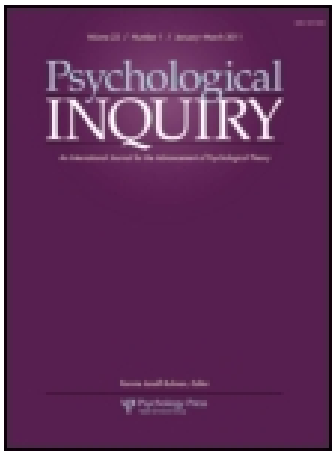

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The Rising Expectations of Marriage: What We Do and Do Not Know

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The Rising Expectations of Marriage: What We Do and Do Not Know

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> "As soon as the idea that love should be the central reason for marriage, and companionship its basic goal, was first raised, observers of the day warned. . .that the very features that promised to make marriage such a unique and treasured personal relationship opened the way for it to become an optional and fragile one"—Coontz (2005, p. 5)

For decades, sociologists have written extensively about the changing norms surrounding marriage in America. There is little doubt that the meaning and function attached to marriage has shifted radically over the centuries. Numerous scholars have argued that at no other time in history have Americans placed such tremendous expectations on marriage (e.g., Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2009; Cherlin, 2004; Coontz, 2005). Today, the marital relationship often is expected to serve as a primary source of one's emotional and personal fulfillment, an expectation that rather paradoxically has resulted in marriage becoming both more satisfying and more fragile than ever before (Coontz, 2005). Thus, scientific debate regarding the rising expectations of marriage and their consequences for marital stability is certainly not new; in fact, in some ways the overarching ideas of the Finkel, Hui, Carswell, and Larson (this issue) target article echo longstanding themes found within the marital literature. Using this literature as a springboard, however, Finkel and colleagues add a psychological perspective to the conversation by addressing the possible ramifications of these changing societal expectations for the day-to-day, dyadic processes taking place within the marriage.

We would like to begin our commentary by commending the authors for delving into this topic of inquiry. In an age where the federal government is devoting unprecedented resources toward family formation and maintenance efforts (Johnson, 2012), it is imperative for scholars in the field to develop a richer and more complete understanding of the function and dynamics of modern day marriage. Yet progress in developing this comprehensive picture is hindered by the fact that the field of relationship science is better characterized as *multi*disciplinary rather than *inter*disciplinary. Although research examining marital happiness and stability can be found across many distinct disciplines, these programs of research often proceed in parallel, without building on one another. Thus, despite our wealth of knowledge regarding the macrolevel contextual forces and the microlevel interpersonal processes that shape marital outcomes, research highlighting the intricate interconnections between these levels is sorely limited (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). In their attempts to synthesize the sociological and psychological literatures, Finkel and colleagues (this issue) take a step in an important and fruitful direction.

That said, before the target article can inspire new lines of research, it is necessary to critically evaluate the many assumptions underlying the "suffocation of marriage" perspective. As we outline in our commentary, we fear that the Mount Maslow metaphor is built upon a series of premises for which there is a notable paucity of direct empirical support. Of particular concern is the fact that the authors knowingly sidestep meaningful discussion of the bifurcation of marital experiences by socioeconomic status. Since reaching their peak in the 1980s, divorce rates have steadily declined among middle-class, better educated individuals yet have continued to rise among lower income, less educated individuals (Cherlin, 2010; Martin, 2006); in fact, rates of divorce are nearly twice as high for women who live in low-income neighborhoods as compared to those who live in high-income neighborhoods (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Raley & Bumpass, 2003). We argue that these trends have enormous implications for the tenets of Mount Maslow and that the state of modern-day marriage cannot be discussed reasonably using the broad strokes employed in the current piece. Thus, for the remainder of our commentary we aim to evaluate the support for Mount Maslow by exploring what we do and do not know about marital expectations and their consequences. We also discuss the appropriateness of using the Mount Maslow metaphor to understand and prevent marital dysfunction across all segments of the population. We have structured our comments around three fundamental questions: (a) Why do people marry? (b) Whose marriages are suffocating? (c) How can we help marriages that are struggling?

Why Do People Marry? Evaluating the Evidence for Self-Actualization Goals in Marriage

One key tenet of the Mount Maslow metaphor is that the vast majority of Americans look to their

marriage to fulfill their higher order needs of autonomy and personal growth. In other words, the authors suggest that the primary function of marriage today is to aid individuals in achieving their self-actualization goals. Consequently, relational processes such as effective communication and support should take on greater importance within the relationship, as these processes are thought to be pivotal for reaching such high marital aspirations (Finkel et al., this issue). Many have speculated that the culture of "expressive individualism," which emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, may have given rise to such higher order expectations of marriage (Cherlin, 2009). Yet a closer look at the literature reveals remarkably little psychological evidence to support these assumptions. Although the standards for marriage may have risen for many Americans, lingering questions remain as to whether self-actualization per se is the ultimate goal.

For instance, as the target article reveals, evidence for the primacy of self-actualization goals in marriage is largely indirect. Finkel and colleagues (this issue) draw from classic theories of self-expansion (Aron & Aron, 1986) and the Michelangelo phenomenon (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999) to highlight the robust positive association between personal growth and relationship happiness. Although these programs of research are indeed consistent with the notion that individuals may be happier in marriages that provide them with personal growth opportunities, this work does not provide conclusive support for the functional argument of marriage. In other words, are individuals are actually looking to and expecting their marriage to fulfill their personal growth needs?

To effectively argue that individuals have placed a burden on marriage to provide personal growth benefits, one must directly assess individuals' reasons for marrying as well as their expectations for married life. Of interest, some of the best work exploring why people choose to marry—research that was overlooked in the target article—explores these issues within low-income populations. Edin and colleagues (Edin, 2000; Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005) have conducted in-depth interviews with hundreds of low-income single mothers regarding the meaning these women ascribe to marriage. When asked to describe their hopes and expectations for a marriage partner, the women offered narratives that converged on several consistent themes. The most prominent theme was a desire for a financially stable partner—one who was fiscally responsible and had acquired reasonable financial assets—as marital unions were expected to facilitate rather than hinder economic security. In fact, many women noted that entering marriage signifies that the couple has "arrived" financially (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005, p. 1308). A second, albeit somewhat less common, theme was a desire for an exceptionally high-quality relationship capable of weathering any storm. An ideal marriage was expected to provide a trustworthy confidant, friend, and companion with whom one could share a lifelong love (Edin et al., 2004). To be sure, the women set a high bar for marriage, one that may be difficult to meet. Yet it is worth noting what these women did *not* say about marriage; the narratives did not contain references to a marriage partner making one a better person or helping one achieve one's personal goals. In other words, these women did not voice concerns over whether marriage might fulfill higher order self-actualization needs. Rather, their narratives suggest that the function of marriage is to provide safety, belongingness, and love.

Further work directly comparing the marital standards of higher and lower income individuals corroborates the notion that the expectations of lower income couples may be firmly rooted at the lower to middle portion of Maslow's hierarchy. Survey data collected from a stratified random sample of more than 6,000 individuals revealed that economic standards for marriage were more salient for lower income men and women compared to higher income respondents (Trail & Karney, 2012). Compared to higher income individuals, lower income individuals placed more importance on steady employment and less importance on emotional support and effective communication (i.e., processes argued to be essential for higher order self-actualization goals) when considering the components of a successful marriage. Given that the number of families facing serious economic challenges in our country is steadily increasing (Roberts, Povich, & Mather, 2012), results such as these underscore important qualifications to the assumption that most Americans are placing the burden of self-actualization goals on their marriage. The needs and expectations that Finkel and colleagues (this issue) suggest are central to modern-day marriage are not a primary focus for a sizeable segment of the American population.

Of course, the previously reviewed evidence only speaks to the marital expectations of lower income populations. Therefore, it remains possible that expectations for self-actualization may be a luxury reserved for those who occupy a higher socioeconomic status. After all, Maslow's hierarchy suggests that without the worries of economic insecurity, these individuals should be free to focus on higher order needs. Some support for this notion can be found in a study of the changing themes found in marital advice columns in popular women's magazines from 1900 to 1979 (Cancian & Gordon, 1988). Throughout this period, themes of self-fulfillment in marriage became more prevalent. However, this shift was not linear in nature, but rather exhibited more of a zigzag pattern that covaried with important cultural factors. For instance, during the prosperous 1920s there was a sharp

increase in articles advocating these more modern-day notions of love. Yet, with the onset of the Great Depression, themes of self-fulfillment receded in favor of the less self-expressive, more self-sacrificing themes associated with companionate goals. In other words, adapting to economic deprivation seemed to alter ideas about the family in favor of lower level needs (Elder, 1974).

Yet the possibility that self-actualization goals primarily emerge among those of higher socioeconomic status must be balanced against other societal trends that may offer a different story. As noted by the authors, the age of first marriage has risen steadily over the past several decades, particularly among well-educated individuals (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009). This trend, in part, has been explained by a change in attitudes toward marriage (Cherlin, 2004, 2009). In the 1950s, entering marriage represented an initial step toward adulthood; one married in order to become an adult. Consequently, individuals married young and were likely growing and developing their identities together. Today, however, the prevailing attitude has shifted, such that one must be an adult before one can marry. As marriage often occurs later in the life course, individuals today are more likely to have achieved many of their personal goals prior to entering marriage (Cherlin, 2009). As a result, it is plausible that the delay of marriage serves to actually remove some of the burden of self-actualization goals from modern-day marriage.

Our speculation here is simply intended to emphasize that our understanding of the function of marriage is far from complete. To make a persuasive case for the prominence of self-actualization goals in marriage, it is imperative for future work to untangle self-actualization needs from love and belongingness needs and to more directly evaluate their relative contributions to marital happiness. Self-actualization remains a nebulous concept, used to refer to such diverse ideas as becoming a better person (Finkel et al., this issue, p. 2); focusing on and achieving one's personal goals (p. 2); and having personal happiness with the levels of passion, intimacy, and companionship present in one's relationship (p. 26). In other words, the self-actualization examples in the target article vary considerably in the extent to which they illustrate self-expressive (i.e., self-actualization) versus relational (i.e., love and belongingness) goals. This conceptual ambiguity renders it difficult to evaluate the arguments of the current piece. In sum, we agree with Finkel and colleagues' (this issue) assertion that many Americans have higher, and perhaps more idealistic, expectations of their marriage compared to the past. However, whether those expectations are for self-actualization or for love and belongingness remains an unsettled empirical issue that warrants further investigation.

Whose Marriages Are Suffocating? Evaluating the Consequences of Rising Expectations

A second key tenet outlined by Finkel and colleagues (this issue) is that marriages today are "suffocating." Due to rising marital expectations, successful marriages require a greater investment of time, effort, and resources into cultivating the relationship than in decades past; yet contemporary Americans report having less time available for shared activities with their partner (Amato et al., 2009). The consequences of this state of affairs, in which Americans are thought to be expecting more but investing less, is that "Americans are, on balance, suffering adverse psychological consequences and becoming less satisfied with their marriages" (Finkel et al., this issue, p. 33).

Although it is true that many American marriages are struggling, we argue that consideration of the previously reviewed research linking economic resources to marital expectations and outcomes paints a more nuanced picture that raises questions over the extent to which higher order expectations are contributing to the suffocation of marriage. Despite the fact that lower income individuals place little emphasis on the utility of marriage for fulfilling one's self-actualization goals (Edin et al., 2004), less educated, low-income spouses report significantly higher levels of marital distress and are at greater risk for marital dissolution than better educated, middle- or high-income spouses (Karney, Garvan, & Thomas, 2003; Martin, 2006). Given that lower income populations often report holding less idealistic, and more practical expectations for marriage (Trail & Karney, 2012), it is difficult to argue that the high levels of marital discord present within this population can be attributed to unreasonable higher order marital aspirations. Conversely, although individuals occupying a higher socioeconomic status should be more likely to burden their marriage with higher order expectations, these individuals are enjoying remarkable levels of marital success. Divorce rates within this segment of the population have fallen to levels well below 50% in recent years (Martin, 2006). Rather than suffocating, the majority of higher income couples appear to be reaping the benefits that modern American marriage can provide. For this reason, we suggest that perhaps the ascent to the top of Mount Maslow is not as dangerous a trek as implied by Finkel and colleagues (this issue), as only a fortunate few even set their sights on the journey. In essence, socioeconomic resources may simultaneously provide higher income couples with the rare opportunity to focus on higher order goals *and* more tools for successfully achieving those goals.

In light of this possibility, we found the authors' description of the marital landscape at the upper levels of Mount Maslow overly bleak. In focusing so heavily on the disillusionment that may result from rising marital expectations, the authors provide little insight

into the potential of these societal shifts to create more satisfying marriages. As the prominent marital historian Stephanie Coontz (2005) noted, "many couples work hard to enrich their relationship and deepen their intimacy with a dedication that would astonish most couples of the past" (p. 278). Thus, for couples with greater resources, higher order expectations may prove more inspiring than disheartening. Indeed, growing empirical evidence indicates that, under the right conditions, idealized marital expectations promote marital well-being. When couples are in a better position to achieve their high expectations, holding high expectations serves to motivate more constructive responses to marital challenges, thereby preventing declines in marital satisfaction over time (McNulty & Karney, 2004; Neff & Geers, 2013).

The authors portray a similarly desolate scene when exploring the consequences of the ascent to the top of Mount Maslow for personal well-being. For instance, the authors suggest that supporting a partner's self-actualization goals is associated with a host of potential costs, including feelings of inadequacy regarding one' support provision skills and resentment resulting from sacrificing one's own needs in favor of the partner's needs. Yet the authors neglect to review the burgeoning literature demonstrating the tremendous benefits associated with caregiving behaviors. Daily diary work indicates that individuals experience decreases in negative mood on days in which they provide support to a partner; in fact, providing support is more clearly linked to enhanced daily mood than receiving support (Gleason & Iida, in press; Gleason, Idia, Bolger, & Shrout, 2003). Likewise, a recent study examining the relative contributions of giving versus receiving support to longevity revealed that providing emotional support to a marital partner predicted lower mortality risk. Receiving support, however, had no effect on mortality (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003).

Related research on sacrifice within relationships tells a similar story. When the motivation underlying the sacrifice is approach oriented (e.g., wanting to create intimacy or please the partner) versus avoidance oriented (e.g., wanting to avoid conflict), sacrificing one's own needs in favor of a partner's needs is associated with enhanced personal and relational well-being. For instance, daily diary research indicates that on days in which individuals sacrifice for approach motivations, individuals experience an increase in positive emotions, which in turn predicts greater satisfaction with the relationship (Impett, Gere, Kogan, Gordon, & Keltner, 2013). Together, these literatures suggest that caregiving does not detract from well-being, but rather may be an essential element for healthy living.

In summary, it is unclear whether marital dissolution is caused by elevated expectations and the onerous caregiving behaviors associated with these expectations. After all, higher expectations should be motivating as long as couples have adequate resources; moreover, caregiving processes seem to produce benefits in marriages on average. Rather, our view is that marriages in the United States are struggling because those with fewer resources are having difficulties navigating the lower levels of Mount Maslow; had they the resources to reach the summit, they might be reaping greater marital rewards.

How Can We Help Struggling Marriages?

To conclude their piece, the authors offer several avenues for helping couples maximize the quality of their marriage. Specifically, Finkel and colleagues (this issue) argue that marital success requires a balance between the demands placed on the marriage and the time, energy, and resources invested in the marriage. To achieve this balance, the authors offer some seemingly reasonable advice, such as encouraging couples to carve out quality leisure time together or releasing one's spouse from the sole burden of supporting one's self-actualization goals by expanding one's social network. However, the authors also offer two additional, more controversial methods for recalibrating one's marriage: living apart together (e.g., living in separate residences) and consensual nonmonogamy.

In our opinion, the authors' recommendations for intervention are least suited for the couples who are struggling the most: lower income couples. By definition, low-income marriages take place in an environment of ongoing financial strain and hardship. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that when asked about the primary sources of difficulty in one's relationship, lower income respondents cite money more often than higher income respondents (Trail & Karney, 2012). Moreover, having a low income is associated with a host of concrete negative stressors, such as unemployment, accumulating debts, inadequate child care, health problems, poor housing, lack of transportation, and so on, all of which may place an enormous strain on individuals and couples (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Lower income couples also are more likely than higher income couples to report struggling with issues of infidelity (Trail & Karney, 2012). Consequently, encouraging individuals to maintain separate residences and engage in consensual nonmonogamy (Finkel et al., this issue) seems out of touch with the reality of those spouses in the most fragile marriages. In essence, the authors are prescribing marital salves that require not only immense financial resources but also remarkable skill in navigating the potential complications that may be associated with adding extramarital partners to the relationship (e.g., jealousy, etc.).

Furthermore, we have some doubts as to whether these recommendations would prove useful for the marriages of higher income couples as well. For

instance, the authors suggest that living apart together may enhance marriage by promoting the outsourcing of need fulfillment; if partners are less accessible to one another, they should be less likely to rely on one another as their primary source for support. However, living apart together likely brings complications that may be difficult for many couples to surmount. Partners who maintain separate residences must invest even more energy into coordinating quality time with each another, as they cannot rely on inevitable encounters in the home at the end of the day. If modern Americans are reporting more difficulty balancing the demands of their daily life (Amato et al., 2009), is it helpful to require that even daily interactions with a partner must be structured and scheduled along with all other daily hassles? Families forced to coordinate the chaotic schedules of school-age children would be especially likely to struggle; even if the goal is for one partner to manage child care while the other pursues self-actualization goals, the difficulty of such coordination is likely compounded when partners do not reside in the same household. Thus, rather than removing burdens from the marriage, this living arrangement may pile on additional burdens that serve to undermine relationship quality.

To close, we would like to note that lessons from the marital education literature suggest that translating empirical science into effective intervention is a complex endeavor (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013; Johnson, 2012). As one example, recently the federal government invested millions of dollars into the Building Strong Families Study, a study in which more than 5,000 lower income couples across eight national sites were randomly assigned into an experimental intervention group or a no-intervention control group. Couples in the intervention group received training in such areas as learning more effective communication and support provision skills as well as enhancing forgiveness and empathy within the relationship, processes known to predict greater relationship well-being (Halford & Bodenman, 2013; Wood, McConnell, Moore, Clarkwest, & Hsueh, 2012). Unfortunately, the intervention proved shockingly unsuccessful; longitudinal data indicate that these relationship enhancement efforts had no long-term effects on relationship quality or stability (Wood et al., 2012). Similarly disheartening results emerged from a recent study of primarily middle-class couples examining the impact of common marital education programs on changes in couples' conflict and support behaviors over a 3-year period. Rather than improving couples' interactions, these programs often had unintended negative consequences for couples' behavior over time (Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2013). To date, then, helping couples navigate even such seemingly simple goals as communicating more effectively has proved quite elusive. For this reason, we believe the field has a long way to go before the more complicated recommendations put forth by Finkel and colleagues (this issue)—such as coordinating separate residences or sublimating jealousy about extramarital partners—can be put into practice.

Concluding Thoughts

Our commentary focused on several of the shortcomings of the target article, highlighting some of the gaps in our knowledge regarding marital expectations and their consequences. At present, the dearth of direct empirical evidence for several key tenets of the Mount Maslow perspective renders the model quite speculative. However, we would like to conclude by reiterating that Finkel and colleagues (this issue) have written a thought-provoking piece that can serve as a springboard for many important and interesting programs of research. The psychological study of close relationships offers many sophisticated methodologies for studying day-to-day dyadic process, marital expectations, and goal pursuits and thus is well suited for untangling many of the lingering questions we raised. Consequently, we are excited to see the new research that emerges from this piece.

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Note

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