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

Selena Beard

ABSTRACT

According to Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development and because marriage as an undergraduate student is not the norm, marital status may have implications for college students’ academic performance. In addition, relationship quality may predict how well undergraduates perform academically. 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

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. Since being married as an undergraduate student is not the norm, the context of being married may have implications for individuals’ academic performance. Additionally, there is some support that relationship quality may provide a stronger explanation than relationship status for individual well-being 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.

The focus of this study is on undergraduate college students and academic performance. Most studies focus on children or adolescents as it pertains to academic performance, leaving a deficit in the literature regarding the context of college. College students represent late adolescents and young adults, who often experience similar developmental tasks, such as identity development (Arnett, 2000), and are different from children and teenagers. Additionally, we focus on academic performance as our dependent variable. Academic performance represents a central aspect of young adult development and a measure of young adult well-being (Harter, 1999; Zvonkovic, Pennington, & Schmiege, 1994). 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 cumulative grade point average (GPA), last semester GPA, and perception of GPA, which provide a precise measure of academic performance in college.

RELATIONSHIP 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. 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 their academic performance. Transitioning to college can be both an important and stressful psychosocial development experience for emerging adults in the United States. According to Roberson et al. (2015), romantic partners can positively and negatively impact academic performance, which also influences development.

Generally, relationship status appears to play a role in the academic performance of students. However, the research is scarce, not up-to-date, and does not primarily focus on undergraduate university students. When conducting a literature review, it was difficult to locate articles concerning marital status and academic performance in undergraduate students. Much of the research concerning academic performance focused on graduate students. However, these studies provide direction concerning the relationship between academic performance and romantic status for undergraduate students. For example, one 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.

There is theoretical support for why marital status might influence undergraduate academic performance. According to Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development, during late adolescence, which is the time many individuals enter college, individuals are striving to form their romantic identity (Erikson, 1950; 1985). Erikson's theory is composed of eight stages, each of which has its own distinctive goal to be attained in order for a "healthy personality" to develop (Erikson, 1950; 1985). Each stage during psychosocial development represents a critical period of conflict and possible crisis for the emergence of an ego quality such as trust, initiative, or identity (Erikson, 1985). According to Erikson (1985), infancy and childhood involve the first four core conflicts: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, and industry versus inferiority. During adolescence, the conflict is between identity and identity confusion, and in adulthood the core conflicts include the following: intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus self-absorption, and integrity versus despair. Thus, in early adulthood individuals focus on forming long-term intimate relationships, such as marriage. During emerging adulthood, relationship exploration is common and considered a part of identity exploration (Arnett, 2000; Roberson et al., 2015). According to Roberson et al. (2015), identity exploration during this time allows for individuals to figure out what type of person they desire to be in a romantic relationship, what constitutes a good or healthy romantic relationship, and the characteristics they want in a partner. If individuals were to form a marital relationship prior to establishing their identity, meaning they may have rushed through the identity versus identity

confusion stage, they may report declines in academic performance. Individuals may not perform as well in college if more attention was dedicated towards relationship formation as opposed to identity formation. Therefore, based on the theoretical evidence and the limited literature on marital status and undergraduate academic performance, we propose the following hypothesis:

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

RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

In addition to relationship status, relationship 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, relationship quality may provide a stronger predictor of academic performance than marital status, as low quality relationships are likely to distract from school 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 also reported better academic adjustment. A different study found that women's GPAs were negatively related to the love they had for their dating partner (Zvonkovic et al., 1994). Based on these studies, some evidence exists that the quality of students' romantic relationships is likely to be related with how well students 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 commitment) will moderate the relationship between marital status and academic performance.

METHODS

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 ($F = 17.09, p < .001$).

MEASURES

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 ($SD = 1.15$).

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).

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 ($SD = .47$).

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 ($SD = .61$).

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

For both hypotheses, multi-level 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). 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. For hypothesis 2, the predictor variables were 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 analysis. 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.

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 2*. 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 .

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 2*. Relationship satisfaction and relationship communication 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.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to examine the relationship between marital status and academic performance in undergraduate college students. The results of this study showed marital status was negatively associated with academic performance. This study also showed relationship quality did not moderate the relationship between academic performance and marital status, nor significantly predict academic performance. The results of this study provide implications for marital relationships and undergraduate academic performance.

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. Married couples may face more issues than non-married students when it comes to college. For example, married couples may not only have to focus on their own daily schedules but their spouses' schedule as well. Married couples also have to navigate marital roles, which may be difficult while also in college. For example, deciding who completes which house chores or who pays the bills may distract from academic performance.

Another issue could be that undergraduate students who are married formed their romantic relationship prior to forming their romantic relationship identity. According to Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development, during late adolescence, individuals are striving to form their romantic identity (Erikson, 1950; 1985). During adolescence, the developmental conflict that an individual experiences is between identity and identity confusion, and in adulthood, the core conflicts include intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus self-absorption, and integrity versus despair (Erikson, 1985). When individuals are in early adulthood, they are focusing on forming long-term intimate relationships. If individuals formed a marital relationship prior to establishing their identity, they may have rushed through the identity versus identity confusion stage. Establishing one's identity is central to development, and not solving this conflict can disrupt future stages according to this theory (Erikson, 1985). Thus, rushing through identity formation may distract from academic performance as individuals attempt to navigate married life when they may not be prepared to do so. If more attention was focused on relationship formation than romantic relationship identity, individuals may not perform as well in college.

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 occurs in the relationship quality reported by the participants. 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 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. 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.

The goal of this study was to examine how marital status predicts undergraduate academic performance, and test 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. Implications

emphasize the impact of marriage during a developmental period where marriage may not be the norm.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics by relationship status.

		Single	Seriously Dating	Married	Total	χ^2 (2, 110)
<i>n</i>		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*).

Table 2. 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
<i>Hypothesis 1</i>			
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
<i>Hypothesis 2</i>			
Intercept	3.20 (5.10)	4.80 (5.68)	10.59 (10.70)
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.

* $p < .05$.