an interpretation of the data from this study that accurately represents how the women who participated in this study perceive the influences on their perceptions and expectations of marriage.

Findings

Below are the three primary findings of this study on young women's perceptions and expectations of marriage. Respondents were consistent in expressing a desire for an equal division of labour, but each had a unique definition of what an equal division would look like. The two primary influences that were commonly outlined by respondents were parents and media. Media, in particular, was expressed as a potential window into the ex-

pectations placed upon women by broader society. The final finding is that a few of the respondents described a sense of sharing a timeline with other women in their age group, and feeling pressure to conform to taking similar life steps as these other women specifically in the context of marriage. This finding supports Elder's (1995) concept of shared trajectories between members of the same cohorts. Below are more detailed descriptions of these concepts as they emerged in my analysis of the interviews I conducted for this study.

Division of Labour

When asked about how they planned on dividing the labour associated with marriage (such as housework and childrearing), all respondents described wanting an equal distribution of work between themselves and their spouses. However, when prompted to describe what this equal distribution would look like, and how it could be maintained throughout their marriage, respondents' definitions of an equal work distribution varied. Meg emphasised the shared responsibility in a marriage, specifically in the context of raising a child. "You and the partner have created it, or you have adopted a child and you have a shared responsibility to this literally living being – creature, or to anything that you're doing". However, Meg was relatively flexible when it came to outlining how she wanted the division of labour to be in her own marriage. "Both partners should always be aware of what's happening, and always be on the same page and agreeing to whatever financing, whether it's 50/50, or one person does everything... case by case". This level of flexibility in defining the division of labour demonstrates a clear deviation from the division of labour outlined in Smith's (1993) SNAF. Despite demonstrating a general apathy toward the idea of getting married, Rachel held strong views on how she plans to divide labour in any future relationship, whether married or not. She explained wanting the work associated with marriage (or any relationship) to be "split evenly" between her and her spouse by referencing how she perceived everything in her family growing up to be equal. "I think that's just how I grew up and how I want it.... Equality for men, women, older, younger – it doesn't matter". Rachel described the importance of evenly distributing work in her current relationship, while recognizing that not every aspect of a relationship can necessarily be perfectly even.

> I think that's very important for me. In my relationship right now, everything is split evenly. Not necessarily every single thing is split evenly, but... all... as a sum, everything is even. Or as even as you can, right? Someone does what they're good at. I'm a crap cook, but I'll clean, you know?

Despite expressing a strong expectation for the division of labour in her current and future relationships to be even on the whole, Rachel acknowledged that it may not be possible for labour to be divided completely evenly.

Unlike Rachel and Meg, the other women interviewed did not explicitly link their own expected division of marital work with their spouse to having grown up in a family with an equal division of labour. They did, however, sometimes cite their personal ideologies as explanations for why they wanted a sense of equality in their marital-work division.

Liz asserted that the division of work "would have to be equal between me and my husband. Cause that's what's fair". Liz explained, "I believe in gender equality... so I think that bleeds into how I think my expectations of marriage are, as well". This sense of gender equality seemed to also influence Liz's perceptions of some of the expectations associated with marriage, such as not wanting to take her husband's last name should she get married. Despite outlining what may be considered to be feminist beliefs, Liz did not label herself as such during her interview.

Both Violet and Maya cited their own feminist beliefs as explaining some of their marital expectations. Violet explained that "I think that... there has to be a showing of equality... I label myself as a feminist. I think that it's... difficult to see myself in a position where there is anything less than equality". Maya was even more stringent with her expectations of an equal division of labour between her and her spouse. "For me, it would have to be equal. Like, 100%. I wouldn't be... a stay at home wife, like, at all.... That's not something I would be willing to compromise on." Maya associated the idea of women doing more household labour as more of a traditional idea of marriage – an idea she strictly opposed.

> I would not be... at all happy or satisfied with a relationship where I'm expected to do more, like, labor of any sort. It's just not fair, and it's not... that feels like a very outdated, like house wife type thing where... women were basically... a bunch of unpaid labor for men to be able to go out and have a good time.

Maya later summed up her views as having "a very feminist view of marriage", which she explained came from years of educating herself on "very liberal, leftist websites" on topics of gender politics, LGBT activism, feminism, and other topics.

Of all six respondents, Rachel, Liz, Violet, and Maya presented their expectations for equal division of labour as more vital to their potential marriages, while Meg and Amber were more relaxed in their view of how labor should be divided. Throughout their interviews, Liz, Violet, and Maya emphasized their personal beliefs in gender equality and/or feminism as explanations for why they value gender equality so highly in life and in their marital expectations. Rachel drew a clear connection between her experience growing up and her current expectations. Meg did not outline any personal ideologies as connected to her views on marriage.

What was common between Violet, Meg, Rachel and Amber was that while they all defined the equal division of labour associated with marriage between their spouse and themselves, they consistently referred to open communication with their spouse as crucial in determining how to divide the labour. Despite stating that the ideal division of labour would be 50/50, Amber explained that "if my effort and work is appreciated, and that's actually verbalized, then I would be more okay with [a less even distribution]". This flexibility in terms of the actual distribution of labour, so long as they perceived the division of labour as "fair", appears consistent with Wilcox & Nock's (2007) finding that "women's perceptions of equity - but not an equal division of domestic of market work - are important predictors of marital happiness for wives" (107). Violet, Meg, Rachel and Amber placed an emphasis on compromise as a large part of marriage. These four respondents seemed to emphasize how strong communication with their partner, and compromise by extension, would allow them to be satisfied by the division of labour between themselves and their spouse whether the labour is objectively split equally or not.

Despite holding differing views on the specific ways labour should be divided in marriages, the respondents seemed to all acknowledge the need for ongoing discussion and reassessment of their division of labour with their partners would be necessary in their potential future marriages. Whether they were willing to compromise on evenly dividing labour with their partner or not, all women seemed to be under the impression that their marriages would be relatively egalitarian.

Primary Influences

Perception of Parents as Key Influence

Five of the six respondents in this study stated that their family, often specifically their parents, were the (or one of the) primary influences on their marital perceptions, expectations, and/or opinions. Respondents seem to take their parents' relationship as an example to model their own expectations of marriage after, and sometimes as a way to see what aspects of marriage they would want to "do better" than their parents.

Liz and Rachel reported perceiving that their parents played a more influential role on their marital expectations and perceptions than their extended family members. Liz paints a picture of how her perceptions of marriage have been formed from seeing a wide variety of marriages, and the different forms marriage as an institution can take. Ultimately, she outlines that her parents' marriage has been the most influential on the development of her own views.

Sara: So, where do you think your... perception of marriage came from?

> Liz: I think it's been influenced a lot by my family life. In my personal – like, seeing my parents' marriage. Um. . . . Also seeing other people's marriages in my family. Because I've seen both marriages that have succeeded, and other marriages that just fell apart. . . But, mostly it's been seeing my parents' example.

When asked about where she thinks her ideas, expectations, and opinions of marriage come from, Rachel focuses more on the geographical distance between her extended family as an explanation for why she feels her parents had the largest influence on her views.

> I'm sure it comes from my parents and my family. . . But, definitely my parents just because. . . I grew up with my immediate family here, so there weren't much stressors from other family members. . . . Like, I know my grandma is way more conservative, so she definitely wants a specific type of person for me to be with, and I have to get married, and all this stuff. . . I think, living away from that, I haven't grown up with the idea that I need to as well.

Violet and Meg both outlined aspects they would want to focus on in their marriages in response to parts of their parents' marriages that they were critical of. For Violet, the focus was on having a marriage that was more of a balance between a loving relationship and a partnership. Violet said:

> My parents were far more of a partnership than of a. . . kind of love, and I think it's equal parts just kind of seeing that as an example, and also seeing that as something that I want to an extent but would also like something that is more loving.

Meg, on the other hand, zeroed in more on her perception of the lack of compromise in her parents' marriage, and how she perceived it to take a negative toll on her parents' relationship. In talking about what she perceives to influence her ideas, expectations, and opinions of marriage overall, she said the following.

> I think a lot of it has also come from me seeing [my mother] not compromise, or my dad not compromise and see how that works out, and I go "Okay, well, that's important." Like, "I'm going to do that, but better. . . in my marriage".

Maya was the only respondent who did not perceive her family to be a primary influence on her current marital expectations. Having grown up with a family in which "marriage and, like, relationships has never been something that we've wanted to talk about", Maya perceives the influence of her family on her marital views to be minimal. When asked specifically if she feels her family played a role in her expectations and perceptions of marriage, Maya said the following.

> My family, looking back on it, I guess my current opinions are affected by how I now see the evolution of my parents' marriage. But, because it was... it was just kind of absent from my childhood, mostly. Like, I don't think I was getting a lot of influence from my family's views of that, because it just wasn't really there when I was growing up.

While the other respondents focused on their parents as primary influences, Maya placed a stronger emphasis on the role media (specifically through online mediums) has played in influencing her perceptions and expectations of marriage.

Media as Influence

Although not all respondents in this study considered media as a primary influence on their marital perceptions or expectations, they all referenced media at some point during their interviews. Media, specifically including advertisements, social media sites (such as Facebook), and movies (specifically romantic comedies), were referenced as either being a symbol of what societal expectations exist, or as shaping women's expectations and perceptions itself. The respondents in this study commonly referenced the general shift in women's priorities (to include a career) that seems to be reflected in media. In this way, the women seem to view their current expectations (and current societal expectations) as more progressive than that of previous generations.

As Maya discussed in her interview, media can shape individuals' frames of viewing the world, and their expectations within these frames. For Maya, media shaped her understanding of gender politics, social justice, and feminist ideology. She explained:

> A lot of my politics, a lot of my gender politics, and... any sort of like, sexism, racism, like all the isms, all my politics around there comes from... spending a lot of time on very liberal, leftist websites.

In turn, Maya seems to view her perception and expectations of marriage as having been influenced by the worldviews and ideologies she has developed from educating herself on these topics through online media.

> It's the age of the internet where we live in. Like, this is where I learned about feminism, and... any sort of... LGBT activism, all that kind of stuff. Which... knowing a lot about the queer community has, I think, affected my ideas of marriage as well. Because there's been so much..... like, it was illegal for a long time for queer people to get married, you know? Like, that kind of stuff, which probably made me start thinking about the idea that... marriage is not the absolute like, end all, be all of any relationship, or proving that you love somebody.

Through her experience with teaching herself about gender politics and feminist ideologies online, Maya's perceptions of marriage as an institution were altered in a way that I did not see among the other respondents – she was the only one to refer to the different access members of the LGBTQ community have to marriage as an institution. While Maya discussed the impact of media on marital perceptions and expectations in the most detail, all five other respondents also seemed to perceive media as playing a role in the way they think about marriage, whether they present it as a key influence on their personal views or not. According to Amber, "media adds that layer of extreme romanticism [to marriage], which I'm a sucker for". Meg also was under the impression that marriage is romanticised in the media and portrayed as a symbol of having a "perfect" life.

> I think a lot of media helps to kind of convey marriage kind of being. . . .
> perfect, and meaning you have, like, such a good life and such a good family,
> and everything is strong and stable.

Rachel spoke about the perceived importance of finding a committed partner in society.

> I still think in society it's important to be married. Like, people are still look-
> ing for that commitment. We see that in media, a lot. And a lot of movies and
> that – like, they're still looking for it.

In discussing this societal value placed on marriage and commitment, Rachel uses media, and movies specifically, as an indicator of the value. Seeing marriage as a goal for characters in films seems to be supporting Rachel's perception of the societal expectation for individuals to seek out marriage. This view ties to the perceived societal expectation that marriage is a step that everyone will take in their lives, which was common among the respondents. While this topic will be discussed in more detail in the *Timeline Pressures* section below, it is important to note that the women often mused that the media was linked to this expectation. Liz mused that "maybe the media and society always kind of assume that you're going to get married, and you're going to find a partner". When asked whether she felt there were societal pressures or expectations placed on women in her age group, Meg used a Facebook post as an example for how there is less societal pressures for women to get married than there has been in the past.

> Meg: . . . as of right now, no. Society hasn't done anything super crazy, and
> I've actually, if anything, seen a lot of. . . on Facebook recently, I saw this
> ad for, like, "why don't dads get to spend more time with their kids" and it
> was. . . it was on the like imbalances in policies for maternal care and all that.
>
> Sara: Mhm, yeah.
>
> Meg: It's like dads, like, "We want to step up, we are the dads, let us", you
> know? So I think there's definitely a shift in everything that's happening,
> which is nice. And it's nice to be a part of the generation that's kind of. . . a

little bit more progressive in that way.

Here, Meg draws a clear connection between an example of a social media campaign, and the broader patterns of societal pressures on individuals.

Another example of media being used as an indicator or symbol of trends in societal expectations is Maya speaking about how she perceives the evolution of romantic comedy films over the past few decades. When asked about what she feels has shaped her expectations and perceptions of marriage, she discussed the media's role.

Maya: A lot of it's media, honestly. Like, what I've seen in movies, especially like older movies. Like, I watched an old romcom from like, 1998 or something like that, and I was like wow, this is... from 1998! ...... So like, take for an example, Breakfast at Tiffany's, a very old... classic romcom, it's seen as so romantic.

Sara: Yeah.

Maya: But then you watch it again through kind of a modern feminist perspective, and you're like what the ****? Like... this isn't... Like, I don't remember the plot of that movie, but I just know that the guy is very creepy, and very like, possessive, and not – it's not my idea of romance at all. It's creepy to me...But that is what it was like back then.

Maya contrasts how current movies have shifted in the themes involved.

And then just, like, a more... modern movie. I can't think of an example, but it's definitely – the conflict is usually more about, like, a woman's career versus the marriage, or whatever...So, media is something that definitely affects – has affected how I think society sees marriage, if that makes sense.

Although Maya perceives the media as influencing societal views of marriage, it seems like a cyclical relationship between the two in that films, as an example of media, are created by members of society. While she discusses her perceptions and expectations of marriage as having been informed by her ideologies that she developed in light of information from media, she also seems to perceive a distinction between the broad symbol of marriage presented in films (as an example of media) and her personal marital opinions and perceptions. In viewing media as an external symbol of societal norms and meanings of marriage, the respondents indicated that they felt a sense of agency in terms of whether they can choose to accept the symbols of marriage presented in media or not, despite marriage also existing as a symbol in current North American society separate from the media.

Timeline Pressures

A common perception shared by the participants was of a societal assumption that women will get married. When asked about how she perceives her friends' relationships to influence her own marital perceptions and expectations, Amber spoke about this pressure and sense of a shared trajectory with her peers, and her resistance to this pressure.

> I might feel pressured to be like, "Okay, like, that means that I have to start doing it, because this person who is in the same timeline as me has started doing it". But I think for the most part... at least in my brain right now, I'm trying to get used to the idea that I don't have to subscribe to that timeline.

Rachel also discussed the idea that there are steps people are expected to take in life, one of which is getting married.

> I think for a lot of people, once you get the marriage certificate... then it means you have to have kids. So, I think a lot of people put off... getting married because they don't want the pressure of "oh, now I've done that step, so I need to do the next step".

This sense of a shared timeline with one's peers was also showcased in Liz's interview, when she discussed how she would feel about her own experiences as a woman if those in her same friend group (and presumably, similar age) were to get married. Liz said:

> I think, let's say, if we were 10 years down the road, and I was single and most of my friends were married, I would feel kind of left out. And would almost think, like, there must be something wrong with me for still not being married. Which I think is unfortunate, that a lot of people feel that way.... Just because you.... You're kind of the same age group, you're going through the same part of life.

Liz seems to perceive this sense of a societal assumption to be a reason that some people choose to get married, because they "don't want to be alone". Rachel also emphasized the societal pressures to marry as being driven by finding a partner, perhaps in order to avoid being alone.

> A lot of what we do in life is surrounded by the need to have a partner. Everything. Lots – just, everything we do in life. Where we move, where we work, who we're with – it's still very much about "I need to find a partner," "I need to find someone I'm going to be with forever... till I die". Because that's still seen as the ultimate thing.

Rachel also expressed the following:

You know, once you've found someone, you're supposed to be settled. But then, "is this the right person?" If it's the right person – if it's not the right person, then "oh, but if I leave them then I'll be alone, so it's not good".

This sense of the avoidance of being "alone" (or rather, single) ties heavily to the use of marriage as a validation tool for women. While pressures to marry may be delayed by the pressure for women to build careers, marriage is still expected of women. The respondents seemed to see the societal norm as women getting married, and by contrast, if women do not marry they are seen as defective. Amber expressed this in the following way:

> . . . especially because I am a woman, it feels like this validation tool. So, it's like. . . even though I have things that I care about and want to do, it feels like I haven't – or I won't succeed or have value if I don't get married.

Specifically, Maya outlined how she feels this use of marriage as a validation tool is gendered. It appears that men who do not marry are scrutinized much less than women who do not marry. Maya provided the following example.

> . . . a single woman in her 40s would be seen generally as like, something's wrong with her. Like, "why isn't she married?", while a single man in his 40s, we're like, "oh, he's living the bachelor life, he's focused on his career, blah, blah, blah, and all that stuff.

Interestingly, despite having outlined their perception of societal pressures and expectations being placed on women, both Rachel and Maya seemed to perceive themselves as removed from facing the consequences of marriage as a validation tool. They drew somewhat of a distinction between how they view societal responses to women not marrying, and what they would expect responses to be if they do not marry. Maya said:

> . . . I don't feel that as a personal pressure on myself. Like, I don't feel like if I didn't get married people would disown me, or. . . think any less of me or anything. But I do think that as a whole. . . societally. . . that pressure does exist.

In discussing what she believes influences her marital perceptions and expectations, Rachel brought up the diversity of perceptions between herself and her friends, and their perceived open-mindedness.

> . . . Even though. . . some of my friends have stress and pressure to find a person and get married, have the house, all of that. . . they're still open to the fact that I might not. . . They're not questioning my needs and my wants. It's never like, "oh, you're not going to get married, oh, what's wrong with you"... Everyone's happy for what you want. And I think that support really helps in

terms of… shaping my views, but also not pushing me to change my views.

It is interesting to note how both Maya and Rachel discussed broad, societal assumptions of marriage that exist on an abstract level, but do not clearly identify those assumptions as being influential on their personal expectations for marriage. They both seem to perceive having a level of agency that allows them to be exempt from the social consequences they perceive others who do not marry to face.

The timeline that respondents referred to in interviews seemed to reflect the common notion that women are expected to be at least somewhat dependent on men for companionship (if not also economic support). This sense of devaluation may be perceived as happening to others who do not marry because they are seen as having broken the societal norm of getting married and "settling down". Whether respondents expect to feel this devaluation personally seems to be dependent on how strong their own sense of agency is, and how they perceive their ability to break norms without facing social consequences of being deviant by not marrying.

Discussion

The main findings of this study include that the women who participated all expect to have some sort of even distribution of labour in their potential future marriages, but that they define equality differently in this context. In addition, respondents in this study view their parents and the media as two primary influences on women's marital perceptions and expectations. The final finding of this study is that there is a sense of a shared timeline among women in similar age groups, and that within this sense of a timeline is a pressure to marry – a step that they feel is assumed by society.

It seemed that the respondents to this study often shared a perception of the SNAF as a traditional form of marriage, specifically in terms of husbands acting as breadwinners and wives staying at home to take care of the home and/or children (Smith, 1993). However, the respondents were often critical of this "traditional" form of marriage, indicating that while the SNAF may still be recognized as a shared format of marriage, they did not believe that it was expected that they would partake in a marriage that was formatted in this way. They often said that they would be "unhappy," or would simply not get married if they were expected to be housewives while their spouses worked full time. My finding that all women expressed a desire for some level of equal division of labour, despite the definition of an equal division of labour being subjective, indicates that the SNAF as a societal ideological code may be losing its place in individuals' marriages.

This perception of the SNAF among the participants may be seen as a symbol of the way they perceive marriage as an institution. The emphasis respondents placed on

compromise may have been a way for these respondents to reconcile the uncertainty of maintaining an equal division of labour between partners over a long period of time. This expected need for compromise also demonstrated the potential for these respondents' marriages to revert to less egalitarian divisions of labour, as framing an unequal division of labour as a "compromise" may allow them to reconcile their desire for equality in a relationship with remaining societal pressures to perpetuate the SNAF ideal, unequal, division of labour (Smith 1993). Some of the respondents also expressed critiques of marriage as an institution, outlining ways in which marriage can be made negative, such as through "domestic abuse… people manipulating others financially… cases where women have left their careers to support their marriage…. Infidelities", as Liz outlined in her interview. Despite expressing critiques of marriage, and often acknowledging that marriage may require them to compromise on having a truly equal division of labour to some extent, all of the respondents expressed either neutral or positive feelings towards marriage, and four out of the six respondents stated (with some level of certainty) that they would like to get married. This general regard for marriage as a powerful and, mostly, positive commitment is consistent with Lauer & Yodanis' (2010) claim that marriage is not being deinstitutionalized (if using Lauer & Yodanis' (2010) definition of deinstitutionalization). The concept of marriage as an expected step for women to take, and as a tool used to validate women's life experiences and choices, which emerged through the interviews in this study also demonstrates the power that marriage as an institution still holds in North American society.

While all six of the participants in this study came from similar educational backgrounds and all live in a relatively liberal city in Canada, they held a diverse range of perceptions of marriage. In relation to marital expectations, Hartwell et al.'s (2004) finding that non-feminist women had stronger desire for marriage than feminist women was consistent with my findings, in that the participants who specifically outlined holding feminist ideologies or strong beliefs in gender equality (which may be considered a feminist belief) did express more critiques of marriage than those who did not specifically outline holding these beliefs in their interviews. Despite identifying herself and her views as feminist, Maya's critique of more traditional distributions of labour in marriage could be considered anti-feminist through a Choice Feminist lens (Thwaites, 2017). Specifically, Choice Feminism indicates that the connection between feminist ideologies and marital expectations is more dependent on the individual's self-identification as a feminist and personal choices rather than externally-imposed labels of feminism. Thus, traditional divisions of labour would be accepted under the Choice Feminism branch as long as the woman is perfectly content with the manner in which chores are divided. Therefore, Unlike Ellison et al.'s (2004) findings, despite two respondents referencing having had religious upbringings, the respondents in my study did not explicitly draw a strong connection between religiosity with their marital expectations or views. As Amber said in her interview, upon being asked where she believes her perceptions of marriage come from, "I want to say, like, my Catholic faith somehow, but I was never that Catholic… So I'm sure, like, it is

in there somewhere, but not that I can recall". Sexuality was another social intersection that I expected to have an influence, but that was not emphasized in my interviews. One respondent described herself as bisexual, and another referenced having gone through a period of questioning her sexuality, but neither of them explicitly communicated their sexuality as influencing the way they perceive marriage. Economic security, as outlined as an important expectation for marriage by Barich & Bielby (1996), was a factor that was only emphasized in one interview. Liz discussed how a primary piece of advice imparted on her by her parents was the importance of being financially independent prior to getting married. In this way, Liz counteracted Barich & Bielby's (1996) finding, in that she seems to place a large priority on developing financial autonomy before getting married in order to avoid feeling the need for a marriage in order to attain economic security. The expressed desire for financial security may be connected to the importance women place on developing their careers, increasing the necessity for marriages to have more egalitarian divisions of labour as discussed by Duetch et al. (2007). However, while all participants in this study outlined a desire for some level of an egalitarian division of labour, it appeared as though this came more from the women wanting equality in their potential future relationships rather than as a side-effect of wanting to meet career-goals. This lack of discussion about careers also contrasted with Hoffnung's (2004) analysis, in that the respondents did not emphasize a sense of having considered balancing a career, motherhood, and marriage.

The two primary influences on women in this study's marital expectations and perceptions are their parents and media. There is limited discourse on the relationship between media and marital perceptions and/or expectations. However, the relationship between individuals' families and parents and their own perceptions and expectations is well researched. The finding that the respondents in this study often perceived their parents to be a primary influence on their own martial expectations and perceptions ties to Gerson's (2011) analysis of individuals' experiences of marriage in the context of the gender revolution, in that the respondents in her study "[expressed] strong support for working mothers and much greater concern with the quality of the relationship between parents than whether parents stayed together or separated". Respondents in this study seem to share a desire for having a high quality relationship of their own (in terms of having strong levels of love, commitment, and sense of partnership), with less of an emphasis on having a marriage that lasts throughout the course of their lives than may have been seen in previous generations. In this way, it seems as though the support respondents in Gerson's (2011) work espoused may also be adapted by young people into their own expectations, through maintaining a similar focus on quality of relationships in both the way they view their parents' relationships, and their expectations for their own marriages.

The perception respondents expressed of societal expectations being placed upon women to marry may be indicative of the great significance and power that marriage has as a symbol in current North American society. Views of marriage, and gender norms within marriage (and dating), held on an institutional level may inform individuals of what their

perceptions and expectations of marriage should be. These views then get disseminated through media, such as romantic comedies, which in turn continue to shape our views. Maya's sense of having sought out information through online media outlets may have influenced her sense of agency in regard to being personally affected by media, and may have in turn influenced her sense of agency in marital expectations and perceptions in relation to her peers.

The concept of timeline pressures being placed on young women to marry ties heavily to Elder's (1994) Life Course Theory, as well as Carroll et al.'s (2007) Marital Horizon concept. The women who discussed the sense of sharing a timeline with their peers demonstrated that they perceive a societal expectation that they are a part of a shared life-trajectory with women in their age group, and that the expectation in North American society is that women will marry at some point in their lifetime. The sense that women who do not marry are seen as having something wrong with them, or are less valuable to society than women who do marry, is demonstrative both of the power that marriage still holds in our society and how people who get married may be privileged in our society by facing less scrutiny. It appears that men who do not marry are scrutinized much less than women who do not marry. This perception of unmarried men being framed differently than unmarried women in society indicates that the symbol of marriage is gendered itself. By avoiding scrutiny for not being married, unmarried men hold privilege where unmarried women face judgement and potential prejudice from broader society. However, as Maya and Rachel pointed out in their interviews, on an individual scale, women may not feel such scrutiny for not marrying. Maya and Rachel both expressed a sense of agency in their decision whether or not to marry, and that they did not anticipate facing any scrutiny if they elect not to marry. It is also possible that Maya and Rachel (potentially subconsciously) want to portray themselves as having this agency in order to fulfill societal pressures for women to demonstrate their autonomy and agency. One potential explanation for this may be individuals' abilities to deploy the sociological imagination for others, but not for ourselves (Mills, 1959). That is, we may be able to draw connections between our history and biography but are often limited by the difficulty of objectively understanding the connection between the two for ourselves at any given time. For the respondents other than Maya and Rachel, it appears that their current Marital Horizons are highly dependent on whether they perceive marriage to be a common step members of their cohort are taking, and they seem to be influenced heavily by external pressures rather than from a personal, internal desire to marry (Carroll et al., 2007).

Overall, it seems as though the pressure to marry, and the devaluation of non-married women, is recreated through individuals' assumptions of marriage being a valued institution in society. If marriage was to be deinstitutionalized by Lauer & Yodanis' (2010) definition, the norms of marriage would be weakened, and this devaluation would not be possible (or it would at least be weakened as well) (p. 61). If marriage was deinstitutionalized, there would likely be less societal pressure placed on individuals to marry, as not marrying would no longer be a deviant choice. There seems to be a cyclical re-

lationship in that the sense of pressure to marry and devaluation of non-married women indicate that the institution of marriage is still strong, and that it is recreated by individuals' assumptions of marriage as being valued by society. As individuals subscribe to the norms and symbols (such as marriage) they perceive in society, they are aiding in upholding those norms.

Limitations

It is important to note that the results of this study are not generalizable to a broader population because of both the homogeneity of the research participants, and the small sample size. This study is also limited in that it does not fully include myriad factors such as family cultural beliefs or values or other historical factors that may play a role in women's perceptions. The influences outlined in my findings are a part of a broader picture of factors that play into the development of women's personal expectations and understandings of marriage. This study identifies the emphasis that respondents in this study placed on their parents and media as playing important roles in shaping their views.

The scope of this study is focused on marital expectations of division of labour within marriages specifically. In order to further this analysis, future research may consider how women's expected age at marriage, their expectations or opinions of divorce, and their expectations for children and family may play a role in their expectations of labour division.

In approaching influences on marriage, the interviews for this research did not include specific questions on identity characteristics like the women's socio-economic status (or income-levels), their sexuality, their religiosity, or whether they hold feminist ideologies. Participants' references to these social categories were used in this analysis, but it is important to note that respondents may belong to social categories and not have mentioned this because they were not directly asked.

This study may have been limited because I, the interviewer, belong to the same age group and gender as the respondents. Because of this, respondents may have edited their answers or had an assumed shared knowledge with me that may have impacted their responses to questions. While I was aware of this possibility during the interviews and attempted to ask for clarification whenever it seemed the respondents may have assumed that I shared an understanding with them, it is important to note that the data in this research may have been impacted by this.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to develop an understanding of how young women (those between the ages of 19- and 24-years old) perceive their own marital expectations and perceptions, and what they believe influences these expectations and perceptions. The findings of this study are not conclusive, but rather may act as a starting point from which further discourse can be developed to better understand the influences on and experiences of marriage that young women have.

At its core, the main aim of this study was to provide an opportunity for women's own perceptions, understandings, and standpoints to be included in the academic discourse on marital perceptions and expectations. While the scope of this study was very limited, the findings demonstrate how individual women's perceptions of societal pressures and processes may differ from the way social scientists and researchers theorize them to function.

Future work should include a larger sample size in order to portray a more well-balanced depiction of women's experiences. Future studies should also include a more diverse population of women, including women from different social backgrounds such as differing educational levels, political leanings, and socio-economic statuses. They also should place more emphasis on understanding differences in women's expectations and perceptions based on their ethnic background and sexuality. In the future, it is important to also compare groups of men with women in order to better understand how perceptions of marital expectations differ between men and women, in addition to adding populations from different geographic locations to better account for how cultural and political contexts may influence individual's experiences of marriage. Finally, future work may aim to develop a deeper understanding of whether the ways women interact with media change how influential it is on their perceptions and expectations.

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