“When Are You Getting Married?”
The Intergenerational Transmission of Attitudes Regarding Marital Timing and Marital Importance

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Abstract
Using a sample of 335 young adults and their parents, this study investigated the intergenerational transmission of marital attitudes from parents to their children and how parental marital quality moderates that relationship. Results suggested that the marital attitudes of both mothers and fathers are related to the marital attitudes of their children. Parents’ marital quality had little direct impact on the marital attitudes of their young adult children but did moderate the relationship between fathers’ marital attitudes and their young adults’ marital attitudes. The association between fathers’ marital attitudes and their children’s marital attitudes increased at higher levels of marital quality.

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Research on young adults’ marital attitudes has become an increasingly important area of developmental and family scholarship as family formation trends continue to change in the United States. With marriage now typically delayed into the late 20s or early 30s (Kreider, 2005), young adulthood is partially characterized as a formative period for attitudes toward marriage, cohabitation, and other long-term relationships (Carroll, Willoughby, Nelson, Barry, & Madsen, 2007). These attitudes have been shown to play a significant role in shaping the developmental trajectories and outcomes of young adults. In particular, researchers have found that young adults’ attitudes toward later marriage are related to risk-taking, relational behavior, and later marital outcomes (Carroll et al., 2007; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Sassler & Schoen, 1999; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009).

Despite this research showing strong links between young people’s marital attitudes and their behavior during young adulthood, little is comparatively known about how these attitudes develop and the role that parents may play in influencing their children’s marital trajectories. Previous studies have identified links between parents’ attitudes about family life and their children’s family formation attitudes (De Valk & Liebrog, 2007; Moen, Erickson, & Dempster-McClain, 1997) as well as an association between parental marital quality and young adult attitudes toward marriage and divorce (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006; Kapinus, 2005). However, although scholars have found a link between the attitudes of parents and their children, most studies to date have focused on how parental factors influence attitudes toward divorce and marital instability. Significantly less attention has been given to how parental attitudes and relationship characteristics affect their young adult children’s attitudes about specific aspects of marriage or expectations for marital timing. Furthermore, no research to date has looked at how parental beliefs about their own child’s marital trajectory may translate into young adult marital attitudes.

Understanding how marital attitudes develop in young adults and the role that parents may play in the process is an important next step in understanding how marital attitudes influence young adulthood and how beliefs and values about marriage are transmitted from one generation to the next. The purpose of this study is to both update and expand previous research suggesting evidence of an intergenerational transmission of marital attitudes. This study contributes to the literature on marital attitudes in two important ways.
First, although previous research has largely focused on the influence of mothers’ attitudes on their young adult children, the present study includes both mothers and fathers to assess if a parent’s gender influences how marital attitudes are transmitted across generations. Second, previous research has largely focused on the transmission of general marital attitudes, or attitudes about the general institution of marriage (e.g., importance of marriage, etc). However, it is possible that parent’s attitudes that are specifically about their child’s relationships may have a more salient effect on the marital attitudes of their young adult children. We investigate both how parental attitudes about the general importance of marriage and their beliefs about their own child’s specific marital trajectory interact with parental marital quality to influence the importance young adults place on marriage and their ideal marital timing.

Background

The Influence of Parents on Young Adult Relational Attitudes

Several studies have shown that parents’ general attitudes about relationships and family life influence the attitudes of their offspring (Axinn & Thornton 1996; Cichy, Lefkowitz, & Fingerman, 2007; Glass, Bengston, & Dunham, 1986; Kapinus, 2005; Kapinus & Pellerin, 2008). Relationship skills, such as conflict styles and communication patterns, are also transmitted from one generation to the next (Dadds, Atkinson, Turner, Blums, & Lendich, 1999; Feng, Giarrusso, Bengtson, & Frye, 1999; Riggio & Weiser, 2008). The causal mechanisms through which relational attitudes are transmitted are still unclear. It is likely that as parents model positive and negative relationship behaviors to their children, these children begin to make generalizations and develop expectations about marriage and other family relationships (Dennison & Koerner, 2006).

Parental relationship behaviors likely play a central role in the attitudinal development of adolescents and young adults. The relational attitudes of young adults are partially shaped by the social consequences and rewards they perceive as they witness relationships around them (Fazio, 2007), and parents provide a proximate relationship that children are exposed to on a daily basis. As adolescents and young adults begin to experiment with romantic relationships, they often interact with romantic partners using similar relational behaviors as those modeled by their parents (Dadds et al., 1999). These observations regarding their parent’s relational behavior translates into relational attitudes and family formation plans (Kapinus, 2005). Young adults who
came from parents who reported high stress or frequent conflict often labeled relationships as unstable and constraining compared with young adults who grew up with parents with high marital quality who learn that relationships take work and require commitment (Weigel, Bennett, & Ballard-Reisch, 2003).

Direct communication of parental relationship attitudes is another method through which young adults may be exposed to the relational attitudes of their parents (Brody, Moore, & Glei, 1994). Young adults are often exposed to the relational attitudes held by their parents as mothers and fathers express beliefs about what relationships entail and require (Brody et al., 1994). Late adolescence and young adulthood may be a particularly important time in the life course for parents to influence family formation attitudes as young adults begin to think about long-term relationship goals and begin the process of leaving their parent’s home (Kapinus, 2005). It is likely that both observation of parental relational behavior and direct discussion of parental attitudes are involved in the intergenerational transmission of attitudes from parents to their children and highlight the important role parents play in the value and attitude development of young adults.

**Moderating and Mediating Factors of Attitude Transmission**

Several factors have been found to facilitate or hinder this transmission of relational attitudes as well as dictate what kind of relational attitudes are formed. For example, scholars have suggested that the transmission of values between parents and children depends on the quality of the parent–child relationship (Rueter & Conger, 1995; Taris, 2000). Family structure and the adherence to traditional gender roles within a family are examples of two other variables that affect how strongly values are transmitted between generations. Children growing up in families where the mother works outside of the home tend to have more flexible views of marriage and what a marital relationship entails (De Valk & Liefbroer, 2007). De Valk and Liefbroer (2007) found that children who have mothers that work outside the home also viewed marriage as less important for social acceptance. Other studies have found that the intergenerational transmission of attitudes is diminished in nonintact families (Valk, Spruijt, de Goede, Larsen, & Meeus, 2008), and that children from divorced parents have more negative marital attitudes than children from intact families (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). If divorce is the end result of the parents’ marital relationship, this behavior demonstrates that the marital contract and its commitment can be broken, which in turn shapes views of marriage and commitment in their children (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Riggio & Weiser, 2008). Thus, quality and stability of the parental
relationship has a potentially significant impact on what relational and marital attitudes are transmitted across generations.

**Marital quality and young adult attitudes.** Marital quality of parents has been found to have a strong association with many types of relational attitudes in young adults, including attitudes toward marriage, cohabitation, and gender roles (Amato & Booth, 2001; Cunningham & Thornton, 2006). Marital quality likely affects the influence parents have on the marital attitudes formed by their children, but it is less clear if marital quality’s link to attitudes formation is direct or indirect. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) would suggest that as children, adolescents, and young adults observe their parents’ marital relationship, they begin to develop their own perceptions and beliefs about what marriage is like and what it entails. As children observe the quality of their parent’s marriage they will form their own beliefs and values about marriage based on the relational model provided by their parents.

Two measures of parental marital quality likely have related and overlapping influences on the development of young adults’ attitudes about marriage. These two measures are the *actual* marital quality of the parents, typically measured through parental reports, and the *perceived* quality of the marriage, as measured by reports from young adult children. Research has found that both these types of reports of marital quality affect young adults’ attitudes. Parental reports of marital quality have been linked to attitudes about divorce and premarital sex (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006) whereas young adult perceptions of their parents’ relationship are linked to attitudes toward divorce (Kapinus, 2005).

Although previous research has linked parent-reported marital quality with general relational attitudes, there has been a lack of research specifically linking young adult perceived parental marital quality to young adults’ specific attitudes and orientations toward marriage. Much of the research in this area has instead focused on the association between parental marital quality and young adults’ attitudes toward divorce. For example, previous studies have found that children who perceive their parents’ marital quality as low and believe their parents should divorce are much more likely to have more tolerant views toward divorce (Amato & Booth, 1991; Kapinus, 2005). It is unclear if parental marital quality as reported by young adults would have an association with other types of marital attitudes.

In what is likely the most comprehensive analysis of how parental marital quality influences the intergenerational transmission of marital attitudes to young adults, Cunningham and Thornton (2006) suggested that parental marital quality would moderate the intergenerational transmission of attitudes between parents and their children. Cunningham and Thornton (2006)
confirmed this hypothesis, finding that the intergenerational transmission of attitudes was strongest among parents with high marital quality. This finding is an important contribution that should inform any inquiry linking parental marital quality to young adults’ attitudes. However, the study was hampered by several limitations, most noticeably focusing on only the marital attitudes of mothers and relying on a somewhat dated sample with data gathered almost 20 years ago. The present study seeks to expand on those findings by continuing to explore how marital quality moderates the intergenerational transmission of marital attitudes using a contemporary sample and examining the marital attitudes of both fathers and mothers.

**Theoretical Framework**

Emerging adulthood (ages 18-25 years) has been conceptualized in many ways, from a distinct developmental period (Arnett, 2000) to a period in the life span with an indistinguishable amount of variety (Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007). This study uses the *marital horizon theory* of emerging adulthood proposed by Carroll et al. (2007; Carroll et al., 2009) to inform both the development of measures and the interpretation of results. Marital horizon theory argues that trajectories through young adulthood are influenced by young adults’ beliefs, attitudes, and expectations toward long-term committed relationships, typically marriage. One’s marital horizon consists of at least three separate and overlapping dimensions—desired marital timing, the importance of marriage in one’s life, and the criteria one holds regarding marriage readiness (Carroll et al., 2007; Carroll et al., 2009). This framework suggests that marital attitudes influence more than simply relationship trajectories, playing a significant role in framing and influencing young adult behaviors in many aspects of their life, such as risk-taking, sexual patterns, educational pursuits, and employment plans.

Of the three dimensions of marital horizon theory, ideal marital timing has been shown to have perhaps the greatest salience as a determinant of young adult behavior. Carroll et al. (2007) found that young adults who thought marriage should be ideally placed later in the life course were more prone to greater levels of binge-drinking, increased sexual activity, and more nontraditional family attitudes. Willoughby and Dworkin (2009) used the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to show that desire to marry soon was significantly related to sexual behavior and alcohol use among young adults. Other researchers have also found that the importance young adults place on marriage can affect sexual behaviors, risk-taking, and relationship decisions (Carroll et al., 2007; Clarkberg et al., 1995; Willoughby &
Dworkin, 2009). Because of the previously established importance of these two factors, this study uses these two dimensions of marital horizon theory as the primary variables of interest. By determining how young adults’ attitudes toward the importance of marriage and marital timing are influenced by their parents, researchers will be better able to understand how these important attitudes are formed.

**Present Study and Hypotheses**

Expanding and updating Cunningham and Thornton’s (2006) earlier research, in this study we will investigate how parental attitudes and marital quality are associated with two specific marital attitudes of their young adult children. Parental attitudes will be used to predict both young adults’ ideal marital timing as well as the importance young adults place on marriage. This latter investigation will use parents’ specific beliefs about the importance of marriage in their child’s life, making it a unique contribution of this study and representing the first time the intergenerational transmission of specific marriage goals from parents to children has been studied. We also consider how the marital quality of parents influences this relationship as previous studies have found that marital quality may be an important moderator of the intergenerational transmission of marital attitudes (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006).

**Hypotheses.** Parental marital quality has previously been shown to be associated with young adult family formation attitudes (Amato & Booth, 2001; Cunningham & Thornton, 2006). Previous research in this area has suggested that children who come from families where parents report high marital quality tend to have more positive attitudes toward marriage. Marital horizon theory would suggest that those young adults with positive attitudes toward marriage would be more likely to have a younger ideal age of marriage as they both put a stronger priority on marriage and become more involved in romantic relationships sooner than peers with less positive attitudes toward marriage (Carroll et al., 2007). Because of these findings and theoretical links, we expect parental marital quality will be positively related to the importance young adults place on marriage and negatively related to young adults’ ideal marital timing (Hypothesis 1).

Previous work has also established that intergenerational transmission exists between parental attitudes and the attitudes of their children. This transmission has previously been found among attitudes toward divorce and general attitudes toward the institution of marriage. We expect these trends to continue among measures of marital importance and timing and predict that parental attitudes toward the importance of marriage for their young adult
child and their general belief about ideal marital timing will have a positive relationship to the corresponding attitudes for their young adult children (Hypothesis 2).

Finally, previous research has found that the intergenerational transmission of certain family formation attitudes from mothers to young adults is strongest within families where parents have high marital quality (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006). This moderation has not currently been tested among current cohorts of young adults or with fathers. However, we expect that these trends will continue with the current generation of young adults and will also carry over to fathers. We predict that parental marital quality will moderate the relationship between parental marital attitudes and young adults’ marital attitudes with stronger intergenerational transmission among parents with higher marital quality (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were selected from a study of young adults and their parents entitled Project R.E.A.D.Y. (Researching Emerging Adults’ Developmental Years). The sample used in the current study consisted of 335 (244 female, 91 male) never married, undergraduate and graduate students and their married parents recruited from six college sites from across the country (a small, private liberal arts college and a medium-sized, religious university on the East coast; two large, Midwestern public universities; a large, religious university in the inter-mountain West; and a large, public university on the West Coast). The female skew in the sample was predominately because of sampling largely taking place in social science classrooms, which were predominately female. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years, with the mean age of the sample being 19.8 years (SD = 1.8). The majority of the sample (95%) comprised of undergraduates. Eighty five percent of the participants were European American, 3% were African American, 6% were Asian American, 2% were Latino American, and 4% indicated that they were “mixed/biracial” or of another ethnicity. The largest religious affiliation listed within the sample was Roman Catholic (42%). Other major religious affiliations identified were conservative Christian (15%), liberal Christian (16%), Mormon (3%), Jewish (2%), and Agnostic (3%). Fathers were on average 50.1 years old (SD = 4.7) and mothers were on average 49.0 years old (SD = 4.3). All parents were in their first marriage. The average total family income of the sample was $75,000 to $100,000.
Procedure

Participants completed the Project R.E.A.D.Y. questionnaire via the Internet. The use of an online data collection protocol facilitated unified data collection across multiple university sites. Participants were recruited through faculty’s announcement of the study in undergraduate and graduate courses. Classes selected were mostly large, entry-level social science classes where professors were willing to introduce the study to their students. Professors at the various universities were provided with a handout that had a brief explanation of the study and directions for accessing the online survey to give to their students. Interested students then accessed the study website with a location-specific recruitment code. Informed consent was obtained online, and only after consent was given could the participants begin the questionnaires. Each participant was asked to complete a survey of 448 items. Most participants were offered course extra credit for their own and their parents’ participation. In some cases, participants were offered small monetary compensation (i.e., $10-20 gift certificates) for their participation.

Measures

Marital attitudes. Marital attitudes of young adults and parents were measured in two ways. Marital importance was measured by one item asking young adults how much they agreed with the statement, “Being married is a very important goal for me.” This item was assessed on a six-point scale (1 = very strongly disagree, 6 = very strongly agree). For parents, the item was altered to reflect their attitude toward marriage being a goal for their child and parents were asked their agreement with the item, “Marriage is an important goal I have for my child.” Ideal marital timing was measured by an item asking both young adults and their parents, “What is the ideal age to be married?”

Marital quality. Marital quality was assessed by two scales, one from the parents’ report of their own relationship and one from young adults’ report of their parents’ relationship. For the parents’ report of marital quality, three items were used asking each spouse how much they agreed with the following items: “We have a good relationship,” “My relationship with my partner is very stable,” and “Our relationship is strong.” Each item was assessed on a seven-point scale (1 = very strongly disagree, 7 = very strongly agree). These items were summed and the scale showed good internal reliability (mothers, \( \alpha = .98 \); fathers, \( \alpha = .96 \)). Young adults’ report of their parents’ marital quality was assessed by summing three items asking how much young adults agreed
with the following statements regarding their childhood on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree): “My father was happy in his marriage,” “my mother was happy in her marriage,” and “I would like my marriage to be like my parent’s marriage.” The alpha coefficient for this scale was in the appropriate range (α = .93).

Demographic variables. Measures of age, gender, religiosity, and race were used as control variables in this study’s analyses. These variables have previously been shown to have associations with many types of marital attitudes (Carroll et al., 2007; Willoughby & Carroll, 2010; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2009). Religiosity was measured by combining four items drawn from the Religious Life Inventory (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993) addressing various aspects of religious practice and belief. These items included questions asking about daily praying, the importance of faith to personal identity, attendance at religious services, and overall importance of faith. Three items were assessed on a 4-point, forced choice scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). These items were, “My religious faith is extremely important to me,” “I pray daily,” and “My faith is an important part of who I am as a person.” The last item, “How often have you attended religious/spiritual services in the past 12 months?” was measured on a 4-point scale with higher numbers indicating more attendance at religious or spiritual services. These items were summed to create a religiosity score. Reliability statistics were in the acceptable ranges (α = .91). Race was assessed by one item asking young adults, “How would you describe yourself?” and asking them to select one racial category. This item was dummy coded for all analyses.

Data Analysis Plan and Preliminary Analysis

Hypotheses for this study were tested by using hierarchical multiple linear regression techniques. In each case, young adults’ marital attitudes served as the dependent variable for two distinct blocks of predictors. The first block of predictors consisted of demographic variables whereas the second block included predictors of interest for the present study. This method allows for the investigation of how much unique variance is explained by the variables of interest for the study. In addition, the moderating effect of marital quality on the relationship between parental marital attitudes and young adult marital attitudes was tested by adding an interaction effect between marital quality and parental attitudes into models predicting young adult attitudes.

All predictor variables were tested for normality and multicollinearity. Continuous predictors were mean centered in line with Cohen Cohen, West, and Aiken’s (2003) recommendations. It was initially found that the measure
of young adults’ importance of marriage was negatively skewed, possibly biasing results. All results reported using this measure were run with both the item in its original metric as well as a squared transformation that normalized the variable. Results using these two different measures were identical and the results reported use of the item in its original form.

**Results**

*Parental Marital Quality and Young Adult Attitudes*

Table 1 shows the intercorrelations among the predictor variables. Correlations were in the expected directions and most correlations were low to moderate, showing a low likelihood of multicollinearity problems. The one exception was the moderate correlation between the multiple measures of marital quality (ranging from .381 and .484) and the two parental reports of marriage being a goal for their child ($r = .387$). Initial analysis investigating the predictive nature of parental marital quality on young adults’ marital attitudes also showed a strong statistical overlap between young adult and parental reports of marital quality. To assess which measure of marital quality was the most relevant for the prediction of young adults’ marital attitudes, parental and young adult reports of parents’ marital quality were each run in separate regression equations. These results (not reported here) suggested that parental reports of their own marital quality were the more salient predictor of young adults’ marital attitudes. This measure of marital quality was therefore used in all regression models. Because mother and father reports of marital attitudes are likely dependent and initial results suggest they were moderately correlated, regression analyses predicting young adult outcomes were run separately for each parent.

Table 2 summarizes the means and standard deviations for each of the main study variables. Fathers, mothers, and young adults all placed marriage ideally around 25 years old, with young adult females indicating the youngest ideal age and fathers indicating the oldest ideal age. All participants and their parents also placed a high priority on marriage, reporting strong agreement on average that marriage was an important goal.

Initial models investigating the predictive nature of marital quality on young adults’ marital attitudes included two blocks of predictors. Age, race, religiosity, and gender were entered into the first block of the regression model. Results for mothers’ reports of marital quality indicated that these demographic variables were significantly associated with both young adults’ ideal marital timing ($F = 5.22, p < .001$) and general importance of marriage
### Table 1. Intercorrelations Among Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religiosity</th>
<th>YA Age</th>
<th>Father Marital Quality Report</th>
<th>Mother Marital Quality Report</th>
<th>YA Ideal Marital Timing</th>
<th>Mother Ideal Marital Timing</th>
<th>Father Ideal Marital Timing</th>
<th>YA Marital Importance</th>
<th>Mother Marital Importance</th>
<th>Father Marital Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
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<tr>
<td>YA age</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>YA marital quality report</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>-.032</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father marital quality</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.416**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mothers marital quality report</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>-.004</td>
<td>.484** [.381**]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YA ideal timing</td>
<td>-.228**</td>
<td>.157**</td>
<td>-.106</td>
<td>-.133*</td>
<td>-.093</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother ideal timing</td>
<td>-.184**</td>
<td>-.116**</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>.140*</td>
<td>.203**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Father ideal timing</td>
<td>-.105</td>
<td>-.124</td>
<td>-.045</td>
<td>-.204**</td>
<td>-.197**</td>
<td>.214**</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>YA marital importance</td>
<td>.233**</td>
<td>-.104</td>
<td>.176**</td>
<td>.143*</td>
<td>.142*</td>
<td>-.291**</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>-.043</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother marital importance</td>
<td>.131*</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.123*</td>
<td>-.085</td>
<td>-.051</td>
<td>-.013</td>
<td>.096</td>
<td>-.155**</td>
<td>.147**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father marital importance</td>
<td>.165*</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>.132*</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>-.044</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>-.120</td>
<td>.170**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: YA = young adults.

* *p < .05. ** *p < .01.
Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Focal Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child marital timing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24.98</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25.43</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father marital timing</td>
<td>25.74</td>
<td>2.20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother marital timing</td>
<td>25.48</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child marital importance</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father marital importance</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother marital importance</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father marital quality</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother marital quality</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age \((b = .143, t = 2.40, p < .05)\), religiosity \((b = -.125, t = -4.34, p = .001)\), and being Asian \((b = 1.22, t = 2.81, p < .01)\) were significant predictors of young adults’ ideal marital timing whereas religiosity \((b = .070, t = 3.88, p < .001)\) was a significant predictor of how important marriage was to a young adult. More religious young adults were more likely to place marriage ideally earlier in the life course and place more importance on marriage. Models using fathers’ reports of marital quality were similar with the exception that age no longer predicted young adults’ ideal marital timing.

Parental quality was then added as a separate predictor to see if marital quality was associated with young adults’ attitudes above the variance explained by background factors. It was found that the addition of marital quality as reported by either parent did not add to the prediction of ideal marital timing but did significantly increase the prediction of marital importance for both models (mothers, \(F\Delta = 5.54, p = .01\); fathers, \(F\Delta = 4.76, p = .03\)). In both cases, parental reports of higher marital quality were associated with young adults placing a greater importance on marriage as a goal (mothers, \(b = .101, t = 2.35, p = .01\); fathers, \(b = .130, t = 2.18, p < .05\)). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported.

**Parental Attitudes and Young Adult Attitudes**

The association between parental attitudes toward marriage and young adults’ attitudes toward marriage was investigated by adding mother and father
marital attitudes to the second block of separate regression models. These results are summarized in Tables 3 and 4. For the prediction of ideal marital timing, it was found that mothers’ and fathers’ reported attitudes regarding ideal marital timing were significantly associated with their young adult child’s ideal marital timing (mothers, $b = .077$, $t = 2.76$, $p < .01$; fathers, $b = .159$, $t = 2.79$, $p < .01$). This relationship for mothers and fathers was positive, suggesting that when parents ideally place marriage farther in the life course, their children also reported a later ideal age of marriage. As in the previous models, parents’ reported marital quality appeared to have little impact on young adults’ ideal marital timing.

For the models predicting marital importance, results suggested that mothers’ and fathers’ attitudes had a significantly positive relationship with young adults’ attitudes (mothers, $b = .118$, $t = 2.11$, $p < .05$; fathers, $b = .152$, $t = 2.24$, $p < .05$) suggesting that as parents place more importance on marriage being a goal for their child, their young adult children are more likely to report marriage being an important goal in their life. Based on these results, Hypothesis 2 was fully supported.

Table 3. Unstandardized Coefficients for Regression Models Predicting Young Adults’ Marital Attitudes With Mother Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ideal Marital Timing</th>
<th></th>
<th>Importance of Marriage</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Block 1</td>
<td>Block 2</td>
<td>Block 1</td>
<td>Block 2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>.061</td>
<td>.168***</td>
<td>.061</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender$^a$</td>
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<td>.235</td>
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<td>.233</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race$^b$</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Black</td>
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<td>.926</td>
<td>.628</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.23**</td>
<td>.439</td>
<td>.953*</td>
<td>.443</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>.674</td>
<td>.595</td>
<td>.669</td>
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<td>Mixed</td>
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<td>.761</td>
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<td>.487</td>
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<td>Religiosity</td>
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<td>.029</td>
<td>-.100***</td>
<td>.030</td>
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<td>Mother marital quality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother ideal timing</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>.028</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother importance of marriage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

a. Female $= 1$.
b. Reference group is “White.”
*p < .05, **p < .01.
To investigate if marital quality moderates the relationship between the attitudes of parents and their young adult children, regression models using the same baseline predictors were again run with an interaction term added to the second block of each equation. Results for both ideal marital timing and the importance of marriage suggested that no interaction existed between mothers’ attitudes and reports of marital quality. Significant interactions were found between fathers’ attitudes and reported marital quality for both young adult attitudinal outcomes. Results for interaction models are summarized in Table 5.

To further assess the nature of this significant interaction, an analysis of simple slopes was used in conjunction with suggestions made by Aiken and West (1991) for interpreting interactions between continuous predictors. Simple slopes for fathers’ attitudes were generated and compared for three levels of fathers’ reported marital quality (at the mean and ± 1 standard deviation). Results for the prediction of ideal marital timing suggested that

### Table 4. Unstandardized Coefficients for Regression Models Predicting Young Adults’ Marital Attitudes With Father Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Ideal Marital Timing</th>
<th>Importance of Marriage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>.139* .073</td>
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<td>.760 1.04</td>
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<td>−.152* .068</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father ideal timing</td>
<td>— —</td>
<td>.152* .068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father importance of marriage</td>
<td>— —</td>
<td>— —</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Female = 1.
b. Reference group is “White.”
*p < .05. **p < .01.

The Moderating Effect of Parental Marital Quality

To investigate if marital quality moderates the relationship between the attitudes of parents and their young adult children, regression models using the same baseline predictors were again run with an interaction term added to the second block of each equation. Results for both ideal marital timing and the importance of marriage suggested that no interaction existed between mothers’ attitudes and reports of marital quality. Significant interactions were found between fathers’ attitudes and reported marital quality for both young adult attitudinal outcomes. Results for interaction models are summarized in Table 5.

To further assess the nature of this significant interaction, an analysis of simple slopes was used in conjunction with suggestions made by Aiken and West (1991) for interpreting interactions between continuous predictors. Simple slopes for fathers’ attitudes were generated and compared for three levels of fathers’ reported marital quality (at the mean and ± 1 standard deviation). Results for the prediction of ideal marital timing suggested that
fathers’ ideal timing had a stronger effect on their young adult child’s ideal marital timing as marital quality increased with the slope at 1 standard deviation below the mean on reported marital quality being nonsignificant (−1 SD, \(b = .098, t = 1.55, p = \text{n.s.}; +1 SD, b = .313, t = 3.86, p < .001\)). Results for the prediction of marital importance also suggested that the importance placed on marriage for their young adult by fathers had a stronger effect on their young adult’s importance of marriage as reported marital quality increased (−1 SD, \(b = −.004, t = −.041, p = \text{n.s.}; +1 SD, b = .300, t = 3.32, p = .001\)). These findings suggest that the intergenerational transmission of attitudes from fathers to their young adult children is moderated by marital quality and that transmission may only occur when fathers are in high-quality marriages. Hypothesis 3 was partially supported in that marital quality moderated the relationship between parental attitudes and the attitudes of young adults, but only for fathers.

**Discussion**

In line with previous research, the present study found that parental attitudes toward marriage had an impact on the marital attitudes of their young adult children. Results suggested that parents’ global attitudes toward ideal marital timing had a direct impact on the ideal marital timing of their children. This was true of both mothers and fathers and corresponds to previous research suggesting that global family values are transmitted across generations (Axinn & Thornton 1996; Cichy et al., 2007; Glass et al., 1986). This pattern was also true of the transmission of specific marital goals from parents to
children. Mothers’ and fathers’ reported importance of marriage for their child did have a strong, positive effect on young adults own reported importance of marriage. This suggests that young adults are influenced by their parents’ goals for their life when forming their own attitudes and goals around family formation.

Parental marital quality was found to have only a moderate direct impact on young adults’ marital attitudes. This is in contrast to previous studies that have found links between parental marital quality and young adults’ attitudes (Amato & Booth, 2001; Cunningham & Thornton, 2006). Despite this general trend in previous studies, some research has suggested that marital quality has little impact on young adults’ attitudes over the age of 18 years (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006). As young adults continue to develop their marital attitudes and move out of their parent’s home, they may be less influenced by their own family environment and by their parent’s relational modeling.

More specifically, in the present study, marital quality had no impact on young adults’ ideal marital timing. This suggests that young adults form their ideal marital timing regardless of the marital quality of their parents. Taken together with results showing the direct link between parental ideal marital timing and their young adults’ ideal marital timing, young adults’ beliefs about placement of marriage in the life course may be more directly influenced by hearing and being exposed to their parents’ attitudes and less influenced by the observation of their parents’ marital relationship.

Marital quality did affect young adults’ reported importance of marriage as a goal, but this relationship disappeared for fathers once parental attitudes toward the importance of marriage were entered into the regression models. Overall, the results suggest that marital quality may have a weak direct association to the marital attitudes of young adults, instead serving as a moderator between the intergenerational transmission of attitudes from parents to their children, particularly for fathers. These results mirror those found by Cunningham and Thornton (2006) where parental reports of marital quality had a weak direct effect on the marital attitudes of young adults. It is possible that current generations of young adults who grew up in an era of high divorce rates and family instability are less likely to be influenced by their parents’ marital quality. Despite historically high divorce rates, young adults remain remarkably positive about marriage and almost universally expect to marry in the future (Burgoyne & Hames, 2002; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). This suggests that young adults are forming and maintaining marital attitudes in many cases at odds with the marital quality they observed in their family of origin.
Interestingly, although this study used two measures of parental marital quality, only marital quality as reported by parents themselves had any impact on the marital attitudes of young adults. The fact that the marital quality of the parents as perceived by the young adult had no impact on their marital attitudes suggests that marital attitudes, particularly attitudes around the importance of marriage, may be shaped by actual interaction with married couples and not by the perception of a healthy marital relationship. In other words, it is not the perception of a healthy relationship that makes young adults more likely to value marriage, but actual observations of healthily married parents. These observations may create more incentive to value the institution of marriage and hold marriage as an important goal in one’s life. It is also possible that because young adults’ reports of parental marital quality relied on dated observations when young adults were still living at home, the young adult reports of marital quality were no longer relevant to their current attitudes. Parental reports of marital quality provide current, more reliable assessments of marital quality that may be more likely to be linked to current marital attitudes.

Regardless of where these differences came from, marital quality appeared to have the largest impact as a moderator between father marital attitudes and young adult marital attitudes. The positive association between fathers’ marital attitudes and the marital attitudes of young adult children grew stronger at higher levels of fathers’ reported marital quality. Perhaps the simplest explanation for this finding is that fathers are more likely than mothers to reduce communication and have a poorer relationship with their children in a low-quality marriage compared with mothers (Coiro & Emery, 1998; Kaczynski, Lindahl, Malik, & Laurenceau, 2006). Other researchers have suggested that the closeness of the father–child relationship is related to young adult beliefs about divorce (Risch, Jodl, & Eccles, 2004). In low-quality marriages, fathers may be more likely to withdraw from the family making it less likely that their children are exposed to their opinions and attitudes.

The fact that no interaction was found between mothers’ reports of marital quality and mothers’ marital attitudes suggests that the intergenerational transmission of marital attitudes from mothers to their young adult children does not seem to rely on the quality of the parental relationship. This is in contrast to the moderating effect found in previous research between parental marital quality and marital attitudes for mothers (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006). It is unknown if these differences are due to differences in measurement or in the newer cohort of young adults sampled here. More work is needed to understand how parental gender influences the transmission of attitudes form one generation to the next.
Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several key limitations that should be considered before generalizing the results. First, this study used cross-sectional data that do not allow longitudinal relationships or changes over time to be determined. This also limits the ability to discern how the marital attitudes of parents and young adults interact and influence each other in a reciprocal relationship. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine if parental attitudes and marital quality have differential impacts at different points in the life course and to document the trajectory of marital attitude change across time.

Additionally, this study used a strictly college sample that likely comes from a higher socioeconomic environment with more resources than noncollege-bound young adults. It is unknown if the patterns and relationships found in this study would generalize to all young adults and caution should be taken before doing so. Marriage has become increasingly less common among low-income families (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005) and alternative family forms such as cohabitation are becoming increasingly normative (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Young adults growing up in low-income families may form their attitudes toward marriage and relationships in different ways than young adults from higher socioeconomic groups. Future research should investigate if the findings from this study would replicate in a sample of low-income young adults. Additional variables such as those assessing parent–child relationship characteristics and family dynamics may also be important in understanding links between parental and young adult attitudes. Future studies should continue to investigate additional variables that might influence the intergenerational transmission of attitudes.

The sample was also heavily female, which may mask some unique results for male young adults. Although we found no evidence of gender differences in the results of the study, it is possible that a larger sample of young adult men would uncover slight gender differences in the patterns of results found here. Future studies should verify that the results found in this study replicate when generated from a larger sample of men. Background and demographic variables also had an influence on the marital attitudes of young adults in the expected directions. As expected, highly religious young adults placed more importance on marriage and had a lower ideal age of marriage. Interestingly, Asian students stood out as having higher ideal age of marriage compared with White participants. This finding may suggest racial differences in some components of marital horizon theory that should be addressed by future researchers.
Although not the focus of the present study, an investigation of nonintact families would also likely provide more information regarding how parent interactions with children affect the transmission of marital attitudes. Some researchers have found that the intergenerational transmission of attitudes is diminished in nonintact families (Valk et al., 2008). Although the sample this study was drawn on included nonintact families, the sample size of these families where information was available from both parents was limited and not sufficient to do comparisons. Future studies should investigate how the marital attitudes of divorced and widowed parents affect the marital attitudes of young adults.

The findings in this study suggest that the relationship between parental marital attitudes and young adults’ marital attitudes exists for mothers and fathers but that the relationship between fathers’ attitudes and young adult attitudes may depend on marital quality. Parents continue to have an influence on their young adult’s beliefs well into young adulthood and those beliefs and attitudes have an impact on many of their children’s relational and behavioral decisions. Given the importance marital attitudes play in the developmental trajectories of young adults, these findings represent an important step forward in understanding how marital attitudes develop and interact with attitudes held by parents. Future research should continue to investigate how young adults’ marital attitudes are influenced by family members and peer groups to continue to uncover how these attitudes are shaped by environmental and family factors.

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