The Influence of Plans to Marry in Dating Couples of Emerging Adults on Relationship Quality, Confirmation, and Desire for Evaluation

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to: a) investigate the influence of marriage plans on relationship quality and confirming communication in the romantic relationships of emerging adults, b) analyze the role of confirmation as a mechanism explaining the relationship between marriage plans and relationship quality, and c) examine the influence of plans to marry on individuals’ desire for positive evaluation or self-verification evaluation. As expected, those with plans to marry reported higher relationship quality and more confirming communication than did those without plans. Further, the relationship between marriage plans and relationship quality was partially mediated by confirmation. However, the findings suggested that the marriage plans did not affect people’s desire for evaluation from their partner. Although, counter to expectations, dating partners with plans to marry did not have a desire for self-verifying evaluation, they perceive that they received more confirmation from their partner than those without plans, which lead to higher relationship quality.
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Previous studies have suggested that dating partners who have plans to marry each other may have higher relational outcomes than those without marriage plans including a higher possibility of actual marriage, higher relationship quality, and higher quality of communication than those without marriage plans (Brown, 2000, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996; Peake & Harris, 2002). Existing studies, however, have not investigated the impact of marriage plans on romantic couples of emerging adults. Emerging adulthood, the period from the late teens through the mid-to late 20s, is a critical time in which individuals start to pursue intimate and serious love and consider who they desire to marry (Arnett, 2000).

Further, even though existing research has examined the influence of marriage plans on communication variables, such as the frequency of interaction (Brown & Booth, 1996) and disagreements (Brown, 2004), they have not focused on the effect of plans to marry on relational communication, which functions to define the nature of the relationship (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). A variety of dimensions of the relational communication such as dominance, receptivity, and immediacy, through verbal and nonverbal behaviors have been found to be critical determinants of important relational outcomes such as trust and satisfaction (Burgoon, Pfau, Parrott, Birk, Coker, & Burgoon, 1987; Burgoon, Buller, Hale, & deTurck, 1984). Therefore, this study investigated the effect of marriage plans on confirming communication, which is a type of the relational communications (Dailey, 2009; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Moreover, although existing studies consistently revealed the association between marriage plans and relationship quality (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996), the mechanism to
explain the association is left unexplored. This study hypothesized that confirmation would mediate the relationship between plans to marry and relationship quality.

The current study also scrutinized the influence of marriage plans on different desires for evaluation from romantic partners: positivity strivings and self-verification strivings. The idea that people want others to see them positively has been widely supported by extant research and theory (Goffman, 1955; Jones, 1973; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Shrauger, 1975). However, Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon (1994) argued that people also have “an independent desire for evaluations that verify their self-conceptions” (p. 858). They further noted that this desire for self-verification may be particularly evident in marriage. In line with their argument, Swann and his colleagues found that people who were married were most intimate with spouses whose evaluations verified their self-concept (self-verification striving), whereas those who were dating were most intimate with partners who evaluated them positively (positivity striving). These findings imply that a shift takes place from positivity strivings to self-verification strivings throughout the course of relationship development.

Although Swann et al. (1994) noted that the shift from positivity strivings to self-verification strivings occurs gradually over time, when and why the shift takes place are still in question. The current study takes the position that partners’ plans to marry may be closely related to the shift based on prior studies indicating that dating with plans to marry had a similar relationship quality to that of partners who are married (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996).

In short, the purpose of the current study was to assess the influence of marriage plans on relationship quality, confirmation, and desire for evaluation from a partner in the romantic relationships of emerging adults. First, previous studies on marriage plans and emerging adulthood are reviewed and hypotheses to investigate the effects of marriage plans on a variety of
outcomes are posed. Next, research methods including features of participants are described. Then, results are reported and discussed along with limitations and future research directions.

Review of Literature

Marriage Plans

Existing research has demonstrated that dating partners with marriage plans may have higher relational outcomes than those without plans to marry including higher relationship quality and a higher level of communication such as more frequent interactions and fewer frequent disagreements (Brown, 2000, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996; Peake & Harris, 2002). Brown (2000) found the marriage plans of cohabiting couples significantly predicted actual marriage and separation. Her study also indicated that cohabiting couples without plans to marry were not only less likely to marry, but were 2.5 times as likely to dissolve their relationship as were couples with plans to marry. Similarly, unmarried parents with plans to marry were about 7.2 times more likely to marry and 2.2 times more likely to stay together than parents without plans (Waller & McLanahan, 2005). Non-cohabiting dating partners with plans to marry were more confident of their ability to solve difficulties associated with integrating work and family than those without plans (Peake & Harris, 2002).

Other studies of cohabiting couples have shown that couples with marriage plans reported more positive relationship features and communication than those without plans and similar to those of marital couples (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996). Although cohabiting dating partners have been found to have more negative relationship qualities than marital partners (Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995), plans to marry diminished the difference (Brown & Booth, 1996). Specifically, Brown and Booth (1996) documented that while cohabiting partners without marriage plans had poorer relationship quality, more frequent disagreements, and lower levels of
fairness than married partners, cohabiting partners with marriage plans were not significantly different from those who were married. Surprisingly, the researchers also indicated cohabiters with marriage plans reported more frequent interaction with their partner than did those who were married.

Brown (2004) analyzed interview data conducted at two time points and revealed that cohabiters’ marriage plans were significantly associated with relationship quality. Specifically, she found in the second data collection, these cohabiters without plans to marry were less happy and had higher levels of relationship instability than did cohabiters who marry. Those with plans to marry at second data collection reported similar levels of happiness and relationship stability as cohabiters who married. Finally, the absence of marriage plans was associated with more disagreement as well as more violence in conflict resolution.

Importantly, the age of the participants in these studies widely ranged. For example, Brown and Booth (1996) recruited participants whose age was under 48. Other studies on marriage plans such as Brown (2000, 2004), Peake and Harris (2002), and Waller and McLanahan (2005) did not mention the age ranges of the participants in their studies. In short, studies have not specifically examined the influence of marriage plans on romantic couples of emerging adults.

Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adults are individuals whose age ranges from the late teens through the mid-to late 20s (roughly ages 18-25) (Arnett, 2000). Arnett (2007) suggested individuals in emerging adulthood should not be categorized either as adolescents or adults because of distinctive features of emerging adulthood. For example, Arnett (2007) documented that compared with adolescence and adulthood, emerging adulthood is a more critical time period in which individuals develop
their identity, explore life possibilities, and feel a sense of in-between and instability. Emerging adulthood is also distinct subjectively. When emerging adults were asked whether they feel they have reached adulthood, the majority of them answered the question by “in some respects yes, in some respects no” (Arnett, 2001).

Emerging adulthood is an important developmental stage in which drastic changes in attitude toward romantic relationships occur. Arnett (2000) found emerging adults start to pursue intimate and serious relationships. Dating relationships in emerging adulthood last longer and are more likely to involve sexual intercourse than they are in adolescence (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1995). Emerging adults may ruminate about the question: “What kind of person do I wish to have as a partner through life?” (Arnett, 2000). Yet, not all emerging adults desire to achieve a serious and stable dating partner. Dhariwal, Connolly, Paciello, and Caprara (2009) noted two romantic styles in emerging adults: consolidated and exploratory romantic styles. Those with a consolidated romantic style hope to form committed dyadic relationships and experience romantic satisfaction. In contrast, individuals with an exploratory romantic style desire to be intimately related to different partners and want changes in romantic activities. These findings are well represented by a statement by Arnett (2007): “It is true that many emerging adults are ambivalent about taking on adult roles and responsibilities” (p. 71).

In short, some emerging adults seek a serious romantic relationship, whereas others are afraid of being committed to a romantic relationship because such a serious relationship could limit the opportunities to try alternative partners. Even if individuals desire to marry their dating partner, their relational quality may be relatively low if their partner sees marriage as a threat to his or her ability to test alternative partners. That is, the relationship quality of emerging adult
partners is likely to be higher when both partners plan to marry. Therefore, these hypothesis are posed:

- **H1A**: The relationship quality of dating partners who believe that both they and their partner plan to marry will be higher than that of those who believe that either they or their partner do not plan to marry.
- **H1B**: The relationship quality of dating partners who believe that both they and their partner plan to marry will be higher than that of those who believe that neither they nor their partner plan to marry.

*Confirmation*

The current study predicted confirming communication in dating couples was affected by their plans to marry. Based on the conceptualization of confirmation posited by Buber (1965) and Laing (1961), Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) introduced specific definitions of confirmation and disconfirmation; confirmation is defined as occurring when one person accepts another person’s definition of her or himself and sees the other’s view of her or himself as valid. Disconfirmation is conceptualized as taking place when one person negates another’s definition of her or himself, generating alienation. Further, Sieburg (1975, 1976, 1985) conceptually categorized the functions of confirming communication and described those functions in the context of family relationships. Since Sieburg’s work, scholars have conducted empirical studies of confirmation in various family relationship contexts examining issues such as children’s psychopathology (Wichstrøm, Anderson, Holte, Husby & Wynne, 1996), nonverbal behaviors in parent-adolescent interaction (Dailey, 2008), and adolescents’ psychological adjustment (Dailey, 2009) and openness (Dailey, 2006). Research has consistently indicated the substantial influence of confirmation on family members’ psychological and relational outcomes, including
adolescents’ openness (Dailey, 2006) and adolescents’ family satisfaction (Dailey, 2005). As a consequence, even though confirmation has not been often studied in the couples of emerging adulthood (Cissna & Keating, 1979), it is likely that confirmation affects the intimate relationships of emerging adults. Since dating partners with plans to marry have more positive interactions compared to those without plans (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996), it is hypothesized that those with marriage plans will have higher levels of confirming communication with partners than those without plans. However, as predicted in Hypotheses 1, both partners’, rather than only one partner’s, marriage plans would contribute to partners’ tendency to engage in high confirming communication. Consequently, the next hypotheses were put forth:

H2A: Individuals who believe that both they and their partner plan to marry will engage in higher confirming communication than those who believe that either they or their partner do not plan to marry.

H2B: Individuals who believe that both they and their partner plan to marry will engage in higher confirming communication than those who believe that neither they nor their partner plan to marry.

Mechanism of the Relationship between Marriage Plans and Relationship Quality

This study also expected that the association between marriage plans and relationship qualities would be mediated by confirmation. Even though prior reports found an association between marriage plans and relationship quality (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996), the mechanism to explain the relationship remains to be studied. This study predicted that dating partners with marriage plans are more often engaged in confirming communication than those without plans and, in turn, the confirming communication leads to high relationship quality. As previously documented, relational communication including confirmation is associated with a
number of relational outcomes such as trust and satisfaction (Burgoon, Pfau, Parrott, Birk, Coker, & Burgoon, 1987; Burgoon, Buller, Hale, & deTurck, 1984; Dailey, 2005). As a consequence, confirmation in dating couples can be considered to play a key role in enhancing their relationship quality. Consequently, the third hypothesis was posed:

**H3:** The expected relationship between plans to marry and relationship quality will be mediated by confirmation.

*Marriage Plans and Different Desires for Evaluation*

Based on the findings that dating couples with marriage plans have similar relationship features such as relationship quality and communication compared with marital couples (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996), this study forecasts that dating partners with plans to marry would have similar desires for evaluation from a partner compared to marital couples. Two types of desires will be detailed here: positivity strivings and self-verification strivings.

**Dating Couples and Positivity Strivings**

Scholars have repeatedly supported the idea that people want to be seen in positive ways (Goffman, 1955; Jones, 1973; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Shrauger, 1975). Self-Enhancement Theory, put forth by Shrauger (1975), suggests that, regardless of whether their self-views are positive or negative, people prefer positive evaluations. Goffman’s (1955) detailed explications of human interactions similarly suggest that individuals are motivated to be seen positively. In his discussions of the term *face*, he noted that people attempt to behave in ways that make what they are doing consistent with a positive image. Jones and Pittman (1982) also mentioned much of people’s social behavior is motivated by a concern that others form a positive impression of them. The desire that individuals have to be seen positively by others has been termed by Swann and
his colleagues as *positivity strivings* (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992; Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Angulo, 2007).

Existing studies indicate people who are dating are likely to select their partners on the basis of positivity strivings (Swann et al., 1994). The findings of impression management studies implicate that people behave so as to make a positive impression on those to whom they are closely related (Leichty & Applegate, 1991; Lim & Bowers, 1991). In a similar vein, and contrary to Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987), Baxter (1984) argued individuals are motivated to be polite even to close relationship partners because they want to be seen positively and liked. The findings of a study conducted by Swann et al. (1994) further describe that those involved in dating relationships are most intimate with partners who evaluate them positively. Even though no studies have tested the positivity strivings in a sample of emerging adults, the existing findings and theories enable us to estimate romantic couples of emerging adults will show the positivity strivings. Given this, the following hypothesis is considered:

H4: The more positively individuals who are dating without plans to marry perceive themselves to be evaluated by their partners, the higher their relationship quality.

*Marital Couples and Self-Verification Strivings*

A number of researchers have argued people are motivated to be seen in a fashion consistent with their self-concept, regardless of its valence (Lecky, 1945; Secord & Backman, 1965). This motivation is termed by Swann and his colleagues as *self-verification strivings* (Swann et al., 1992; Swann et al., 2007). Self-Verification Theorists (SVT) (Swann, 1983; Swann, 1987; Swann et al., 1992; Swann et al., 2007) argue individuals are compelled to manage their environments in ways that confirm their self-concepts. A notable aspect of the theory is its
suggestion that people with a negative self-view want to be seen negatively, because they want others to see them as they see themselves (Swann, 1983; Swann, 1987; Swann et al., 1992; Swann et al., 2007).

Previous research shows that self-verification strivings are evident in marriage. More specifically, Swann et al. (1992) found people were more committed to their marital relationship when their partner verified their self-concept. In particular, spouses who had a positive self-concept were more committed to their relationship when their partner viewed them positively; those who had a negative self-concept were more committed to the relationship when their partner viewed them negatively. In a separate study, Swann et al. (1994) found that while people who were married were most intimate with spouses whose evaluations verified their self-concept, those involved in dating relationships were most intimate with partners who evaluated them positively. In short, individuals who were married desired partners who saw them as they saw themselves, more so than partners who saw them positively.

Inasmuch as dating couples with marriage plans are similar to married couples, it is expected that those with marriage plans want their partners to verify the way they see themselves, regardless of whether they evaluate themselves in positive or negative ways. Therefore, another hypothesis is put forth:

H5: For individuals who are dating with plans to marry, the more consonance there is between their self-worth and their perceptions of their partner’s evaluation of them, the higher their relationship quality.

Overall, this study investigates the effect of marriage plans on relationship quality, confirmation, and desire for evaluation in dating relationships of emerging adults. Also, the mechanism of the relationship between marriage plans and relationship quality was scrutinized.
The findings of this study will contribute to an understanding of how marriage plans of dating couples of emerging adults affect relationship quality through the communication as well as an understanding of the influence of marriage plans on their desire for evaluation from their partner.

Method

Participants and Procedures

A total of 110 undergraduates at a large public university in the southwestern United States participated in this study. All of the participants were involved in heterosexual romantic relationships. Sixty-nine (62.7%) of the respondents were female and 41 (37.3%) were male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 26 years ($M = 19.88$, $SD = 1.37$). The majority was Caucasian ($n = 52$, 47.3%); other ethnicities were Asian American ($n = 22$, 20.0%), Hispanic ($n = 17$, 15.5%), African American ($n = 12$, 10.9%), Pacific Islander ($n = 2$, 1.8%), and other types ($n = 5$, 4.5%). Relationship length ranged from 1 month to 115 months ($M = 20.64$, $SD = 19.11$).

Participants were asked to fill out questionnaires that required them to report on plans to marry their partner, relationship quality, perceived confirming communication from their partner, their self-worth, and perceived evaluation from their romantic partner. Demographic information was also obtained including gender, age, ethnicity, relationship length, and cohabitation.

Measures

Plans to marry. Participants’ plans to marry were examined using two, two-step questions. First, participants were asked if they had a definite plan to marry their current partner. If their answer was no, they were asked if they thought that they would eventually marry their partner. Second, individuals’ perceptions of their partner’s marriage plans were examined. Participants were asked whether they thought their partner had a definite plan to marry them. If
their answer was no, they were asked whether they thought their partner would eventually marry them. This procedure was used successfully in a previous study (Brown & Booth, 1996).

**Relationship quality.** Relationship quality was measured by a modified version of the Marital Opinion Questionnaire – MOQ (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986). This index asks participants to rate their relationship using a series of 10 semantic differential items (e.g., miserable – enjoyable, interesting – boring) as well as a single item evaluating partners’ relational satisfaction. In this modified version of the measure, the instructions were changed so that they referenced participants’ “relationship” instead of their “marriage” or their “marital relationship.” The MOQ was used to assess partners’ relationship quality because it generates a global evaluation of satisfaction and does not yield artificially high correlations with specific behaviors (see Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Huston et al., 1986; Norton, 1983 for a full discussion of this measurement issue).

**Perception of partner confirmation.** Ellis’s (2002) perceived parental confirmation scale, the Confirmation Behavior Indicator (CBI), was used to assess individuals’ perceptions of the extent to which they were confirmed by their romantic partner. The original CBI is composed of 28 items. Following Dailey (2009), the original measure was shortened to 14 items to prevent participant fatigue. Each of the 14 items asks participants to rate the frequency of confirming or disconfirming communication in their relationship on a 7-point Likert scale (1: *Strongly disagree* – 7: *Strongly agree*). In the original measure, every item starts with the phrase “My mother/father…” For the purposes of the current study, that phrase was changed to “My partner…” Examples of items are: “My partner gives me undivided attention when engaged in private conversations” and “My partner allows me to express negative feelings.”
Self-worth and perception of evaluation from partner. Self-worth was examined using the five-item Self-Attribute Questionnaire (SAQ; Pelham & Swann, 1989). The SAQ measures five attributes that are central to people’s self-worth: intellectual capability, physical attractiveness, athletic ability, social skills, and aptitude in arts and music. Participants were asked to rate themselves relative to other people on each of the attributes using interval scales that range from 0 (bottom 5%) to 9 (top 5%).

A modified version of the SAQ was employed to investigate individuals’ perceptions of the way their partner evaluated them. Rather than asking participants to report on their own self-worth, this modified scale required them to rate their perceptions of how their partner evaluated their “activities and abilities.”

The reliabilities, means, and standard deviations for each of the aforementioned measures are shown in Table 1. In addition, the items measuring relationship quality had an alpha of .94. The correlation between the sum of the main scale items and the global rating of satisfaction was .88.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Only four participants (3.6%) were engaged to their partners. More than half of participants reported that they intended to marry their partners and expected their partners also to plan to marry them (n = 59, 53.6%). Individuals in this group were labeled as both plan participants. The number of individuals who did not intend to marry their partner, but thought their partner wanted to marry them was twenty (18.2%). Interestingly, only one participant (0.9%) reported that she or he wanted to marry her or his partner but believed that her or his partner did not to want to marry her or him. This participant was combined with the group of
individuals who did not plan to marry their partner, but thought that their partner planned to marry them. The resulting group was labeled as *individual plan participants* (*n* = 21, 19.1%). Thirty (27.3%) people reported that neither they, nor their partner, intended to marry each other. They were labeled *neither plan participants*.

Further, correlations among main six variables are presented in Table 1. Marriage plan was significantly correlated with other variables in predicted ways, such as relationship quality and confirmation. A high correlation between self-worth and evaluation from a partner represents that participants tended to believe they were accurately evaluated by their partner. When those with marriage plans and those without marriage plans are combined, evaluation from a partner was positively associated with relationship quality.

**Main Analyses**

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted that plans to marry influence relationship quality and confirming communication. Results associated with hypothesis 1 and 2 are shown in Figure 1. Table 2 displays the means of each of the marriage plan groups. Participants in the *both plan* group, on average, reported the highest scores across each dependent variable. The test of null hypotheses by using MANOVA (IV = Marriage plan: both, individual, and neither plan; DV = Relationship quality and confirmation) indicates that groups differed on the set of dependent variables, $F_{Wilks'\, \Lambda} (4, 212) = 3.08, p = .017, \eta^2 = .11$.

Hypothesis 1 suggested that dating partners with plans to marry would report higher relationship quality than those without marriage plans. To test the hypothesis, the univariate $F$ test for relationship quality was conducted. The results showed a significant effect of marriage plans on relationship quality, $F (2, 110) = 5.04, p = .008, \eta^2 = .09$. As shown in Table 3, post hoc comparisons using Tukey’s procedure showed that the relationship quality of *both plan*
participants ($M = 5.95, SD = 1.06$) was higher than that of individual plan participants ($M = 5.14, SD = 1.41$) and neither plan participants ($M = 5.21, SD = 1.49$). Thus, the results were consistent with Hypothesis 1A and 1B.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that dating partners with plans to marry would perceive more confirming interactions with their partner than would those without marriage plans. To assess the hypothesis, the univariate $F$ test for confirmation was conducted. The results showed a significant influence of marriage plans on confirming communication, $F(2, 111) = 3.39$, $p = .037$, $\eta^2 = .060$. As shown in Table 3, post hoc comparisons using Tukey’s procedure showed that the both plan participants ($M = 5.42, SD = 0.82$) reported a higher score of confirmation than the neither plan participants ($M = 4.93, SD = 0.93$). Even though both plan participants reported a higher score of confirmation than individual plan participants ($M = 5.18, SD = 0.79$), the difference was not statistically significant. These data were consistent with Hypothesis 2A, but not 2B.

Hypothesis 3 expected that the relationship between marriage plans and relationship quality is mediated by confirmation. In order to test if confirmation mediates the relationship, four steps of analyses were conducted as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). A variable of marriage plans was dummy-coded for regression, so two variables were made: both plan and individual plan (reference group is neither plan group). For the first step, multiple regression was used to examine the relationship between a predictor (marriage plan) and an outcome variable (relationship quality). In the analysis, two dummy-coded variables, such as both plan and individual plan, were included as independent variables and relationship quality was included as the dependent variable. The results were significant, $F(2, 109) = 5.04$, $p = .008$, adjusted $R^2 = .07$. Both plan group had a higher level of relationship quality than neither plan group ($\beta = .28$, $t = $
2.60, \( p = .011 \)). However, individual plan group had a similar level of relationship quality to neither plan group (\( \beta = -.02, t = .19, p = .851 \)).

For the next step, the relationship between the predictor (marriage plan) and the mediator (confirmation) was examined. Because there was not a significant difference between individual plan group and neither plan group in relationship quality, only both plan group was included as a predictor in multiple regression. The results were significant, \( F (2, 109) = 5.64, p = .019 \), adjusted \( R^2 = .04 \). Both plan group reported higher confirmation than neither plan group (\( \beta = .22, t = 2.37, p = .019 \)).

For the third step, the influence of the mediator (confirmation) on the outcome (relationship quality) was investigated. Multiple regression was used including both plan variable and confirmation as predictors and relationship quality as the dependent variables. The results were significant, \( F (2, 109) = 36.33, \ p < .001 \), adjusted \( R^2 = .39 \). Controlling for marriage plan, confirmation was significantly associated with relationship quality (\( \beta = .58, t = 7.57, p < .001 \)).

In the final step, in order to establish that confirmation mediates the relationship between marriage plan and relationship quality, the effect of marriage plan on relationship quality controlling for confirmation should be zero. The unstandardized coefficient indicating the relationship between marriage plan and relationship quality was reduced after controlling for confirmation (from .74 to .43) as the result of the Sobel test showed, \( z = 2.26, p = .024 \). However, even after controlling for confirmation, there was still a statistically significant association between marriage plan and relationship quality (\( \beta = .16, t = 2.14, p = .034 \)). As Baron and Kenny (1986) suggested, the result showed that confirmation partially mediates the relationship between marriage plan and relationship quality.
For the analyses of hypotheses 4 and 5, both plan participants were considered as partners with plans to marry (n = 59) and individual plan and neither plan participants were combined and considered as partners without plans to marry (n = 51). This procedure may also increase statistical power.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that, for individuals who were dating without plans to marry, there would be a positive association between their perceptions of their partners’ evaluations of them and their relationship quality. To assess the hypothesis, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The results were not significant, $F(2, 48) = 2.00, p = .146$, adjusted $R^2 = .04$. Individuals’ perceptions of their partner’s evaluation ($\beta = -.22, t = .99, p = .329$) did not significantly predict their relationship quality. Thus, the results were not consistent with Hypothesis 4.

Hypothesis 5 suggested that, for people who did plan to marry their current partner, the more consonance there was between self-worth and their perceptions of their partner’s evaluation of them, the greater their relationship quality would be. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to investigate the hypothesis. An interaction effect between self-worth and partner evaluation indicates the presence of self-verification strivings because it suggests that the influence of evaluation from a partner on relationship quality depends on self-worth. The results of this analysis were significant, $F(3, 55) = 4.32, p = .008$, adjusted $R^2 = .15$. However, there was no interaction between self-worth and partner evaluation ($\beta = -.12, t = .98, p = .330$). The analysis showed that evaluation from a partner was a significant predictor ($\beta = .55, t = 2.73, p = .009$) of relationship quality, but self-worth was not ($\beta = -.19, t = .96, p = .340$). These findings suggest that if dating partners who have plans to marry are evaluated positively by their partner, their
relationship quality is relatively high – a finding consistent with positivity strivings. In short, the results were not consistent with Hypothesis 5.

Discussion

The purposes of this study were to: a) examine the effect of marriage plans on relationship quality and confirmation of dating couples of emerging adults, b) analyze the role of confirmation as a mechanism to explicate the association between marriage plans and relationship quality, and c) investigate the influence of dating partners’ plans to marry on their desire for positive evaluation or self-verification evaluation. In general, dating partners with plans to marry reported higher relationship quality and more confirming communication than did those without marriage plans. The relationship between marriage plans and relationship quality was partially mediated by confirmation. However, the findings suggested that dating partners without marriage plans did not show positivity strivings. In short, the evaluations these individuals felt they received from their partner did not predict the quality of their relationship. Further, dating partners with marriage plans did not show self-verification strivings. That is, the consonance between individuals’ self-concept and their partner’s evaluation did not predict individuals’ relationship quality. Yet, for those with plans to marry, perceived evaluations from their partner predicted the quality of their relationship.

Relationship Quality and Confirmation

The findings associated with Hypothesis 1A and 1B showed that the relationship quality of dating partners of emerging adults who believed that both partners plan to marry was higher than that of those who believed that either only one partner or neither partner plans to marry. These findings are consistent with previous studies suggesting that dating partners who have plans to marry each other, similar to those of marital partners, have relationship qualities that are
higher than those without plans (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996). Moreover, there was no difference between individual plan participants and neither plan participants in relationship quality, suggesting that the quality of relationships is high in cases where both partners in a couple plan to marry. As predicted, because there are variations in perceptions of dating relationships as serious relationships or exploratory relationships among emerging adults (Dhariwal et al., 2009), only both partners’ marriage plan has a significant effect on their relationship quality. This result is also consistent with the conceptualization of marriage as a dynamic interpersonal system based on both the husbands’ and wives’ interdependent thoughts and feelings (Charania & Ickes, 2006).

For Hypothesis 2B, results indicated that partners who had plans to marry (both plan participants) perceived their partners to be significantly more engaged in confirming communication than did those who did not have such plans (neither plan partners). The difference in communication between those who had plans to marry and those who did not is consistent with the results of previous studies (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996) which showed that the quality of communication of dating partners with marriage plans was as high as that of marital partners and higher than those without marriage plans. Because prior research has focused on the effect of marriage plans on limited aspects of communication such as the frequency of interaction (Brown & Booth, 1996) and disagreements (Brown, 2004), it is valuable that this finding indicates that confirmation, which was a type of the relational communications, was improved by plans to marry.

Contrary to Hypothesis 2A, confirming communication which both plan partners engaged in was as high as that of individual plan partners. This finding might suggest that even if individual plan partners do not perceive high relationship quality, they have a more hope for
satisfied relationships than *neither plan partners*. Consequently, *individual plan partners* attempt to confirm their partner as often as *both plan partners* with the hope to improve their relationship quality. Because this study found a positive impact of confirmation on relationship quality as assessed in mediation analyses, it is possible that if *individual plan partners* keep engaging in confirmation communication, their relationship quality will be as high as that of *both plan partners*.

Importantly, this study explicated why marriage plans had a positive influence on dating couples’ relationship quality. Even though existing studies reported that marriage plans enhanced communication and relationship quality (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996), how those outcomes are related has not been investigated. This study revealed that dating partners with plans to marry perceived a higher level of confirmation from their partner than those without plans, so those with plans reported a higher level of relationship quality than those without plans. The results are consistent with findings of extant studies implying that marriage plans promoted quality of communication (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996) and relational communication plays a critical role in enhancing relational outcomes (Burgoon et al., 1984; Burgoon et al., 1987; Dailey, 2005).

*Desire for Evaluation from Partner*

The findings of the present investigation are not theoretically consistent with the arguments put forth by SVT. The results associated with Hypothesis 4 showed that the evaluations that individuals perceived from their partner were not a significant predictor of relationship quality when individuals did not have plans to marry. Previous studies of SVT imply that, although positive evaluations from a partner predict relationship quality for those who are dating, evaluations from a partner that are consistent with self-worth predict relationship quality
for those who are married (Swann et al., 1994). Contrary to the findings associated with SVT, the results associated with H4 indicate that evaluation from a partner did not influence relationship quality of individuals without marriage plans. An interpretation of this finding is that because emerging adults who were dating without plans to marry were not serious about their relationship or their joint future, they did not care much about how their partner evaluated them. Related to this interpretation, whereas dating partners in a study by Swann et al. (1994) who appreciated positive evaluation from their partner ranged in age from 14 to 48 ($M = 25.5$), participants in the current study ranged in age from 18 to 26 years ($M = 19.88$). On average, emerging adults in this study are younger than participants in the previous study. Therefore, it is likely that emerging adults who do not plan to marry their current partner are not serious about their relationship and so, they do not care much about evaluations from their partner. We see value in future research that further investigates what emerging adults’ couples without marriage plans think about marriage. If, for example, some of them think of marriage as a cost rather than a benefit, they may not want to be serious about marriage (McGinnis, 2003).

Like Hypothesis 4, Hypothesis 5 was not supported. The findings associated with H5 revealed that, for couples with plans to marry, there was not an interaction effect between self-worth and evaluation from a partner. That is, consistency between people’s self-worth and the evaluation they received from their partner did not predict their relationship quality. However, the more positively participants perceived themselves to be evaluated by their partner, the higher their relationship quality. This latter finding was anticipated for dating partners without plans because it indicates positivity strivings. Several possibilities for explaining this result should be considered. An explanation suggested by the findings of previous studies employing SVT is that, in general, dating partners have positivity strivings (Swann et al., 1994; Swann et al., 2007).
These prior studies did not consider the influence of plans to marry on individuals’ tendency toward positivity strivings or self-verification strivings. The findings of the current study may provide new evidence that dating partners have positivity strivings only when they are relatively serious about their relationships (i.e., have plans to marry), but not when they are less serious about their relationship. Another explanation is that because perceived rather than actual partner appraisals were used in this study, self-verification strivings were not present in dating partners with marriage plans. Reviewing previous studies related to SVT, Swann et al. (2007) suggested self-verification strivings were found only when partners’ actual appraisals were investigated. Although perceptions of partners have been found to be significant factors influencing relationship quality (e.g., Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Murphy, 1984), the findings of the current study are consistent with the argument that only actual appraisals are associated with self-verification strivings.

In addition, the fact that self-worth did not interact with evaluation from a partner to impact relationship quality can be explained by an argument by Sears (1986), implicating that self-definitions of college students—participants from a narrow age range—are uncrystallized and still developing. Sears’ argument was that although many studies in social psychology suggest people have a relatively impoverished ability to access to their own subjective states, those investigations typically use only college students as samples. Because the self-concept of college students is still developing, it might not guide their behaviors or affect their feelings in consistent ways. This argument may explain why self-worth was not interacted with evaluation from a partner in the present study only using college students, especially focusing on an emerging adult sample.
Dating Couples with Marriage Plans

Taken together, the results of the current study suggest romantic partners with marriage plans are in a transitional phase in their relationship. They perceived to be successfully engaged in confirming interactions with their partner, which lead to positive relationship quality. However, their relationship quality was not a function of the accuracy of their partners’ perceptions of them, but rather a function of how positively they believed that they were evaluated by their partner. In other words, although individuals with plans to marry appreciate that their partner makes an effort to confirm them as they are, they are still motivated to be seen positively by their partner.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present investigation is limited in several ways. First, the study examined participants’ perceptions of their partner’s attitudes, including their views of the way their partner might evaluate them and their partner’s plans for marriage. Sillars et al. (1984) suggested the perceived attitudes of partners can be particularly significant predictors of relationship quality. However, individuals’ perceptions do not provide information about what the partner’s actual evaluations were or if the partner really had plans to marry. Future studies should investigate the actual appraisals of partners and examine the marriage plans of both partners in a couple.

Second, and similarly, confirmation was examined using participants’ perceptions. These data allowed us to investigate the meanings which participants ascribed to their partners’ confirming behaviors. However, as Ellis (2002) suggested, in order to study confirmation, it is also important to observe confirming communication.

Moreover, examining communication using self-reports at a single point in time does not provide data concerning what people talk about and how they talk about it every day. Consequently, diary methods may also be useful. For example, dating couples could be asked to fill out a questionnaire every day for a certain time period. This methodology would allow
researchers to investigate what participants in dating relationships converse about on a daily basis and the degree to which their daily communication is linked to their relational satisfaction.

Another limitation is that the reliability of the Self-Attribute Questionnaire used to examine participants’ self-worth ($\alpha = .56$) and their perception of their partner’s evaluation of them ($\alpha = .33$) was low. Although the reliability of these measures has been relatively low in previous research (e.g., .64 coefficient alpha in studies conducted by Swann et al. (1992) and Swann et al. (1994)), the low reliability constrains any associations that might be found between the measures and other variables. It is possible that the low reliability in the present study is due, in part, to the fact that the measures were not originally created to assess perceptions of partners’ evaluation.

Finally, only college students at a large public university were recruited for the study. A college student sample may be viewed as appropriate because many emerging adults are college students. However, the findings cannot be generalized to emerging adults who do not attend college.

Conclusion

Dating partners of emerging adults with plans to marry reported higher relationship quality and more confirming communication than did those without marriage plans. The association between marriage plans and relationship quality was partially mediated by confirming communication. Yet, the findings suggested that dating partners without marriage plans did not show positivity strivings; the evaluations received from their partner did not enhance the quality of their relationship. Further, dating partners with marriage plans did not show self-verification strivings; the consonance between individuals’ self-concept and their partners’ evaluation was not related to individuals’ relationship quality. For those with plans to marry, however, perceived
evaluations from their partner predicted the quality of their relationship. The results showed that emerging adults in romantic relationships who have plans to marry may be in a transitional phase. In other words, although people with plans to marry reported higher relationship quality and more confirming interactions than did those without marriage plans, their relationship quality was a function of their partners’ positive evaluations rather than a function of the consonance between their own evaluations and those of their partners’. Although several limitations of the study should be considered, contributions made in this study lie in investigating the transitions that emerging adults experience in their dating relationships based on their plans for marriage as well as the possible influence of marriage plans on relationship quality and confirming communication.
References


*Southern Communication Journal, 67, 319-334.*


*Journal of Marriage and the Family, 49, 797-809.*


*Psychiatry, 18, 319-345.*


Table 1

**Correlations, Reliabilities, Means, and Standard Deviations.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Marriage plan</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Relationship quality</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.944</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Confirmation</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.852</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Self-worth (SAQ)</td>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>.21*</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.557</td>
<td>5.66</td>
<td>1.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Evaluation from partner</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.76**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.326</td>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>.94</td>
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</table>

*Note.* *p* < .05, **p** < .01.

Marriage plan: 1 = Both plan; 2 = Individual plan; 3 = Neither plan.
Table 2

*Group Means (SD) for the Dependent Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Relationship Quality</th>
<th>Confirmation</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>5.95 (1.06)</td>
<td>5.42 (0.82)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.14 (1.41)</td>
<td>5.18 (0.79)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5.21 (1.49)</td>
<td>4.93 (0.86)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Pairwise Contrasts for the Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variables</th>
<th>Contrast</th>
<th>Mean Differences (SE)</th>
<th>Cohen’s $d$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Quality</td>
<td>Both vs Individual</td>
<td>.80 (.32)*</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Both vs Neither</td>
<td>.73 (.28)*</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual vs Neither</td>
<td>.07 (.36)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation</td>
<td>Both vs Individual</td>
<td>.23 (.21)</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Both vs Neither</td>
<td>.49 (.19)*</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual vs Neither</td>
<td>.26 (.24)</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *$p < .05$
Figure 1. Relationship quality and confirmation as a function of marriage plan