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Financial Considerations of Undergraduate Female Married Students: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

This qualitative, phenomenological research study, involved in-depth interviewing 23 female, undergraduate, married students attending a private, selective Midwest university. Three main themes were found regarding the students' perceptions of their respective financial situations. First, participants described that, in contrast to a single (unmarried) lifestyle, the importance of their budgeting practices significantly escalate. These considerations directly relate to paying bills and school loans, resulting in consequential patterns of limited spending. Second, women in the study described the importance of discussing finances with their future spouse before getting married. Other preemptive efforts included saving money beforehand, as well as pre-discussing financial habits or expectations. Finally, married students described the mindset changes they found necessary when adjusting to married life as an undergraduate student. These included finding less expensive alternatives or "doing without," as well as shifts in their perceptions of finances from individual budgets to collective financial outlooks.

Keywords: married students; financial stress.

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Consideraciones Económicas de las Estudiantes Casadas: Un Análisis Cualitativo

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Resumen

Este estudio de investigación cualitativo fenomenológico involucró 23 entrevistas a estudiantes casadas que asistían a una universidad privada del Medio Oeste. Se encontraron tres temas principales en cuanto a la percepción que tenían las estudiantes de sus respectivas situaciones económicas. En primer lugar, las participantes describieron que, a diferencia del estilo de vida de soltera, la importancia de sus prácticas de elaboración de presupuestos aumentaba significativamente. Estas consideraciones estaban directamente relacionadas con el abono de facturas y los préstamos escolares, resultando en patrones consecuentes de gasto limitado. En segundo lugar, las mujeres en el estudio describen la importancia de discutir las finanzas con su futuro cónyuge antes de casarse. Otros esfuerzos preventivos incluyen el ahorro de dinero previamente, así como el discutir con antelación hábitos o expectativas económicas. Por último, las estudiantes casadas describen los cambios de mentalidad que percibieron como necesarios cuando debieron ajustarse a la vida matrimonial como estudiantes universitarias. Estos incluyeron encontrar alternativas más baratas o "prescindir" de ellas, así como cambios en su percepción de una economía individual a una perspectiva financiera colectiva

Palabras clave: estudiantes casadas; estrés económico..

In the world of undergraduate university admissions, the ticket-price of tuition is one assumed hallmark of education's quality. As a result, higher tuition often is found in more selective institutions. Higher rankings in *U.S. News & World Report*, wealthier alumni, and increased status for the university are all potential benefits a school may reap by maintaining a high tuition (Carey, 2008; Chan, Chau, & Chan, 2012). Although many students do receive financial aid for tuition and room/board at Harvard University, for example, the price in 2004 was an overwhelming \$39,880 per year (Cauchon, 2004). Similarly, in 2008-2009 American University in Washington D.C. charged \$41,000 for a full-time student (Young, 2008). The point is that prices of undergraduate education from a broad range of universities are shocking to tuition-paying parents, partly due to the prestigious connotation tied to high tuition rates.

Furthermore, these high rates are increasing drastically each year. Research by the nonprofit group Project on Student Debt ("College students," 2007) found that prices of public universities had increased up to 57% in the last five years and both students and parents have not generally been aware of how proportionately high college costs have risen during that time frame (Seyedian & Yi, 2011). Petersl et al. (2011) suggests that the plight may be even worse for college students belonging to some minority groups. Shea (2003) reported that 16 states had raised their university tuition rates over 10% in the preceding year. As extreme examples, The University of Virginia and the University of California increased their tuition costs 30% and the University of Arizona increased theirs almost 40%, all within one year (Shea, 2003). Today, young families are looking ahead at saving towards college costs for their children and are seeing projected "numbers that are so astronomical you might think they were a line item in NASA's budget" (Friedhoff, 2008 para. 2). In sum, universities annually raise their tuition and fees as current students, as well as future students, watch with anxiety.

Knowing this, it follows that student debt is reaching incredible amounts. Universities are attempting to cap the amount of student loans, depending on the family income (Porter, 2007). However, this has hardly curbed the debt of a typical undergraduate student. Wang (2003) found that student debt increased 74% from 1997 and the

average undergraduate student had \$16,500 of student loan debt. More recently, two-thirds of college students will graduate with an average of \$20,000 in school loan debt (“College students,” 2007). Student debt has increased exponentially in the past 10 years. Potentially, average contemporary college students today will have an additional \$7,000 of school debt than they would have had 10 years ago (Friend & Collins, 2007). Current students graduate from universities with an overall unhealthy financial burden, particularly for students in the liberal arts where starting incomes for B.A. graduates have not kept pace with increasing tuition costs.

As a result, many students choose to work a part-time or fulltime job throughout their years at a university. Manthei and Gilmore (2005) reported that over half of working students (57%) would not choose to work while attending classes, if it were not necessary in order to stay in college. The students indicated concerns that their college employment will weaken their academic strength and will cause them additional stress. Moreover, fewer than half of students involved in the study found work to be an enjoyable part of their week. Fillion (2006) reported that working more than 10 hours a week in college could negatively impact grades and cause a lack of involvement in social events with other students. Obviously, work must be balanced with many other competing activities in the lives of undergraduate students.

Davis and Lea (1995) reported that, over a decade ago, college students with low-income and high amounts of debt had relatively tolerant attitudes towards debt. They found that the longer the students attended the university, the more relaxed they were about their accumulating debt. Students did not commonly change their lifestyle, because they perceived their financial situation to be only temporary. Because of these future financial expectations, many students may be deterred from relatively low-paying occupations like teaching or social-work (Rainry, 2006). Instead, many are more likely to pursue potentially high-paying careers (Friend & Collins, 2007). In fact, beginning doctors, lawyers, M.B.A.s, and Ph.D.s often accumulate over \$100,000 of debt due to their education (“College students,” 2007). A significant amount of the published research on students’ attitudes towards school debt presently is focused towards these types of high-cost professions and the total debt assumed as a result of college and attending graduate school.

Since it was not practical to study all students' perceptions of their college finances, we selected a subgroup for particular appraisal in the present study. This is the subgroup of married, undergraduate students. The assumption that married students experience similar financial demands as single students do is reasonable due to national tuition increases and even some added stressors since they care for family, rather than only individual needs, during their college years. To our surprise, a paucity of research literature exists that addresses married students' financial situations and needs. Particularly, we searched the databases of PsychINFO, Academic Search Complete, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, SocINDEX with full text, Women's Studies International, Sociological Collection, Contemporary Women's Issues, and LexisNexis Academic and located no published, empirical studies. [Selvaratnam \(2007\)](#) reported that the majority (81%) of undergraduate students would like to get married, but they tend to wait until after graduation or until after they begin their careers. This current trend of marrying later in life may be reflected in the lack of academic literature relating to married undergraduate students' financial lives. [Lobron \(2008\)](#) reported that the overall average marriage ages are now 25 for women and 27 for men.

Given the scarcity of research conducted to date in this domain, we selected qualitative research as the most appropriate means of investigating the construct of married students and their college finances. Qualitative methods most often are most appropriate when investigating new domains where research is relative virgin ([Johnson & Christensen, 2004](#)). That is, when researchers must inductively explore a topic, due to lack of previous literature for providing direction in hypothesis testing, then qualitative protocol most often is warranted. Results from such qualitative approaches can provide meaningful findings from which later quantitative researchers may derive theories and meaningful hypotheses. In fact, without this type of exploratory, qualitative information, salient quantitative research—at least in theory—may not be possible ([Flick, 2006](#)). In sum, we believe that the results from the present study will have a potentially useful heuristic value, leading to productive future quantitative designs ([Creswell, 2008](#)) and more plenary understandings of the construct-at-large.

Method

Participants

Individuals comprising the participants for the present study were matriculated at a private, selective, comprehensive university, located in a Midwestern state in the USA. We focused specifically on females in this study, since homogeneity of sample in qualitative designs generally tends to generate more clear themes and enhance a study's internal validity. We believe that sufficient gender differences likely exist in how males and females perceive the married student experience. Consequently, researching male married students warrants a separate, follow-up study to the present one.

From the Office of Student Services, we obtained a list of all married students attending the university from which the sample was drawn. Female students who were senior and juniors were drawn at random and interviewed, continuing this process until saturation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) was experienced when evaluating the interview transcripts. In qualitative methodology, saturation occurs when adding new participants to the sample no longer provides significant novel findings but, rather, the same general themes reoccur in the data set. Following experts such as Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Slayton and Llosa (2005), this signals the sample size is sufficient for the intended purpose of the study. We found saturation to occur with 23 individuals and consequently discontinued interviews after that number of interviews.

Each of the participants in the sample self-identified as being Caucasian. Given that 94% of the 3,000 individuals in the student body at the institution from which the sample was drawn were Caucasian, our sample for the present study generally reflected the make-up of the students attending the institution. The ages of the students ranged from 20 – 25 (four of the individuals preferred not to reveal their respective ages). The sample was reasonably divided equally between seniors (14) and juniors (10). From a qualitative research perspective, we utilized purposeful and criterion sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) when selecting the individuals for the study—drawing names randomly—once

the individuals qualified with respect to being (a) married students, (b) females, and (c) juniors or seniors. All of the individuals invited to participate in the study agreed to do so and there was no attrition, including students continuing to the end of each respective interview.

Procedure

We designed the study to be a phenomenological, qualitative research inquiry (Creswell, 2012). This means that we endeavored to understand and report the personal constructs and worlds of the participants from their own perspectives. We are clear that some authorities (e.g., Anfar & Mertz, 2006) in phenomenological and grounded theory qualitative methods believe that theory should have an integral role in the research design and interpretation of the study's results. In this paradigm, theory elucidates and helps to shape the meaning of results produced via qualitative methodology (Mason, 2002). Other authorities (e.g., Glaser, 1998), in contrast, believe that theory should not have a role in designing or interpreting the findings of qualitative research studies. In this model, researchers use disciplined restraint—portraying the results as objectively as possible, without the use of an interpretive grid or theory in either the research design or interpretation of the study's results (Raffanti, 2006).

Naturally, we are not going here to resolve this debate that likely will continue among qualitative researchers for some time (Bailey, 2007). However, we do state explicitly our own, longstanding commitment to the more traditional model of qualitative research design: theory should have no role by the researcher. Rather, in this paradigm, it is the role of the reader to apply theory to the findings that are objectively presented by the researcher. This best allows the results of a qualitative study to be viewed from multiple perspectives and to be applied in a variety of contexts, depending on the reader's milieu. In short, the lack of the use of theory in both the methods and discussion sections of the present article is not an oversight. Rather, it is the application of an accepted protocol for conducting apt qualitative research studies (Kinckheloe & McLaren, 2005).

We utilized semi-structured interviews (Alvesson, 2011) in the present study. This approach allowed the participants to express their

sentiments, tell their stories, and digress at points from the general topic at hand in order to convey their perspectives and elucidate their points. The results provided some rich-and-thick descriptions of participants' experiences, many of which we share in the present article in the quotations cited. The names used in order to enhance the article's readability, obviously, are pseudonyms.

We used open coding (Maxwell, 2012) strategies when analyzing the participants' transcripts. This is an inductive protocol that examines the repetition, of phrases, words, and key constructs. Inductively, we attempted to bracket, as much as humanly possible, our own pre-conceived biases and report the common perceptions of the participants' transcripts. This involved moving from the specifics of the data provided to the general themes that emerged from coding the transcripts. Sometimes codes that initially seemed promising were dropped as the analysis progressed, due to lack of board support among the participants (Bereska, 2003; Marshall, 2002). Following Gay, Mils, and Airasian (2009), coding strategies included procedures of asking key questions, concept mapping, organizational review, and visually displaying the findings.

The analysis involved continually comparing (Chenail, 2012) the various interviews with one another. Commonalities were appraised among each of the participants. This process produced the initial codes we used which eventually loaded-into the resultant themes reported in the present article. The use of NVIVO-8 software was a significant aid with the thematic analysis and helped to locate texts that were most germane to the study's results and reported themes. Per Lewins and Silver (2007), the software was used in order to augment the human dynamics involved with the analysis process, including intuition, not to supplant or substitute for it.

Internal validity for the study was enhanced by a number of elements that were embedded into the design and implementation of the research. The research team held regular meetings to confer independent appraisals regarding possible codes and initial themes. The results reported in the present article reflect the consensus of all the research team members vis-à-vis clear themes that represent the participants' sentiments. Member checking (Metro-Jaffe, 2011) involves conferring

team members vis-à-vis clear themes that represent the participants' sentiments. Member checking (Metro-Jaffe, 2011) involves conferring with participants in order to ensure that the conclusions drawn from the study aptly represent the perspectives they believe. The participants in the study indicated their sentiments that the overall themes reported, indeed, reflected their own understandings of married student life.

Consultation with a researcher who was independent of the study (Silverman, 2006) also enhanced internal validity. This is a qualitative research protocol that encourages autonomous scrutiny of findings by an individual who is an expert in research methodology. The researcher was able to aptly trace the conclusions back to the original transcript data, seeing the natural connections between the findings reported and the participants' words. In short, internal validity was affirmed both by individuals within the study (member checking) and outside of the study (independent reviewer).

Generating a data-trail (Rodgers, 2008) also enhanced the study's internal validity. This is a qualitative research method whereby the research team generates a systematic procedure of grounding each proposed finding to be reported in a study with the transcript data from participants. In this way, each of the conclusions drawn can be verified relative to both the quantity and quality of supporting evidence for its reporting in the findings. Data audits help to reduce research fraud and they provide useful information for future researchers wishing to further pursue the research topic or design in other contexts—providing concrete starting points and data on which future studies can be built.

In sum, we endeavored to generate a research design and protocol that represented utmost rigor in the tradition of qualitative, phenomenological research (De Wet & Erasmus, 2005). Embedding elements of internal validity into the study's blueprint and following-through to the implementation of its execution helped to provide confidence in the outcomes reported in the article's conclusions. While all research studies possess limitations, and we report ours at the article's end, the gestalt of the research design and implementation followed standard and generally accepted procedures in order to help ensure the quality of the final product relayed in the results section that follows (Cope, 2004).

Results

Females in our sample reported three main considerations regarding their finances while matriculated as undergraduate married students. First, participants described that, in contrast to a single (unmarried) lifestyle, the importance of their budgeting practices significantly escalate. These considerations directly relate to paying bills and school loans, resulting in consequential patterns of limited spending. Further, women in our study described the importance of discussing finances with their future spouse before getting married. Other preemptive efforts included saving money beforehand, as well as pre-discussing financial habits or expectations. Finally, married students described the mindset changes they found necessary when adjusting to married life as an undergraduate student. These included finding less expensive alternatives or “doing without,” as well as shifts in their perceptions of finances from individual budgets to collective financial outlooks.

Importance of Budgeting Escalates

As married students described their financial situations and their perceptions regarding spending, all participants related these financial dynamics back to monthly bills and other pressing financial responsibilities. Bills for rent or utilities, in particular, were new realities for almost all of our participants, as most previously were campus residents before living off-campus as married students. Mary, for example, explained that once becoming a married student, she and her husband were responsible to meet mortgage payments, gas bills, and all the other house-related payments. Participants explained that, because they now faced the challenge of meeting monthly deadlines for bills and responsibilities, the importance of budgeting only increased. Carla summarized most participants when discussing the necessity of pre-planned spending: “Um, we have to budget for everything—for gas, for groceries, for saving, for all the bills, because bills come first. Um, I think that probably is the biggest thing with the marriage right now, we budget everything.” Females in our study further emphasized the surprise of the potency that this dynamic held in their marriage. That is

not to say women previously were unaware that finances would be a priority but, rather, that the participants reportedly were taken by the extent to which bills dictated or limited their spending. Tina, for example, echoed the basic plan most participants described relating to their budgeting practices:

Budgeting is so important! We went to a [seminar on finances] and that was so helpful. We have everything divided into categories, but we just have to be careful and not splurge unless we know we have a little extra. I mean, there are so many bills. You don't even begin to realize how many bills you have until you are married!

Married students also explained that, resulting from their perceptions of budgeting's importance and necessity, frivolous spending no longer was a typical option. Repeatedly, participants explained efforts that both they and their spouse extended in order to work towards staying within the means of their budget. One female, depicting the sentiments of most participants, relayed her decision only to spend cash when making purchases, with the hopes of bracketing her spending within pre-set limits. Another married student, Tonisha, described the extent to which she and her spouse wished to stay within budget, reflecting its importance in the eyes of these females: "Our last grocery shopping trip, we had to write down how much everything cost! That is the worst it has ever gotten, writing down how much everything costs and calculating it, down to a few items, to make sure that we weren't going over our budget." The females also explained that, generally, their overall budgets involved tighter living as married students. Describing bills and mortgage payments as "reality checks," participants emphasized the importance of consequential and prudent money management. Terri summarized most females' sentiments regarding the expenses that went hand-in-hand with married living:

Our budget, it's definitely way tighter. We have to pay \$700 for health insurance for both of us. So, yeah, like, there are so many unexpected, well, not unexpected, but just things you don't think about. Like, insurance and groceries and car insurance and car repairs, and we have to pay for our utilities.

Finally, participants explained that added financial pressures were experienced as they worked to pay off school loans. Females in our sample were in various stages when it came to paying for their education. At this particular university, tuition alone over the span of four years totaled over \$80,000. Because of this relatively steep tuition expense, many of our participants were employed in order to help pay off the debt they already had acquired while attending school. Working to pay off this much debt requires self-discipline, even from single students. Naturally, adding mortgage payments or rent and utilities to this financial responsibility, such as women in our study described, significantly increased the financial burden most participants reported experiencing. Kari aptly summarized participants' experiences in this regard:

We budget a lot. We try to keep track of everything, because we're trying to minimize what we're spending right now, so it's kind of work and school. You know, that's just what we've got to do. And we're paying off school loans, so we budget everything. We know exactly what we spent in what areas each month, just because we want to make sure we're not throwing away money in various things, from the beginning, you know, to pay off school loans and things like that.

Furthermore, women explained the long-term future benefits they hoped these present financial patterns would hold throughout their marriage. Because most participants were relatively newly married couples, these females hoped that frugal spending patterns made now would carry over into their outlook on spending and prudence later on, contributing to the overall success of their marriage. Amanda, for example, explained:

Budgeting is really important, because [this university], it's kind of expensive, and the housing around here isn't the best rate either. So, if [we] didn't want to start off [married] life in debt, [we have] to spend a long time making up for that, especially with school. So, it's definitely important, especially in the first couple of years, to kind of be under [budget] a little bit and kind of build up some saving and then be able to go from there. I would definitely say [it's been important] to budget, especially in the first couple of years

[of marriage]. Because then [we] start [our] habits, and kind of don't need the budget as much just because [we'll] be like used to being in these lines—you kind of engrain it in your mind.

Forethought Enhances Married Student Success

Participants emphasized the importance of placing money into savings before becoming married. The females in our study were living off limited incomes because of the added expenses associated with married life and their needs to cover college expenses and stay in school. Consequently, females, such as Chris repeatedly explained the importance of saving up money while single—before encountering the added financial responsibilities of married life. Students in our sample continually remarked that, if they had not engaged in some preemptive financial planning prior to marriage, then their present financial strains might become psychologically overwhelming. Susan explained:

I think a budget is really important. That's something we've really been working though these first couple months of marriage. We, well, [my husband] especially, read up a lot on finances just so that, you know, we'd start off on a good foot and so we wouldn't make silly decisions and things. And we saved a lot for this year, since we aren't working, just to get us through until we get jobs. But yeah, it's interesting because we have this amount of money, we're not adding to it all year, and it's got to last us all year. So, definitely a budget is huge, because we don't want to be near the end and be in trouble and be like, "Ah, we don't have enough money for rent!" or whatever, so yeah, we've definitely utilized budgeting.

Moreover, participants explained that, before marriage, when they spent time discussing issues related to relationship-reflection, these talks often revealed each individual's personal values. In this light, participants emphasized the important role that finances would play later in their married life. A couple's values often are revealed by discussions surrounding money, since it is a limited commodity in most households. Participants explained that conflicts with their respective spouse concerning finances easily could arise in their marriages. Ruth illustrated this, emphasizing the preemptive steps that she could take in

order to lesson financial tensions, such as saving beforehand: “I would say definitely make sure your finances are in a good place, because to start off together, that would be such a huge stress to, like, not have enough money right off the bat...because those things just add stress, unneeded stress, to the relationship.”

Additionally, married students in our sample detailed the important role that discussing key financial issues had played in their marriage. Describing some of the stress that money-related issues often cause for newly married couples, participants further emphasized the importance of investigating their respective husband’s financial background, as well as their outlook on spending and saving. Sarah illustrated: “You have to see how you are spending-wise with money. Definitely pay attention to that. Are you more of a spender all of the time, and are they more of a penny-pincher? That’s going to cause problems. Because you have to compromise with money all the time.” Participants further contrasted these financial considerations that accompanied married life with those of pre-marriage, emphasizing the transition they experienced in relation to their outlook regarding finances. Specifically, wives described their realization that finances would change with marriage and the consequent need to discuss these issues beforehand with their fiancés:

When I was single, I didn’t even think about it, because I don’t buy stuff or need a lot when I’m just on campus, and you don’t really need to buy stuff because you eat [in the cafeteria]. So, even before we got married, when we were talking about getting married, I had to sit down and I had to ask him, “Ok, how much money do you have in your account? How much do I have in my account?” and we had to go through all of this.

Finally, participants shared some of the budget realizations they encountered which required addressing pre-existing financial expectations that either they or their husband held before getting married. Specifically, females described fighting against tendencies of expecting a comfortable financial situation, or a lifestyle similar to what their parents worked for years to enjoy. Furthermore, women in our sample seemingly understood the need to alter such false-expectations and to embrace their present financial situations. Tammy explained her

need to adjust spending patterns acquired while single, when financial burdens were significantly lighter:

At times, I think I'm like not able to buy anything, and it's really not [like that]. But I do cut out coupons on the weekend, and it's, like, what I am doing, it's so weird. And it's hard, because my family, like, my parents don't need to watch what they spend and so it's, like, they go to the store and "Oh, you like that? We'll just buy it." But I had to, like, look at the price per pound and all this stuff, so it takes forever to go shopping! (And I'm, like, I don't have this kind of time!)

Finally, participants explained that their overall outlook regarding finances was optimistic because they seemingly understood this phase of life as a married student was temporary. That is, females in our sample viewed college as preparation for a job, which they could not yet attain without completing this phase of education. Understanding the transitory nature of their present situations, participants resultantly reasoned that their present limited budgets hopefully were not indicators of future financial prospects. Amy illustrated:

You have to be willing just to, like, not, like, my parents got married later, so they had an amazing house [right away]. Like, you just have to know that it's going to be meager for a while, but, like, just to be willing to enjoy the nothingness that you have which is good, and be willing to budget...and [learn to] be good at that.

Necessary Adjustments for Successful School Marriages

Participants in our study first identified numerous areas of their lives which routinely are impacted by finances. In particular, the females highlighted specific activities in which they are unable to participate or which they enjoy less often because of cost. Finances seemed to affect married students' lives significantly in multiple areas, ranging from grocery shopping, to eating out, to watching movies in theaters, to buying new clothes. Married students seemed highly aware of the stifling effects of limited finances, as Jane illustrated:

I never shop anymore. Clothes, shoes, never, oh my gosh. I use to go out and always get my hair done, all kinds of stuff like that. Just those little self-pampering things like going to get manicures, pedicures all the time. Now, I don't do it. And I mean that's a huge difference...and that's stuff, like, my [single] friends will go do that and I'm just like "I want to go, but I can't."

Participants reported understanding that a married lifestyle required changes in spending patterns. Contrasting their former budgeting practices with necessary, limiting decisions they now made as married students, females seemingly were able to separate the two lifestyles and recognize their need to shift mentalities. Pam explained this perspective held by most participants and their overall willingness to "go without" when necessary:

Every little thing counts. So, whereas before it was just kind of like get the bills paid and do whatever else you want to do with the money, now every little bit has to go to something. So, I think probably compared to my friends, from what I can see, they're way more carefree than what we are. And we're just like, "Sorry, can't do that. Don't have the money."

Further, participants explained that with their marriage came a change in financial perspective. What once seemed highly important females explained, may be intentionally overlooked now because of the potential financial strain such indulgence might cause. Erin, like most participants, emphasized her increased willingness as a married student to make lifestyle sacrifices:

I'm definitely, it's not like I overspent what I, like made [when single], but I had the freedom to just go shopping and go, like, buy clothes or buy shoes. And, like, now I don't have the freedom to do that, because you realize what's more important, and you realize you can go without certain things...but it's hard because with my single friends, they aren't as careful. So I'll find them asking us to go out to eat a lot or go get ice cream a lot or go do something that costs money...and a lot of the times we have to reject social opportunities like that because we want to be careful with our money.

While participants described their efforts toward frugality, they also shared cheaper alternatives to the activities which they felt must temporarily be forgone. These free or less expensive alternatives demonstrated both the creativity and flexibility of the married students in our sample. Females related going on picnics, utilizing free library resources, playing board games, and many other “cheap” activities that focused more on spending quality time than on the rush or exhilaration experienced from expensive excursions. Alisha illustrated this perspective that was similarly related by most participants:

Going out to eat was a big thing; we used to do that three to four times a week. We probably eat out once or twice a month now. And I like to cook, so it’s working out good. We used to go to a lot of movies, and now maybe we’ll rent them, so just stuff like that. Also, gifts, and we haven’t bought any clothes yet. I’m sure we will, but that’s something that I’m happy. I’m content. My mom gives me a hand-me-down, so I’m content with that. Just little things, but we’re also finding things that we like to do, like tennis and bike rides. I guess it’s just changing your way of life so that it doesn’t revolve around money and things that cost money.

Overall, participants seemingly took in stride the necessary adjustments that accompanied married lifestyles, especially in the realm of finances. Specifically, participants seemed willing to “go without” when necessary, reflecting their relatively strong commitments to budgeting. Pam aptly summarizes the sentiments of most participants in regards to the limiting aspects of finances as a married student:

Sometimes you might have a hundred dollars left in the bank for the rest of the month, but you can’t go spend it on whatever you want, clothes or a treat for yourself because you never what’s coming around the corner, you know. It’s kind of like you have to, “Save it for a rainy day.”

Finally, participants shared a necessary shift in their own mindset regarding their present view of finances. Previously, when single, females in our study described having an individualized outlook towards their money. This stands in sharp contrast, however, to the partnership-finance-model our participants adopted following marriage. As Robin stated: “I am more careful with my money now than when I was single

because I know that it's not just my money anymore." Furthermore, participants related considering their spouse's needs when making purchases. That is, married students seemingly understood the value of reasonable selflessness in a healthy marriage, which seemingly related to their financial realm. Christina explained:

I think when I was single, like, I was a good saver, but I didn't have to like think about spending as much. Like, if I wanted something then I would just get it. But now, it's totally different. Like, I can't just go shopping with girlfriends and, like, get whatever I want. You know, I have to talk about it and make it a mutual decision. [Thinking] is it something I need? You have to communicate a lot more about things like that.

Participants also explained that, as their mindsets shifted toward a collective financial outlook, their need to communicate also escalated. Females explained that, especially when credit and bank accounts were shared, being in regular communication regarding finances became a crucial element contributing to their overall marriage happiness and success. Hannah aptly illustrated this sentiment, as also expressed by most of our participants, when describing the importance of communicating and finances.

Um, I think, when there's two of you spending money that's in one bank account it can more easily turn into, "Hey, where'd all the money go?" you know. Um, because you spend it at different times, you don't realize how much you're spending or how much the other person's spending. So that can be a difficulty so you definitely have to communicate and be, keep your eye on what you're spending things on and, um, cut out things that aren't necessities...I usually always ask [my husband] before I buy anything. So, um, that's definitely, you know, a change. When you're single you just buy whatever you want, but now it's "Hey, I was thinking about buying this can we afford this right now?"

Finally, participants explained their need to consider the unknown when planning a budget. In addition to coordinating with their spouse regarding pressing financial needs, participants also described their changed outlooks regarding the importance of not spending money unnecessarily. Females in our study attributed this shift in thinking to

their adoption of more futuristic, long-term outlooks that accompanied marriage. Katrina summarized, emphasizing the marriage-centered outlook our participants seemed to have adopted:

In order to have enough money to pay our bills and buy stuff that we want and do stuff that is fun, we have to budget. And because [my husband], he is a spontaneous kind of person, he would be more that way if I didn't keep track of it. It's incredibly important, especially with emergencies that come up, you not only have your emergencies that come up, but now you have to think of this other person and stuff that might happen to them, or if he gets sick or something we have [university] insurance and that's it, so it's kind of very limited, which means budgeting, it's huge.

Discussion

Current trends regarding the steep costs of higher education directly impact the financial strain experienced by undergraduate married students, as particularly noted by the college females from our sample. Wang (2003) detailed student debt to have increased 74% since 1997, suggesting the females we interviewed likely face significantly greater financial burdens than the married students of previous generations. Friend and Collins (2007) further reported that, on average, college students today graduate \$7,000 more in debt than they would have 10 years ago. Overall, the challenges related to finances shared by our participants seem only to be increasing. As the average debt loads with which students graduate increases, the financial strain students experience also likely will intensify. This trend toward escalating educational costs enhances the importance that undergraduate students become aware of how finances likely will impact potential student-marriages relative to debt, spending, and budgeting.

Participants in our sample attributed financial stresses they experienced, in part, to the limited income they and their husbands presently are able to make. Because married students in our sample were undergraduates, job options and salary ranges naturally were limited. Manthei and Gilmore (2005) describe the stresses most working students undergo trying to balance academics with their work schedule, as well as students' perceptions that working detracts from their overall

academic performance. Undergraduate students who are married not only face the challenge of balancing work with academics, but they also face additional time demands associated with married life. Because [Fillion \(2006\)](#) found working more than 10 hours a week while a full-time undergraduate student has stifling effects on extracurricular and social activities, married students may find even more substantial, negative results from adopting such schedules. That is, when single students make decisions to take a job while in college, they are not neglecting a marriage partner, as is the case for married students. As [Fillion](#) suggested, students should seek balance when planning work into their schedules, and this admonition seems of particular importance for undergraduate married students.

Throughout the participants' interviews, there seemed to be a social psychological "common enemy" phenomenon at work. Sometimes intimate bonds occur between two opposing individuals or parties through an exposure to traumatic experiences focused around a "common enemy." The focus of individuals in these cases shifts from personal concerns to a collective mindset, where both parties become focused on overcoming the perceived obstacle at hand. Nations often form unanticipated military or economic alliances, for example, when faced with common enemies. These "bonding" type experiences seemingly occurred with participants in our study and their spouses. These women described financial need similar to that of a "threatening foe" in relation to their marriage, and couples seemingly rallied together during these times of financial difficulty in order to meet the challenge of this perceived enemy. The overall results of this phenomenon within the context of marriage appear positive, and seemingly increase the couples' regular discussion of finances, viewing the financial effort as a joint endeavor toward the achieving the victory over college poverty.

We also note the overall positive light with which married undergraduate females portrayed the current state of their respective marriages. In particular, despite the difficult financial situations they faced being married, almost all women affirmed their personal decisions to marry as undergraduate students. This is of particular interest considering [Selvaratnam's \(2007\)](#) findings that most college students not only hope to get married but tentatively plan to wait until sometime after graduation. Additionally, [Lobron \(2008\)](#) indicated that the average

age at which contemporary men and women marry has increased to 25 and 27 for women and men respectively. Because the average young adult today marries several years after finishing college, the married student population remains a significant minority. Better understanding the challenges faced by married students and the specific perceptions they generally hold may prove valuable in assisting this segment of the student population as they face unique challenges—apart from those faced by the typical undergraduate student. Officers in student life divisions of campus universities have vested interest in seeing student marriages succeed. Providing assistance and guidance, as needed, in the domain of finances may help keep student marriages successful. Sharing the findings of the present study (among other important data, of course), in pre-marriage workshops could help get student marriages off to a healthy start.

We did not administer psychological tests or formally survey students' levels of present marriage satisfaction as part of the present qualitative research study. Nonetheless, throughout the interview process, the married students did not share significant concerns about their marriages that overtly signaled either dysfunction or discontentment. In fact, the women generally described their marriage experiences quite positively. That is to say, none of the participants volunteered information during their interviews that suggested undue strain was present in their marriages. Moreover, our present observations during the interviews with these married students did not suggest that these women were living in the midst of unhappy marriages. In short, while participants spoke of financial stress in their respective marriages, they did not portray overall unhappy marriages.

The female students in our sample appeared to possess a level of maturity beyond their chronological years. When compared with their single cohorts, females in our sample seemed amply aware of responsibility-laden life issues, such as finances, that many single students are not yet required or likely ready to comprehend. In particular, these females were able to disclose the realities of life in ways that suggested generally higher levels of maturity. Our findings seem to suggest that females who choose to marry while in college have acquired levels of prudence not possessed by their typical single peers. It is difficult to determine whether females who seriously date and

marry while in college already possess significant levels of maturity, or whether the evident maturity displayed is acquired through the realities that accompany the pragmatics of marriage. Regardless, we suspect that maturity played a significant role to the overall reported marital satisfaction that females in our sample communicated.

Self-discipline was a common thread among each of the themes reported in the present study. Repeatedly, married students affirmed the importance of financial self-control and budgeting, attributing much of their financial success to such practices. Self-discipline may be a trait which relatively mature college students had possessed prior to marriage. However, the practice of self-control also has been the result of life experiences that demonstrate its cultivation. In short, we do not know if self-disciplined people are those who self-select to marry young, or if they learn to be disciplined after marrying due to their increased financial responsibility. Reviewing the interview texts, comparing students' reported pre- and post-marriage spending habits, suggest that most likely females learned more self-discipline, even if they possessed reasonable measures before marriage.

Finally, there is a sense in which participants in our study exercised a process of "trading pleasures." Married females in our sample described significant levels of stress associated with budgeting and applying self-discipline to their lifestyles. Additionally, delayed gratification seemed to be a cogent force driving participants' monetary choices. Students appeared to be willing to trade the immediate potential pleasures of money-spending for the longer-term pleasures of lowered debt after graduation. Further, since the females in our sample generally spoke of having fulfilling marriages, they seemingly were more willing to trade "money pleasure" for perceived "relationship pleasure" with their respective spouses. At least to some extent, all of life consists of trading pleasures, quid pro quo. In the present context, this meant trading short-term financial pleasures for what students in our sample appeared to deem longer-term pleasures in relationship-enhancement with their respective spouses.

Limitations and Future Research

All good research identifies the limitations of a study and reports them (Price & Murnan, 2004). Since all participants in the present study were Caucasian, future researchers should extend the present study with samples that include married students who are minorities. Particularly, a study of Hispanic female married students, a study of African-American female students, and a study of Asian-American female married students would provide interesting comparisons with the findings of the present research study. Additionally, a meta-analysis (Mio, Barker-Hackett, & Tumambing, 2006) among the various minority married student groups and the present Caucasian sample likely would prove very interesting. Various ethnic groups are known to possess some characteristics that are relatively independent of other minority groups (Shiraev & Levy, 2004), and homogeneity of sample often produces the most clear themes in qualitative research studies (Creswell, 2009). Consequently, mixing minorities groups in the context of the present qualitative research studies might not provide as fruitful as would be studying the groups separately then comparing the results of the individual studies among themselves.

Obviously, since the present study focused on married student females, future researchers should replicate this research design, using male married student samples. Comparing the results of those studies with the findings of the present one likely would produce useful insights. Additionally, participants from the present study were sampled from a private, selective, comprehensive, Midwestern university. Future researchers should replicate the present study, exploring the perceptions of married students attending institutions that have different characteristics such as being open enrollment, larger, liberal arts, and located in different parts of the country. Such studies might find potential differences among student bodies that have varying demographic characteristics.

And finally, we believe that future researchers should follow-up the present study using quantitative methods. As previously stated, often qualitative methods are very useful for conducting research where little empirically is known regarding a particular construct (Johnson, Christensen, 2004). Qualitative results can provide highly useful data

for generating meaningful hypotheses that quantitative researchers can test statistically (Sarafino, 2005). Surveys, longitudinal, and correlational designs naturally might follow the findings stated in the present study. That is, the results reported here potentially can provide guides for quantitative researchers to generate heuristic theories that can be tested by reasonable hypotheses.

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