The Real Versus the Ideal: Predicting Relationship Satisfaction and Well-Being From Endorsement of Marriage Myths and Benevolent Sexism

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Abstract

Marriage is a rite of passage in U.S. culture influenced by fairy-tale expectations presented in the media and perpetuated through gender role socialization. Our study tested endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism as predictors of engaged heterosexual college women's premarital relationship outcomes and psychological well-being. Women in heterosexual relationships ($N = 99$) completed an online questionnaire 6–12 months before their wedding. Results indicated endorsement of marriage myths predicted positive experiences, whereas benevolent sexism predicted negative experiences. However, several interactions indicated that women who rejected marriage myths but endorsed benevolent sexism showed more negative patterns including lower relationship satisfaction and confidence, lower educational expectations, and higher depression. Results are interpreted using self-discrepancy theory such that when actual and ideal experiences are congruent, higher relationship satisfaction and more positive well-being results, whereas discrepant actual–ideal experiences predict dissatisfaction and more negative well-being. These results have implications for counseling couples on holding realistic expectations for their romantic partners. Marriage counselors can advise couples about the potential negative consequences of endorsing benevolent sexism. Exposure of common myths or unrealistic expectations about one's partner and relationship may decrease the real–ideal discrepancy and increase marital satisfaction, thus increasing the likelihood of relationship longevity.

In the United States, heterosexual marriage is a rite of passage often associated with unrealistic expectations and fairy-tale fantasies (Rudman & Heppen, 2003; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In an individualistic culture, a first-order change from *me* to *we* is a life-changing event that forces a person to reevaluate his or her identity and often reconstruct his or her self-concept (Heyn, 2011; Thibaut & Kelly, 1959), which may be a challenging process. Another challenge to relationships is any discrepancies between idealized beliefs of a romantic partner compared to the partner's actual characteristics, which is consistent with past research showing a link between partners' disparate gender ideologies and marriage satisfaction (Amato & Booth, 1995; Minnotte, Minnotte, Pedersen, Mannon, & Kiger, 2010). Both the process of becoming interdependent and managing discrepancies between relationship ideals and reality affect relationship satisfaction, which predicts commitment and relationship longevity.

The present study examines how women's endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism predict their current relationship outcomes and psychological well-being. Particular emphasis is given to instances in which endorsement of benevolent sexism, or wanting to be treated like a princess in relationships, conflicts with women's rejection of optimistic marriage myths, in which case relationship and personal outcomes are expected to be negative. The outcomes are grouped into relationship outcomes, including satisfaction, relationship confidence, and partner's support for education goals, and psychological well-being, including anxiety and depression. Because relationships are central to psychological well-being, personal outcomes may be affected and thus are included in our study.

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Positive Illusions and Marriage Myths

Researchers have argued that accurate perceptions of the self and others are necessary components of mental health (Knudson, Sommers, & Golding, 1980; Parrott & Parrott, 1995). However, research focusing on positive illusions and mental health suggests that hyperpositive illusions about the self and others, particularly when paired with a sense of mastery and control, enhance psychological adjustment (Taylor & Brown, 1988). In an imperfect world, seeing one's partner in the best possible manner is more beneficial in romantic relationships than evaluating one's partner according to reality (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996).

Previous research on expectations in marriage has found that popular beliefs about marriage influence marital expectations held by couples (Barich & Bielby, 1996). Marriage is often romanticized in the United States, epitomized by extravagant wedding ceremonies and honeymoons. The knight in shining armor and Prince Charming ideals still infiltrate television programs and movies. Schwartz and Schwarz (1986) suggest that newlyweds base their expectations for marriage and their partners on images of marriage in the media. Marital therapists have identified many common myths about marriage, such as those described by Parrott and Parrott (1995): (a) Spouses assume that they share the same expectations in marriage, (b) everything that is going well in the relationship will only get better, (c) marriage will make the bad things in life disappear, and (d) spouses will complete one another or make each other whole. These idealizations of marriage may influence the development of unrealistic expectations for marriage and one's marital partner.

There are gender differences in the fulfillment of expectations in romantic relationships (Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis, 2012; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). Research suggests that although men and women have similar standards in relationships, women report their standards are met less often than do men (Afifi et al., 2012; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). In other words, women and men assign similar importance to relationship standards, but women may have a higher criterion of what it takes to meet the expectations of marriage than men. One possible explanation for this finding is that traditional gender role socialization leads women to idealize their partners more than their male counterparts do. Women's relationship satisfaction is a stronger determinant of divorce, and women are more likely to initiate divorce than men (Amato & Rogers, 1997), therefore, the present study focuses on the female partner in heterosexual relationships.

Self-Discrepancy Theory and Marital Expectations

Although research suggests holding idealized or overly positive images of one's romantic partner is beneficial to the relationship and one's mental health (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray et al., 1996; Taylor & Brown, 1988), self-discrepancy theory posits that experiences that are discrepant with one's ideals create distress (Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985). Self-discrepancy theory holds that our knowledge about ourselves, and by extension our relationships, takes the form of our *actual* beliefs and experiences and also our *ideal* beliefs and experiences (Higgins et al., 1985). Our ideal beliefs about the self include information about our personal aspirations and our beliefs about what important others hope for us. Any discrepancy between the actual and ideal selves can trigger depression and anxiety, thus we are motivated to minimize these discrepancies.

Within a self-discrepancy theory framework, actual and ideal beliefs can be applied to marital expectations. As stated previously, heterosexual marriage is often associated with unrealistic expectations and fairy-tale fantasies (Rudman & Heppen, 2003; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Idealizations of marriage may influence the development of unrealistic expectations for marriage and one's marital partner. The extent to which an individual's current relationship circumstances is inconsistent with one's ideal circumstances, including abstract beliefs about relationships and gender roles, can potentially lead to lower relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being such as anxiety and depression. Conversely, when one's expectations about a future relationship are optimistic and one's current experiences are positive, relationship satisfaction and healthy well-being are also likely.

Indeed previous research has established a link between expectations and satisfaction (Dainton, 2000; Frank, Anderson, & Rubinstein, 1980; Kelley, 1999; Kelley & Burgoon, 1991; Ruvolo & Veroff, 1997; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Ruvolo and Veroff (1997) found that discrepancies between beliefs of the ideal partner and the partner in reality were negatively correlated with the marital well-being of each spouse. Kelley and Burgoon (1991) reported that although spouses who had their expectations met were satisfied, discrepancies in expectations and outcomes were a better predictor of satisfaction. These findings suggest that discrepancies in expectations are related to marital satisfaction.

Gender Role Socialization and Benevolent Sexism

In addition to cultural views of marriage and the societal promotion of marriage myths, relationship expectations are also shaped by traditional gender roles, which influence development of expectations of power and control in relationships. Rudman and Heppen (2003) found that women who endorsed romantic fantasies reported less interest in personal power; however, men's endorsement of romantic fantasies was unrelated to their interest in personal power. Further, women's pursuit of romantic goals was negatively related to their engagement in math activities and interest in science-oriented careers (Park, Young, Troisi, & Pinkus, 2011), which can be conceptualized as personal power (Rudman & Heppen, 2003).

One way in which women may seemingly obtain power within romantic relationships, but still fulfill gender role

expectations of warmth and nurturance, is to endorse benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Overall, Sibley, & Tan, 2011). Benevolent sexism is the notion that women should be protected and put on a pedestal by men (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Although this set of beliefs is subjectively positive to the perceiver, it has harmful consequences. Benevolent sexism serves as an ideology through which people can perceive, understand, and interpret the social world, particularly as it relates to gender and marriage expectations. Benevolent sexism as an ideology, or worldview, also serves to explain or justify gender inequality, such as the unequal distribution of social or material goods in society (Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007). Thus, benevolent sexism serves to justify hostile sexism, or blatant derogation of women, which explains why an unequal distribution of power between men and women exists (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001; Napier, Thorisdottir, & Jost, 2010).

Gender role socialization that perpetuates romanticized and fantasy-like expectations for marriage is related to benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001; Napier et al., 2010). Related to the romantic belief of the knight in shining armor whisking his bride into the sunset on horseback, benevolent sexism advocates placing women on pedestals to be "protected, supported, and adored" (Glick & Fiske, 2001, p. 109). Women themselves often endorse benevolent sexism and do not view it as problematic (Becker, 2010; Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). However, benevolent sexism is based on stereotypical and restricted roles that portray women as weak and in need of men's protection and care (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Kilianski & Rudman, 1998). Yet endorsing benevolent sexism can serve as a coping response for women in relationships with men who endorse hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Overall et al., 2011). Overall, Sibley, and Tan (2011) posit that benevolent sexism is needed to balance the power of hostile sexism in romantic relationships. Specifically, when men endorse benevolent sexism, they are more open to influence from their female partners. Through couples' endorsement of benevolent sexism, women's relationship power is less threatening and women's interpersonal influence is respected within, but not outside, the relationship.

Marriage Myths and Benevolent Sexism

A novel contribution of this research is the examination of marriage myths and benevolent sexism as they relate to relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being. We argue that marriage myths, or the highly optimistic beliefs about relationship outcomes after marriage, and benevolent sexism are related but distinct concepts that both predict relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being. Popular beliefs of marriage perpetuate benevolent sexism prescriptions, such as emphasizing women's femininity, relishing their cherished and protected status, and viewing women as pure (e.g., the white wedding dress tradition; Chen, Fiske, & Lee, 2009; also see Rudman & Heppen, 2003; Yoder, Perry, & Saal, 2007).

Women who endorse both marriage myths and benevolent sexism are likely to have positive fantasies of their future wedding and marriage.

Marriage myths and benevolent sexism are distinct constructs in that marriage myths are not gendered, but rather they provide an overly optimistic view of marriage. Men and women can equally endorse marriage myths and their impact on the relationship may be similar. Marriage myths do not perpetuate gender inequality per se, although the gender roles within the relationship in which these myths are enacted are likely to be gendered (e.g., women being responsible for emotionally "completing" their partner). In contrast, benevolent sexism is a gendered construct that provides ideals on how women are supposed to act in relationships and how men are supposed to treat women. Endorsement of benevolent sexism by men and women has different outcomes in relationships, providing men with more power than women and perpetuating inequality (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Overall et al., 2011).

We argue that when women reject marriage myths but endorse benevolent sexism, a real–ideal relationship discrepancy occurs so that relationship dissatisfaction and decreased psychological well-being are likely. For example, if a woman endorses benevolent sexism, she expects to be treated like a princess by her partner, to be protected, and to be provided for. However, if she does not endorse marriage myths, she may perceive her partner as falling short of his knightly duties and therefore she is likely to have lower relationship satisfaction and negative psychological well-being. Consistent with self-discrepancy theory, discrepancies between these real and ideal outcomes may result in anxiety and depression (Higgins et al., 1985). Another novel contribution of our study is the examination of whether discrepancies in relationship beliefs extend to personal outcomes in the form of threats to psychological well-being, specifically from anxiety and depression.

We also argue that when a woman shows consistency in endorsing or rejecting both marriage myths and benevolent sexism, she will not experience a real–ideal discrepancy and its associated negative relationship and psychological well-being outcomes. If a woman endorses marriage myths and thus takes an overly optimistic view of marriage, and also endorses benevolent sexism and idealizes her partner as a knight and expects to be treated like a princess, these beliefs are congruent and no discrepancy occurs. Similarly, if a woman rejects both marriage myths and benevolent sexism and takes a realistic view of marriage and egalitarian gender roles in relationships, these beliefs are congruent and no discrepancy occurs.

Additionally, if a woman endorses marriage myths but rejects benevolent sexism, consistency in beliefs still occurs. Although there is acceptance of one belief and rejection of the other, these views remain congruent. In this case, a woman can have overly optimistic expectations for marriage (such as it fixing life's problems and making each partner whole) and she also can endorse egalitarian gender roles in the

relationship by rejecting benevolent sexism. Recall that marriage myths are not gendered but rather reflect overly optimistic views of marriage. Marriage myths do not perpetuate gender inequality per se and therefore are not discrepant with egalitarian gender beliefs. In summary, self-discrepancy theory provides a framework for asymmetrical predictions when applied to relationships. Discrepancies only occur in one mixed-belief condition, that is, when women reject marriage myths but endorse benevolent sexism.

The Present Study

In light of previous research, our study seeks to examine how endorsement of heterosexual marriage myths and benevolent sexism, both separately and jointly, predict premarital relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being for women. Our study uses a self-discrepancy theory framework to understand any discrepancies in real versus ideal views of relationships and their association with premarital relationship outcomes and psychological well-being. For the purposes of our study, marriage myths are conceptualized as individuals' *ideals* because they are expectations for the future, whereas beliefs regarding gender roles in relationships, or benevolent sexism, are *actual* experiences because they are based in the present.

Our research extends the current literature on relationship expectations and benevolent sexism in several ways. To the authors' knowledge, ours is the first study to jointly examine endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism as interacting to predict relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being. Few studies have examined women's endorsement of benevolent sexism as a predictor of premarital relationship satisfaction (see Hammond & Overall, 2013; Overall et al., 2011). Further, it is particularly important to study this topic among a college student population because women who become engaged during their college years are at-risk for not completing their education (Ono, 2003; Sweeney, 2002). In addition, women who marry early in life are at higher risk for divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Booth & Edwards, 1985).

Based on the literature documenting the benefits of holding positive illusions about one's romantic partner, we hypothesize that marriage myths (Hypothesis 1) and benevolent sexism (Hypothesis 2) will independently predict more positive relationship outcomes (satisfaction, confidence, educational plans) and more positive psychological well-being (lower anxiety and depression). Further, we predict an interaction between marriage myths and benevolent sexism for relationship outcomes and psychological well-being (Hypothesis 3). Decomposing the interaction by its simple slopes, we predict that higher endorsement of marriage myths will be correlated with more positive relationship outcomes and psychological well-being (Hypothesis 3a) for both women with higher and lower endorsement of benevolent sexism. In this case, higher endorsement of marriage myths

(ideal) is consistent with higher and lower endorsement of benevolent sexism (actual). Because there is no actual–ideal discrepancy, outcomes should be positive and the slope should be nonsignificant and near zero. In contrast, when there is lower endorsement of marriage myths (ideal) but higher endorsement of benevolent sexism (actual), relationship outcomes and psychological well-being will be more negative than when there is lower endorsement of benevolent sexism (Hypothesis 3b). In this case, there is an actual–ideal discrepancy and a significant negative slope is expected.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants included 99 college student women who were engaged to be married to a man within 6 to 12 months. Participants were eligible to participate if they did not have children and were not pregnant, had never been married, would not be in an arranged marriage, and would be married within 12 months. The majority of participants were not cohabitating ($n = 61$, 63%), with those who were reporting an average of 16 months of cohabitation (standard deviation [SD] = 15.59, range = 1–72 months). Relationship length ranged from 1 to 11 years, with an average of 3.58 years ($SD = 2.14$). Participants reported being engaged for an average of 8.48 months ($SD = 8.67$, range = 1–48 months). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 33 years ($M = 23.12$, $SD = 2.43$). The sample represented the following racial/ethnic backgrounds: 20 Asian/Pacific Islander, 36 Latina, 18 White, 10 multiracial, 1 Black, and the remaining 13 identified as other. Participants were compensated with either extra course credit through the Department's participant pool or a $10 Amazon.com gift card.

Participants completed an online questionnaire 6 to 12 months prior to their wedding date. Psychological well-being measures were asked first in the questionnaire so they would not be influenced by questions on relationship satisfaction nor influence participants to take a relational mind-set when answering the questions. The study was institutional review board approved, and all participants provided informed consent. The questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Two participants did not respond to the cohabitation and relationship length questions, but there were no additional missing data or incomplete questionnaires.

Predictors

Marriage myths. A 10-item measure of marriage myths was developed based on Parrott and Parrott (1995). The original measure included 5 items, and we developed 5 additional items for our study. Items were rated on a 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 6 (*very strongly agree*) scale, with new items including "My fiancé makes up for what I'm lacking," "I make up for what my fiancé is lacking," "We will live happily ever after," "Marriage is hard work" (reverse scored), and "Marriage is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week job" (reverse

scored). The items were averaged to create a single measure of endorsement of marriage myths such that higher scores indicated greater myth endorsement ($\alpha = .79$).

Benevolent sexism. Benevolent sexism was measured using the 11-item subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The Benevolent Sexism subscale was used as a stand-alone measure (Glick & Fiske, 1996) because it is the form of sexism most relevant to the present study. Items were rated from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 6 (*very strongly agree*), and a sample item is "Women ought to be cherished and protected by men." Items were averaged to create a composite score in which higher scores indicated greater endorsement of benevolent sexism ($\alpha = .89$).

Relationship Outcome Measures

Premarital satisfaction. Premarital satisfaction was measured using the ENRICH (evaluation and nurturing relationship issues, communication, and happiness) Marital Satisfaction Scale (Flowers & Olsen, 1993) and the Marital Satisfaction Assessment (Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1983). The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS) included 14 statements rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 6 (*very strongly agree*). Sample items are "I am very happy with how we handle role responsibilities in our relationship" and "I am unhappy about our financial position" (reversed scored). Marital satisfaction was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 5 (*very strongly agree*) and included 13 items such as "My partner and I share the same views about marriage" and "My partner and I have the same beliefs about how marriage will change our relationship (if at all)." The combined measures had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .88$), and scores were converted to *z*-scores in order to compute an overall mean for premarital satisfaction, wherein higher scores indicated greater satisfaction.

Relationship confidence. A measure of relationship confidence was developed using items from the EMS (Flowers & Olsen, 1993) and the Marital Satisfaction Assessment (Olson et al., 1983) that were reworded for future interactions. The measure included 9 items rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 6 (*very strongly agree*). Questions about relationship confidence included "I am not sure we can avoid divorce or breaking up in the future" (reverse scored) and "I am very confident when I think of our future together." The measure had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .91$) in our study, and items were averaged to create a single measure of relationship confidence such that higher scores indicated greater relationship confidence.

Education expectations. Education expectations were measured by 8 items from the Marriage Role Expectation Inventory Education subscale (Dunn, 1960). The items were rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 6 (*very strongly agree*). Statements included "I expect that my partner and I will share the same goals for his career" and "I expect that my partner will support me in my efforts to advance my education." The measure had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .85$) in our study, and items were averaged to create an overall mean for education expectations wherein higher scores indicated greater education expectations.

Well-Being Outcome Measures

Anxiety. Anxiety was measured using the Anxiety subscale of the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis, 1994) and the Anxiety subscale of the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL-25; Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974). The Brief Symptom Inventory had 6 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*), and it included items such as "In the last six months I have felt … Suddenly scared for no reason" and " … Nervousness or shakiness inside." The Anxiety subscale of the HSCL-25 included 4 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 5 (*very strongly agree*). Sample items are "I sometimes can't sleep because I worry about things" and "I am usually able to concentrate on whatever I am doing" (reversed scored). The measure had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .83$) in our study, and scores were converted to *z*-scores to compute a combined overall mean for anxiety, wherein higher scores indicated higher self-reported anxiety.

Depression. Depression was measured using the Depression subscale of the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis, 1994) and the Depression subscale of the HSCL-25 (Derogatis et al., 1974). The Brief Symptom Inventory included 5 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Items on the Brief Symptom Inventory included "In the last six months I … have been feeling lonely" and " … had feelings of worthlessness." The Depression subscale of the HSCL-25 included 5 items that were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 5 (*very strongly agree*). Sample items are "I am able to handle my problems" (reverse scored) and "I have been feeling unhappy." The measure had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .87$) in our study, and scores were converted to *z*-scores to compute a combined overall mean for depression such that higher scores reflected higher self-reported depression.

Results

Data Analytic Strategy

To test the hypotheses related to endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism predicting relationship outcomes (satisfaction, confidence, educational plans) and well-being (anxiety and depression), multiple hierarchical linear regression analyses were computed. All continuous predictor variables

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Overall and by Endorsement of Marriage Myths, and Correlations for All Study Variables.

Variables	Overall		Lower Marriage Myths		Higher Marriage Myths		1	2	3	4	5	6
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD						
1. Benevolent sexism	3.63	.93	3.28	.80	3.97	.93	—					
2. Marriage myths	4.34	.70	3.82	.45	4.91	.43	.431**	—				
3. Relationship satisfaction	4.21	2.34	4.28	.19	4.15	2.49	.002	−.071	—			
4. Relationship confidence	4.66	.65	4.42	.59	4.89	.62	.191	.381**	−.066	—		
5. Education expectations	.83	.72	4.53	.59	5.12	.56	.156	.549**	−.040	.546**	—	
6. Anxiety	3.80	.66	3.79	.63	3.80	.69	−.90	−.011	−.11	.095	.091	—
7. Depression	4.02	.75	3.92	.77	4.11	.73	.039	.123	.080	.309**	.262**	.625**

**p < .01.

were centered to reduce multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). The main effects of marriage myths and benevolent sexism were entered into Step 1 and their interaction was entered in Step 2. If the interaction was significant, tests of the simple slopes were calculated at 1 *SD* above and below the mean of one predictor (Dawson & Richter, 2006).

Before testing hypotheses, we computed independent samples *t*-tests to determine if women who cohabitated differed on the key variables of marriage myths and benevolent sexism. These tests showed no significant differences between women who cohabitated or did not cohabitate with their fiancés. We also computed correlations among relationship length, engagement length, cohabitation length, and endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism. None of the correlations between the predictors and relationship duration variables were significant. Because there were no group variations in our key variables by cohabitation or relationship duration, these variables were excluded from subsequent analyses. The correlation matrix and descriptive statistics of the study variables are provided in Table 1. Furthermore, there was a moderately strong positive correlation between marriage myths and benevolent sexism to support our claim that marriage myths and benevolent sexism are related but distinct constructs, $r(97) = .43$, $p = .001$.

Hypothesis 1: Marriage Myths

Hypothesis 1 predicted a main effect of marriage myths such that marriage myths will independently predict more positive relationship outcomes (satisfaction, confidence, educational plans) and more positive psychological well-being (lower anxiety and depression). Supporting Hypothesis 1, there was a main effect of marriage myths on relationship satisfaction indicating that participants endorsing marriage myths had higher relationship satisfaction than those with lower endorsement of marriage myths ($\beta = .610$, $p = .001$). Consistent with Hypothesis 1, there was a main effect of marriage myths on relationship confidence indicating participants endorsing marriage myths had higher relationship confidence than
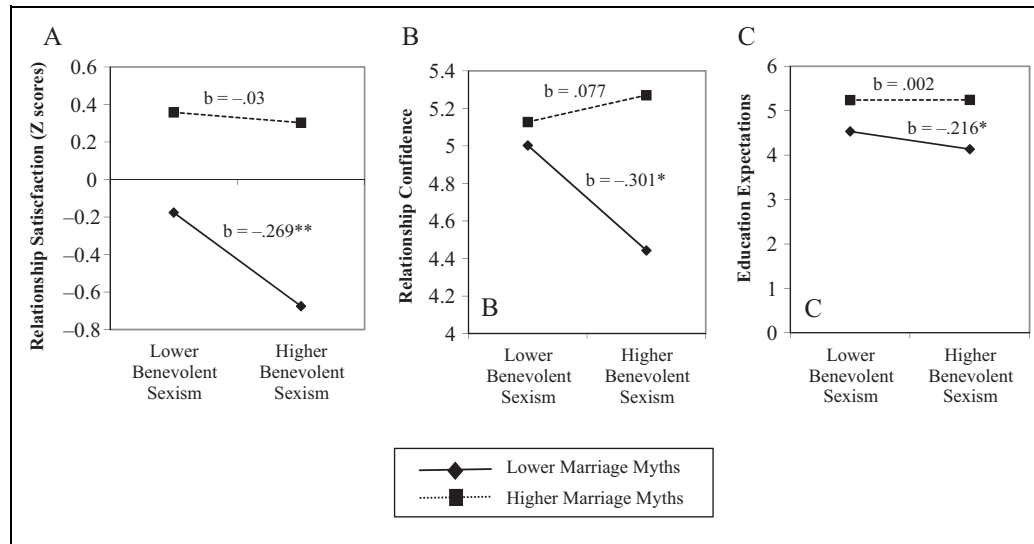
those with lower endorsement of marriage myths ($\beta = .279$, $p = .013$). Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants endorsing marriage myths had higher education expectations than those with lower endorsement of marriage myths ($\beta = .630$, $p = .001$). In sum, Hypothesis 1 was supported across all three relationship outcomes. However, turning to well-being outcomes, there were no main effects of marriage myths on anxiety or depression, thus Hypothesis 1 was not supported for psychological well-being outcomes.

Hypothesis 2: Benevolent Sexism

Hypothesis 2 predicted a main effect of benevolent sexism such that benevolent sexism will independently predict more positive relationship outcomes (satisfaction, confidence, educational plans) and more positive psychological well-being (lower anxiety and depression). Contrary to Hypothesis 2, there was a main effect of benevolent sexism indicating greater endorsement was related to *lower* relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.224$, $p = .023$). Furthermore, the expected relationships between benevolent sexism and both relationship confidence ($\beta = -.122$, $p = .27$) and educational expectations ($\beta = -.137$, $p = .15$) were not significant. As for psychological well-being, there were no main effects of benevolent sexism on anxiety or depression, documenting no support for Hypothesis 2 for these outcomes.

Hypothesis 3: Marriage Myths and Sexism

Hypothesis 3 predicted an interaction between endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism. Specifically, Hypothesis 3a predicted higher endorsement of marriage myths would be correlated with more positive relationship outcomes and psychological well-being for both women with higher and lower endorsement of benevolent sexism. Hypothesis 3b predicted that based on the self-discrepancy theory framework, when there is lower endorsement of marriage myths (ideal) but higher endorsement of benevolent sexism (actual), relationship outcomes and psychological well-

Figure 1. Two-way interactions between endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism on (A) premarital relationship satisfaction, indicating that lower endorsement of marriage myths and higher endorsement of benevolent sexism predicted lower relationship satisfaction; (B) relationship confidence, indicating that lower endorsement of marriage myths and higher endorsement of benevolent sexism predicted lower relationship confidence; and (C) education expectations, indicating that lower endorsement of marriage myths and higher endorsement of benevolent sexism predicted lower education expectations.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

being will be more negative than when there is lower endorsement of benevolent sexism.

Relationship outcomes. Supporting Hypothesis 3, we found a significant two-way interaction between endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism on premarital relationship satisfaction, $\Delta R^2 = .044$, $\Delta F(1, 95) = 5.96$, $p = .017$, $\beta = .215$ (see Figure 1A). Tests of the simple slopes indicated that among participants with greater endorsement of marriage myths, levels of benevolent sexism were unrelated to relationship satisfaction ($b = -.03$, $p = .684$), supporting Hypothesis 3a. The simple slope for participants with less endorsement of marriage myths was significant, indicating those higher in benevolent sexism had lower relationship satisfaction than those with lower benevolent sexism ($b = -.269$, $p = .003$). This result supports Hypothesis 3b that discrepant beliefs (rejection of marriage myths and endorsement of benevolent sexism) are related to poorer relationship outcomes, specifically lower relationship satisfaction.

Supporting Hypothesis 3, there was a two-way interaction between endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism on relationship confidence, $\Delta R^2 = .057$, $\Delta F(1, 95) = 6.06$, $p = .016$, $\beta = .247$ (see Figure 1B). Tests of the simple slopes indicated that among participants with greater endorsement of marriage myths, level of benevolent sexism was unrelated to relationship satisfaction ($b = .077$, $p = .502$), supporting Hypothesis 3a. In contrast, among participants with less endorsement of marriage myths, those higher in benevolent sexism had lower relationship confidence than those with lower benevolent sexism ($b = -.301$, $p = .033$). This result supports Hypothesis 3b that discrepant beliefs

(rejection of marriage myths and endorsement of benevolent sexism) are related to poorer relationship outcomes, specifically less relationship confidence.

Supporting Hypothesis 3, there was a two-way interaction between endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism on education expectations, $\Delta R^2 = .027$, $\Delta F(1, 95) = 3.84$, $p = .053$, $\beta = .169$ (see Figure 1C). Tests of the simple slopes indicated that among participants with greater endorsement of marriage myths, levels of benevolent sexism were unrelated to education expectations ($b = .002$, $= .977$), supporting Hypothesis 3a. The significant simple slope for participants with less endorsement of marriage myths indicated those higher in benevolent sexism had lower education expectations than those with lower benevolent sexism ($b = -.216$, $p = .035$). This result supports Hypothesis 3b that discrepant beliefs (rejection of marriage myths and endorsement of benevolent sexism) are related to poorer relationship outcomes, specifically lower education expectations.

Psychological well-being outcomes. Although there was an interaction between endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism on anxiety supporting Hypothesis 3, $\Delta R^2 = .106$, $\Delta F(1, 95) = 11.43$, $p = .001$, $\beta = -.336$ (see Figure 2A), the pattern of results was counter to Hypotheses 3a and 3b. Tests of the simple slopes indicated that among participants with greater endorsement of marriage myths, higher benevolent sexism was related to less anxiety ($b = -.143$, $p = .011$), which is contrary to Hypothesis 3a. Among participants with less endorsement of marriage myths, there was no significant relationship with benevolent sexism ($b = .110$, $p = .108$). This fails to support Hypothesis 3b that discrepant
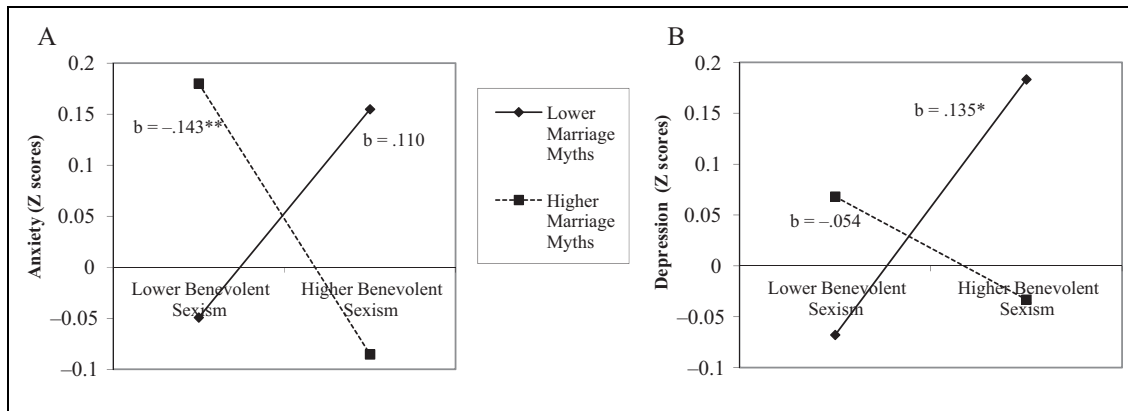
Figure 2. Two-way interactions between endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism on (A) anxiety—indicating that higher endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism predicted less anxiety—and (b) depression—indicating that among those with lower marriage myths, those higher in benevolent sexism had more depression.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

beliefs (rejection of marriage myths and endorsement of benevolent sexism) are related to poorer well-being, specifically anxiety.

There was a two-way interaction between endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism on depression, $\Delta R^2 = .083$, $\Delta F(1, 95) = 8.59$, $p = .004$, $\beta = -.296$ (see Figure 2B), that supported Hypothesis 3. Tests of the simple slopes indicated that among participants with greater endorsement of marriage myths, levels of benevolent sexism did not predict depression ($b = -.054$, $p = .259$), supporting Hypothesis 3a. Among participants with less endorsement of marriage myths, those higher in benevolent sexism had more depression than those with lower benevolent sexism ($b = .135$, $p = .023$). This result supports Hypothesis 3b that discrepant beliefs (rejection of marriage myths and endorsement of benevolent sexism) are related to poorer psychological well-being, specifically greater depression.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to examine how heterosexual women's endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism predict their current relationship outcomes and psychological well-being. The focus of our study was on the discrepancy between endorsement of benevolent sexism, or wanting to be treated like a princess in relationships, and women's rejection of optimistic marriage myths. We found that greater endorsement of marriage myths independently predicted more positive relationship outcomes; greater endorsement of benevolent sexism independently predicted more negative relationship outcomes; higher endorsement of marriage myths, regardless of endorsement of benevolent sexism, showed positive patterns of relationship and psychological outcomes, compared to lower endorsement of marriage myths; and when there was lower endorsement of marriage myths but higher endorsement of benevolent sexism, relationship outcomes and psychological well-being were more negative than when endorsement of benevolent sexism was lower.

Our results generally supported Hypotheses 1 and 3 but also showed some interesting patterns that further our understanding of the role of endorsing marriage myths and/or benevolent sexism in relationship outcomes and psychological well-being. First, there was ample support for Hypothesis 1 that endorsing marriage myths was related to more positive relationship outcomes, specifically higher relationship satisfaction, greater relationship confidence, and higher educational expectations. These main effects indicate marriage myths, or having an overly optimistic view of one's relationship, potentially serve as a protective factor and buffer the relationship from potential negative influences, although directionally cannot be confirmed. This pattern is consistent with the literature on positive illusions and their beneficial effects on well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1988) and relationships (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray et al., 1996).

A question that remains, and that cannot be answered by the present study, is how long do the benefits of marriage myths last? The women in our sample were engaged to be married within 6–12 months, but after marriage, when reality may threaten fairy-tale ideals of marriage, do marriage myths end up harming relationship outcomes? Indeed research suggests that when one's relationships do not live up to one's expectations or ideals, relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution are more likely (Rusbult, 1980; Ruvolo & Veroff, 1997).

An interesting and unexpected pattern emerged regarding Hypothesis 2 and endorsement of benevolent sexism. Although marriage myths and benevolent sexism were positively correlated, the main effects of benevolent sexism showed that endorsing such beliefs has a negative association with relationship satisfaction. This finding may be due to women's partners not living up to the expectations created by benevolent sexism, namely placing women on a pedestal, acting chivalrous, and putting women's safety before men's (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001; Overall et al., 2011; Rudman &

Heppen, 2003). Or, it could be that, consistent with Glick and Fiske's argument (1996, 2001), benevolent sexism justifies hostile sexism, which ultimately predicts negative outcomes for women. Because our data are correlational and directionality cannot be established, a third explanation could be that women who endorse benevolent sexism have less optimistic views of marriage precisely because their relationship partners have failed to meet the high relationship standards benevolent sexism sets for men. However, both the main effects of marriage myths and benevolent sexism can be better understood by examining their interacting effects. Their interaction indicates a more complex pattern of results.

Supporting Hypothesis 3, several interactions between marriage myths and benevolent sexism predicted relationship outcomes. Specifically, Hypothesis 3a predicted that, when endorsement levels of marriage myths were high, positive relationship outcomes would result for women with both higher and lower endorsement of benevolent sexism. Consistent with Hypothesis 3b, when participants had discrepant beliefs (rejection of marriage myths and endorsement of benevolent sexism), negative relationship and psychological well-being outcomes were the result. Together, these effects seem to support the pattern that marriage myths serve as a protective factor and benevolent sexism serves as a risk factor for premarital and psychological outcomes. Put another way, after controlling for the rosy-colored expectations of marriage myths, women who endorse benevolent sexism had more negative relationship outcomes and poorer well-being compared to women who reject benevolent sexism.

Specifically, when marriage myth endorsement was low but benevolent sexism endorsement was high, negative experiences were indicated: lower relationship satisfaction, lower relationship confidence, lower educational expectations, and greater depression (but with no relationship with anxiety). When endorsement of marriage myths was high, endorsement of benevolent sexism did not matter. The general pattern of results indicated more positive relationship outcomes but not psychological ones. Specifically when endorsement of marriage myths was higher, relationship satisfaction, confidence, and educational expectations were higher. There was no relationship between higher endorsement of marriage myths and depression. The result for anxiety was unexpected, indicating that among women with higher endorsement of marriage myths, less endorsement of benevolent sexism showed higher anxiety than more endorsement of benevolent sexism.

In sum, our results support the self-discrepancy theory framework for the role of marriage myths and benevolent sexism in predicting premarital relationship experiences. When marriage myths are endorsed, relationship experiences were more positive. When women endorse benevolent sexism but not marriage myths, a potential real versus ideal discrepancy results, which may lead to relationship dissatisfaction and other negative psychological outcomes.

It is interesting to note that our results supported Hypotheses 3a and 3b consistently for relationship outcomes, namely relationship satisfaction, relationship confidence, and educational expectations, but our results were mixed for psychological well-being. Both Hypotheses 3a and 3b were supported with depression but not anxiety. First, because relationship outcomes are most directly influenced by relationship-related beliefs, these results are expected. However, psychological outcomes are less directly related but still showed a significant relationship to depression. This supports the literature that relationship factors predict psychological well-being. In hindsight, self-discrepancy theory specifically predicts depression when there is a disconnect between actual and ideal selves, but anxiety typically surfaces when there is a discrepancy between actual and *ought* selves (or individuals' sense of personal obligation or duty; Higgins, 1987; Higgins et al., 1985). Our study did not measure *ought* beliefs, thus support for the relationship with depression (actual–ideal discrepancy) but not anxiety (actual–ought discrepancy) is consistent with the self-discrepancy theory framework.

Limitations

The design of our study limits interpretation or generalization of these results in a few ways. First, our study only included perceptions of one partner in the dyad, thus only women's perspectives are described. A dyadic study that collects data from both partners and examines the equal or disparate endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism may further our understanding of the results. Indeed other lines of research have examined gender role belief consistency among partners (Guilbert, Vacc, & Pasley, 2000) and benevolent sexism (Overall et al., 2011), but to our knowledge, this has not been done with specific attention to endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism. Also the data reflect marital expectations without knowledge of actual outcomes beyond current relationship satisfaction. Thus, the self-discrepancy theory framework is a theoretical interpretation. That is, endorsement of marriage myths is the expectation or ideal, but we do not have data on whether that expectation, or ideal, is met. Thus, the interpretation of a discrepancy between ideals and actual outcomes is theoretical. Further, the sample was limited to heterosexual women engaged to a man, which does not address our understanding of lesbian and gay couples.

Understanding the pattern of results would be further enhanced by the inclusion of a measure of ought beliefs and by a longitudinal design in which participants were followed postmarriage, perhaps at a short- and long-term time point. This would allow for testing the short- and long-term benefits (or disadvantages) of endorsing marriage myths and benevolent sexism. A longitudinal analysis with postmarriage outcome data can further test self-discrepancy theory regarding whether actual outcomes (actual selves) are meeting relationship ideals (ideal selves).

Practice Implications

Despite the limitations inherent in a cross-sectional correlational study, our research provides novel contributions to the literature and has implications for practice. To our knowledge, ours is the first study to examine endorsement of marriage myths and benevolent sexism as they relate to relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being among engaged heterosexual college women. The insight gained from exploring the myths of marriage women hold before entering and during marriage may be helpful for marital therapists in treating clients. Many couples seek premarital or marital therapy when facing distress. Perhaps the exposure of common myths or unrealistic expectations about one's partner and relationship will decrease the real–ideal discrepancy and increase marital satisfaction, thus increasing the likelihood of relationship longevity. If individuals are aware that their expectations are unrealistic, perhaps they will be likely to lower their expectations to a level their partner could meet. This would increase satisfaction and commitment and perhaps prevent some individuals from seeking a divorce (Rusbult, 1980; Ruvolo & Veroff, 1997).

The more novel finding of our study is that women who endorse benevolent sexism report more negative relationship and psychological well-being experiences. Without the rosy-colored glasses of optimism provided by marriage myths, women who endorse benevolent sexism report negative experiences—including lower relationship satisfaction, lower relationship confidence, lower educational expectations, and greater depression. The unrealistic romance expectations prescribed by benevolent sexism, including the knight in shining armor mentality, may be too demanding for men. Indeed if male partners do not also endorse benevolent sexism, relationship conflict is more likely (Overall et al., 2011). Thus, women who endorse benevolent sexism are at greater risk for disappointment in their romantic relationships. With this knowledge, marriage counselors can advise couples about the potential negative consequences of endorsing benevolent sexism. These results and that of future research could be incorporated into graduate education for marriage and family therapists so that they are better equipped to help women, and couples, navigate their relationship expectations in the context of real-world outcomes.

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