Saying "I Do" in College: Examining Marital Status and Academic Performance

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Abstract

Marriage as an undergraduate student is not the norm, as only 7% of undergraduate students are married. Therefore, marital status may have negative consequences for college students' academic performance, as they navigate marital roles simultaneously with other roles, such as that of student. However, relationship quality may predict how well undergraduates perform academically, with individuals in higher quality marriages performing better than those in lower quality marriages. Thus, the goal of this study is to examine how marital status predicts academic performance and whether or not relationship quality moderates this association. Data for this study comes from an online survey of undergraduate students from a university in the Midwestern United States ($N =$ 111, 81.1% female, 87.4% White/Caucasian, 21.2% married). Results revealed that marital status is negatively associated with cumulative grade point average (GPA) and perception of GPA. There were no significant effects of relationship satisfaction, relationship communication, or the interaction of relationship quality and marital status for academic performance. Implications for academic performance and young adult development will be discussed.

Keywords: marital status, undergraduate, academic performance, relationship quality

1. Introduction

Many studies have illustrated the benefits of being married for individual well-being (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003; Neff & Broady, 2011) and longevity of life (e.g., Idler, Boulifard, & Contrada, 2012). However, these benefits may not be present in contexts where being married is not the norm. The traditional college student is typically about 18-22 years old, unmarried, and comes directly from high school (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2014). According to the United States Department of Education (2014), approximately 7% of undergraduate students are married and the average age of first marriage is 27 for women and 29 for men (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Because being married as an undergraduate student is not typical, the context of being married may have negative implications for individuals' academic performance. The transition into the role of spouse is likely to distract from academics. However, there is some support that relationship quality may provide a stronger explanation than relationship status for academic performance and relationship outcomes (e.g., Le & Agnew, 2003). Therefore, this study has two goals. First, we examine how marital status predicts undergraduate academic performance. Second, we test relationship quality as a moderator for this relationship.

It is important to examine academic performance in college, as success in this context is positively associated with professional development such as occupational attainment and higher salaries, (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013; Perna, 2003) and personal development such as less stress and higher life satisfaction (Cardillo, 2018; Merisotis, 2016). Additionally, academic performance represents a central aspect of young adult development and a measure of young adult well-being (Harter, 1999; Zvonkovic, Pennington, &, Schmiege, 1994; Merisotis, 2016). Academic performance is also an important measure of development for late adolescents and young adults because academic competencies are indicators of later success in the workplace (Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004). A limitation in past studies is consistency regarding the measure of academic performance, as some studies use perception of academic performance (i.e., Giordano, Phelps, Manning, & Longmore, 2008) and others simply ask about grades, such as mostly A's, A's and B's, etc. The current study seeks to expand the measure of academic performance using three indicators: cumulative grade point average (GPA), last semester GPA, and perception of GPA compared to peers.

1.1 Marital Status and Academic Performance

Although the number of married undergraduate students has increased in the United States (Negy, 2003; Steinberg, 2011), few studies examine how marital status predicts academic performance in college. One study demonstrated a positive influence of marriage on the academic performance of community college students (Yess, 1981). However, Negy (2003) found that some married college students face more day-to-day difficulties than non-married students, which could potentially hinder academic performance. Meehan and Negy (2003) elaborated on these day-to-day difficulties, which included maintaining residences, supporting a spouse, and general marital distress. Being married as a college student is also a trait of non-traditional students, (Rosenthal et al., 2000) and non-traditional students experience higher levels of stress then traditional college students (Dill & Henley, 1998). Transitioning to college can be both an important and stressful psychosocial development experience for emerging adults in the United States.

Research on marital status, specifically in terms of academic performance of college students is relatively scarce, focuses on non-traditional students, or does not primarily focus on undergraduate university students (Meehan & Negy, 2003). There are some studies examining academic performance on graduate students, revealing that marital status is positively associated with academic performance, particularly when receiving spousal support (Stern, 1998). Another study, which focused on graduate students, found married men had better student outcomes than single men, but married women did not do worse than single women in terms of student outcomes (Price, 2006). This study provides some support that marriage may be beneficial for academic performance, but probably more so for men than women. Research on non-traditional students reveals that these students experience more stress than traditional students because they are more likely to already have a job, travel to campus (as opposed to living on campus), and have children (Hoffman & Youngblade, 2002; Li & Kam, 2002; Meehan & Negy, 2003; Stern, 1998). However, it should be noted that non-traditional students are also those that work full-time or are over the age of 25 (Rosenthal et al., 2000). The focus on the current study is undergraduate married couples specifically, rather than non-traditional students. One of the few studies on undergraduate married couples, which followed six married college couples performed worse academically compared to non-married college students due to their increased responsibilities (Norton et al., 1998). As these authors note, however, the experiences of these six couples may not be representative of all undergraduate married couples, particularly since all six were enrolled at the same university. Generally, there appears to be a negative trend concerning marriage and academic performance. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Marital Status will be negatively associated with academic performance.

1.2 Marital Quality and Academic Performance

In addition to marital status, marital quality may also contribute to academic performance. Studies have shown several benefits of being in high quality relationships for individual health and well-being (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003). In the case of undergraduate academic performance, marital quality may provide a stronger predictor of academic performance than marital status, as low quality relationships are likely to distract from courses due to high amounts of conflict and stress compared to high quality relationships (Papp, Kouros, & Cummings, 2009). In one study, Roberson et al. (2015) found that individuals who reported more satisfaction with their romantic relationship and had better conflict management skills reported better academic adjustment. Another study found that women's GPAs were related to the love they had for their dating partner (Zvonkovic et al., 1994). Studies on non-traditional college student success have illustrated that spousal support, indicative of higher quality relationships, was positively associated with academic performance (Katz, Monnier, Libet, Shaw, & Beach, 2000). Studies focusing on spousal support are founded on communication skills within married couples, meaning that couples with better communication skills are likely to be better at providing emotional support (Katz et al., 2000; Meehan & Negy, 2003). Therefore, not only should more satisfied married college students perform better academically compared to lower quality married college students, but those couples who communicate more effectively are also likely to perform better academically in college than those couples who do not communicate effectively. Based on these studies, some evidence exists that the quality of students' marital relationships is likely to be related with how well they perform in college. In these cases, simply being married may not be enough to discern academic performance. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Relationship quality (satisfaction and communication) will moderate the relationship between marital status and academic performance. More precisely, high quality marital relationships will be associated with higher academic performance, whereas lower quality marital relationships will be associated with lower academic performance.

2. Method

2.1 Participants and Procedures

Data for this study comes from undergraduate students from a university in a Midwestern area of the United States (N = 111). Participants were recruited through classroom announcements in which the primary author was currently or formerly enrolled in. The first author either visited their current classes or sent emails out to classes they were previously enrolled in. Interested participants completed an online survey that asked students about their academic performance, relationship status, and relationship quality (if they were in a relationship). Demographics for the study sample are presented in *Table 1*. The majority of participants were female (81.1%) and White/Caucasian (87.4%). Of the 111 participants, 24 were married, six were casually dating, 49 were in a serious romantic relationship (not married), and 31 were single. Based on mean differences tests between married participants and non-married participants, the only significant difference was age, with married participants reporting older ages than single and seriously dating participants (F = 17.09, p < .001). There were no differences in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, educational level, and academic performance.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics by relationship status.

		Single	Seriously Dating	Married	Total	$\chi^2(2,110)$
n		38	49	24	111	
Age		20.85 (2.41)	21.09 (1.95)	24.96 (4.62)	21.87 (3.30)	---
Gender	Male	6 (15.8)	7 (14.3)	7 (29.1)	20 (18.0)	6.56
	Female	32 (84.2)	42 (85.7)	16 (66.7)	90 (81.1)	
	Other	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (4.2)	1 (0.9)	
Ethnicity	White/Caucasian	33 (86.8)	45 (91.8)	19 (79.2)	97 (87.4)	11.88
	Black/African-American	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (4.2)	1 (0.9)	
	Asian/Pacific Islander	2 (5.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (1.8)	
	Hispanic	2 (5.3)	4 (8.2)	4 (16.6)	10 (9.0)	
	Other	1 (2.6)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.9)	
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	36 (94.8)	47 (96.0)	21 (87.4)	104 (93.7)	3.62
	Homosexual	0 (0.0)	1 (2.0)	1 (4.2)	2 (1.8)	
	Bisexual	1 (2.6)	1 (2.0)	1 (4.2)	3 (2.7)	
	Other	1 (2.6)	0 (0.0)	1 (4.2)	2 (1.8)	
Honors Student	Yes	7 (18.4)	7 (14.3)	6 (25.0)	20 (18.0)	
	No	31 (81.6)	42 (85.7)	18 (75.0)	91 (82.0)	
Employment	None	7 (18.4)	6 (12.2)	3 (12.5)	16 (14.4)	8.98
	Part-time	29 (76.3)	36 (73.5)	13 (54.2)	78 (70.3)	
	Full-time	2 (5.3)	7 (14.3)	8 (33.3)	17 (15.3)	
Education	Freshman	8 (21.1)	7 (14.3)	1 (4.2)	16 (14.4)	17.21
	Sophomore	5 (13.1)	8 (16.3)	1 (4.2)	14 (12.6)	
	Junior	6 (15.8)	14 (28.6)	6 (25.0)	26 (23.5)	
	Senior	17 (44.7)	14 (28.6)	9 (37.5)	40 (36.0)	
	5 or more years	2 (5.3)	6 (12.2)	7 (29.1)	15 (13.5)	
Academic Performance	Cumulative GPA[a]	3.26 (.54)	3.39 (.46)	3.22 (.51)	3.31 (.50)	
	Last semester GPA[a]	3.32 (.55)	3.45 (.54)	3.44 (.47)	3.41 (.53)	
	Perception of GPA[b]	4.27 (1.12)	4.71 (1.23)	4.63 (.97)	4.55 (1.15)	

Note: All variables are presented as counts with column percentages in parentheses, except for age and each measure of academic performance, which is presented as means with standard deviations in parentheses.

[a] GPA = grade point average and is on a 4.0 scale.

[b] Perception of GPA is measured on a scale of 1 (*below average*) to 7 (*above average*).

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Academic Performance

Academic performance was measured using three variables: cumulative grade point average (GPA), last semester GPA, and perception of GPA compared to peers. Participants answered the following open-ended question regarding their cumulative GPA: "What was your GPA last semester (on a 4.0 scale)? Participants answered the following open-ended question regarding their last semester GPA: "What was your GPA last semester (on a 4.0 scale)?" Regarding perception of GPA, participants answered the following question, "In your opinion, how does your academic performance compare to your peers?" with responses ranging from 1 (*below average*) to 7 (*above average*). Means for each of these variables are: Cumulative GPA = 3.31 (*SD* = .50); last semester GPA = 3.41 (*SD* = .53); and perception of GPA = 4.55 (*SD* = 1.15). Correlations across these variables with other study variables are presented in *Table 2*.

2.2.2 Marital Status

Participants were asked to identify their current romantic relationship status by answering the following question, "What best describes your relationship status?" with responses being single, casually dating, in a serious relationship, and married. This variable was dichotomized to represent married (value = 1) and not married (value = 0).

2.2.3 Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction was measured using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). Examples of this 7-item scale include, "How good is your relationship compared to others?" and "How much do you love your partner?" Responses for each item ranged from 1 (*Low*) to 5 (*High*). This scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .76), and the average level of satisfaction reported by participants was 4.47 (*SD* = .47).

2.2.4 Communication

Communication was assessed using the Couple Communication Scale (Grello & Harper, 2001). Example items from this 12-item scale are, "I openly tell my partner when I feel ignored by him or her" and "I express my feelings to my partner when I am upset with him or her." Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). This scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .73), and the average level of communication reported by participants was 4.76 (*SD* = .61).

Table 2. Correlations of study variables (*N* = 111).

Study Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Current GPA	---	.79**	.62**	.04	.03	-.12
2. Last Semester GPA	.87**	---	.75**	-.13	.03	-.21
3. Perception of GPA	.57**	.67**	---	.06	.15	-.13
4. Marital Status	.44	.34	.04	---	.02	.16
5. Relationship Satisfaction	-.30	-.39	-.31	-.20	---	.19
6. Relationship Communication	-.02	-.03	-.12	.27	.05	---

Note: Male participants are below the diagonal and female participants are above the diagonal.

** *p* < .01.

2.3 Analytical Approach

For both hypotheses, linear regression analyses were conducted. For each regression model, control variables were entered in Step 1: age, gender, sexual orientation (dichotomized; heterosexual = 0, all other responses = 1), whether or not a participant was an honors student (dichotomized; honors student = 1, non-honors student = 0), and employment (dichotomized; part-time or full-time job = 1, no job = 0). Control variables were entered because each of these variables have been associated with collegiate academic performance in previous studies (e.g., Meehan & Negy, 2003; Negy 2003). Predictor variables were entered in Step 2. For hypothesis 1, the predictor variables were marital status (1 = married, 0 = not married), length of engagement, and length of marriage, which is also consistent with past studies (e.g., Langlais, Anderson, & Greene, 2016). For hypothesis 2, the predictor variables were marital status, relationship satisfaction, communication, the interaction between marital status and relationship satisfaction, and the interaction between marital status and communication. All predictors were

mean-centered for analyses. For each hypothesis, three separate regression models were conducted, each corresponding with the following dependent variables: cumulative GPA, last semester GPA, and perception of GPA. For all analyses, we examined changes in R^2 between Step 1 and Step 2 for each model to measure variance beyond the control variables.

3. Results

The first hypothesis predicted marital status would be negatively associated with academic performance. Results for this hypothesis are presented at the top of *Table 3*. According to this analysis, marital status was negatively associated with cumulative GPA and perception of GPA, but not last semester GPA. Length of marriage and length of engagement were not significant in these analyses. Additionally, only one control variable was significant; being an honors student was negatively associated with all three measures of academic performance. The variance explained by including marital status in these models ranged from .8% to 5.1% according to the changes in R^2.

Table 3. Examining the influence of marital status, relationship quality, and the interaction for undergraduate academic performance ($N = 111$).

Predictor Variables	Cumulative GPA	Last Semester GPA	Perception of GPA
Hypothesis 1			
Intercept	3.76 (.67)	3.04 (.72)	5.34 (1.44)
Marital Status	-.36 (.20)*	-.15 (.21)	-.33 (.42)*
Length of Marriage	.22 (.00)	.06 (.00)	.11 (.01)
Length of Engagement	.10 (.01)	.06 (.01)	.12 (.02)
ΔR^2	.051	.008	.037
Hypothesis 2			
Intercept	3.20 (5.10)	4.80 (5.68)	10.59 (10.70)
Marital Status	.30 (.21)	.24 (.29)	.23 (.24)
Relationship Satisfaction	-.07 (.17)	-.02 (.19)	.07 (.35)
Relationship Communication	-.06 (.12)	-.06 (.13)	-.17 (.24)
Marital Status x Satisfaction	-.39 (.29)	-1.28 (.33)	-.38 (.61)
Marital Status x Communication	-.20 (.27)	1.48 (.30)	.74 (.56)
ΔR^2	.021	.033	.024

Note: All participants had been in school for more than one semester. All analyses controlled for the following variables: age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, relationship status, honors student, and employment. Only honors student was significant in each analysis, resulting in a negative association for academic performance.

* $p < .05$.

The second hypothesis predicted relationship quality would moderate the relationship between marital status and academic performance. Results for this hypothesis are presented at the bottom of *Table 3*. Relationship satisfaction, relationship communication, and marital status were not associated with any of the academic performance variables. Additionally, the interactions between marital status and the measures of relationship quality were not significant in these analyses. The control variable of honors students remained negatively associated with all three measures of academic performance in these analyses. Additionally, the variance explained by these models ranged from 2.1% to 3.3% based on changes in R^2 from Step 1 to Step 2 of the regression analyses.

4. Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine the relationship between marital status and academic performance for undergraduate college students. The results of this study showed marital status was negatively associated with academic performance. This study also illustrated that relationship quality did not moderate the relationship between academic performance and marital status, nor significantly predict academic performance. Study results extend past research on academic performance for married students in the collegiate context.

The goal of the first hypothesis was to examine if there were any associations between marital status and academic performance. Results for this hypothesis showed marital status was negatively associated with cumulative GPA and perception of GPA, but not last semester GPA. Length of marriage and length of engagement were not significant in these analyses. The only control variable that was significant for the first hypothesis was being an honors student. The negative association between marital status and academic performance may relate to certain experiences specific to married couples than non-married couples. Consistent with research on non-traditional students, married couples may face more issues than non-married students when it comes to college (Li & Kam, 2002; Meehan & Negy, 2003). For example, married couples may not only have to focus on their own daily schedules but also their spouses' schedule. These students may also have to worry about commuting to campus and being responsible for household chores compared to traditional students and students who are not married (Negy, 2003). The insignificant finding with last semester GPA is a little more difficult to explain. Hypothetically, shortly after being married, couples experience a honeymoon stage (Lorber, Erlanger, Heyman, & O'Leary, 2015), which may negate some of the everyday stress of college. Presumably, some of the honeymoon stage wears off over time, which supports the negative association between academic performance and current semester GPA.

The goal of the second hypothesis of this study was to examine if relationship quality would moderate the relationship between marital status and academic performance. Results of the second hypothesis illustrated that relationship satisfaction, relationship communication, and interactions with marital status were not associated with any of the academic performance variables. There are some explanations for these null findings. First, little variability was reported by participants with relationship quality. The lack of variability may make it difficult to find significant effects. Second, individuals in college may opt to focus on a single domain, meaning they could either focus primarily on their romantic relationship or academic performance. For example, if an individual experiences conflict with their romantic partner, they may concentrate on solving the marital conflict and they may not let the residual stress of their conflict interfere with their focus on academics. On the other hand, if an individual performs poorly in school, they may not let their deficient performance interfere with the quality of their romantic relationship. During emerging adulthood, individuals sometimes experience difficulty multi-tasking with varying domains (Roberson et al., 2015).

Although this study advances knowledge on academic performance and marital status, no study is without limitations. A majority of the participants in this study were female and heterosexual. Also, the participants in this study were primarily from the Midwest. Future studies could improve on the current study by having a larger, more diverse sample size. Another limitation of this study was that participants were not asked about the number of children that they had. Married couples are more likely to have children than non-married couples. Thus, married students might report lower levels of GPA due to raising children, a task that is likely to distract from academic performance (Hoffman & Youngblade, 2002; Stern, 1998). Future studies should examine the impact of children for academic performance in undergraduate education. This study could also be improved by using a pre- and post-test design. For example, participants could answer questions about their academic performance before they get married, and then answer the same questions about their academic performance after they get married. Therefore, we recommend a longitudinal approach using a pre- and post-test design to verify the results of this study.

Implications for this study can extend to college students who are interested or planning on getting married during college as well as marriage counselors, teachers, and other professionals. College students who are married or who get married during college are recommended to discuss with their partner the role of school during their marriage. Given the significance of emotional support during marriage while individuals are in school (Katz et al., 2000), married college students are encouraged to support each other while they juggle multiple roles, including that of spouse and that of student. College educators may also use information in this study to assist married college students to help them navigate the role of a student while also being married. Being married while in college, although uncommon, appears to influence academic performance. Since academic performance in college is associated with professional achievement later in life (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013; Perna, 2003), it is important to assist this group of students to maximize their academic potential. It is likely that their success in college is likely to positively impact the quality of the married couple (Cardillo, 2018; Merisotis, 2016).

The goal of this study was to examine how marital status predicts undergraduate academic performance, and tests relationship quality as a moderator for the relationship between marital status and academic performance. Results of this study illustrated the importance of marital status for academic performance as opposed to relationship quality. This study emphasizes the impact of marriage during a developmental period where marriage may not be the norm.

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