

Determining Whether Marriage Affects Women's Opportunities Later in Life: Peering into Retrospective Accounts of Middle Aged & Elderly Women

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Abstract

The relationship between marriage and women's perspectives of their social and economic mobility is reviewed and analyzed from women's retrospective accounts of past experiences in marriage to understand the impact on outside opportunities. The data was derived from in-depth qualitative interviews, using answers from a sample of middle-aged and elderly women in the Midwest. Women assess their marriages and opportunities through the lenses of other institutions and factors, such as family, education, religion, and economy. Women's perceived level of autonomy, choice availability, historical circumstances, internal perceptions of self-efficacy and self-worth, support from valued other, and sense of belonging greatly influence one's perceptions and attainment of opportunities outside of marriage. The results reveal a relationship between the institution of marriage, women's perspectives of themselves, and their perspectives of their marriages as their understanding of themselves and the societal changes according to the construction of marriage.

Keywords: Marriage, women, opportunities

1. Introduction

Sitting on the floor of a once young teenager's bedroom, I begin sorting through college textbooks that look to be from the 1960's and 1970's. The now-grown adult's mother sat across the room during this impromptu spring cleaning, now stricken with Parkinson's disease in her late seventies. Our conversation changed to the subject of a college education after leafing through her children's textbooks. After noting the stark difference in the subject matter and time difference of two textbooks compared to the others, she revealed that they had once been hers. Waiting until her children had all graduated high school, she had taken college courses, something she had planned to complete before her marriage. Decades earlier, due to her impending wedding, she rescinded her college registration forms. Unbeknownst to her, the same situation would present itself many years later, only at that time, she continued until she completed the courses against her husband's wishes but along with society's progressing expectations of women. While noting the early influence of her husband's views and society's pressures, words of care and support toward him and their marriage always preceded and followed thereafter. Her imparting words of, "You have your whole life to be married, stay in school, and if you have children, make sure you have all boys" were contradictory. Despite her devotion to her family as a wife and mother, the conflicting words of the statement seem to linger, and provoked the need for further information as to whether marriage or other societal factors influence and affect women's opportunities.

This scene depicts the contradiction of society's definition of marriage and gender roles and women's personal feelings of their marriages and desired opportunities. In listening to many elderly women's stories, many of the same

instances occurred in different ways. Despite society's patriarchal pressures during the time period in which some of these women were coming of age in, their awareness of that fact was made clear through that acknowledgement in their stories. However, their satisfaction and general fulfillment with their choices, spouses, and marriages was always emphasized when speaking of those patriarchal pressures and gender roles. Yet, despite their contentment, further advice and reflections from some included another side that seemed to come from a place of unrecognition in themselves and largely from society. Even when feeling fulfillment and opportunity within their marriages, families, and other commitments, there was an underlying pattern of wanting to seek more. The "more" greatly varied due to differences in one's personal definition of opportunity and fulfillment according to one's preferences, availability of options, and worldviews. It was found that, despite temporary or long-standing conflicting views, blame was never placed on their husbands or others in their social circles, but sometimes themselves. It was this that led to an interest in this research, and more specifically in answering the question, does the institution of marriage affect women's opportunities?, and to a lesser extent, what other outside factors have influenced women's recounts of their marriages and views of personal opportunities? In a time where marriage rates are declining (partly due to the economy, and advancements in education and careers for women)¹³ it has been found that remaining single has increasingly become women's choice, where single women now outnumber the percent of married women in the U.S.¹⁵ Presently, marriage has seemed to have been replaced by cohabitation, remaining single, or being a part of another type of living arrangement¹⁸⁷. The above experience, along with the increasing amount of speculation and information on the link between women, marriage, health, and available opportunity was another part of the draw toward this research. During the research process, middle-aged and elderly women's personal retrospective accounts on marriage, opportunity, and lifespan were reviewed. Through this, other additional questions and unexplored areas of the influence of society and its pressures developed, which could potentially add to current research and possibly aid in the production of future studies not previously done. The research explored further into the institution of marriage, the social relationships within, and its possible effects on women's opportunities along the lifespan. It also largely illuminated how society, gender roles, and social issues of specific time periods influenced women's lives and the institution of marriage. Additionally, it was how meaning was made of their lives and marriages in conjunction with the above societal influences.

2. Literature Review

Opportunity is defined as a set of circumstances that makes it possible to partake in something¹⁴. For many centuries, the majority of men and women have participated in the institution of marriage. The definition and aspects of marriage have changed over time, and will also continue to do so. Many studies have proven marriage's benefit to both men and women, as it promotes psychological and physical well-being along the lifespan¹¹. However, despite the acknowledgement of its benefits overall, studies show that men benefit more than women in terms of overall health, in reviewing legally recognized heterosexual marriages¹¹⁰. Men are also much more likely to report marital happiness than women, with white men reporting the highest level, and black women reporting the lowest⁸. Married women are more likely to be under greater amounts of stress due to the differences in gender roles. The majority of women now being more heavily involved in other areas outside of the home and children, stress lies in the pursuit of a balancing act among it all. While men are presently now more involved with their children and other home duties, studies show that women tend to take on more of those duties, despite the changes in gender expectations compared to the mid-1900's¹. As marriage possesses positive and negative attributes, it is proposed that it affects men and women differently on many things, including life opportunities. The definition and scope of opportunity can mean something different to each individual, in which marriage's effect on opportunity influences married men and women differently, as previous research shows³. The results indicate that the psychological well-being of women in their middle years, perceptions of marital power and happiness, marital quality, attainments and satisfaction of life aspirations, and how meaning is made of marriage all contribute to marital happiness and level of opportunity later in life³.

Over many centuries, the majority of men and women have participated in the institution of marriage. The median age for a first marriage declined for the first half of the 20th century in the U.S., but has been steadily rising since that point in time¹⁷. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2010 the median age for a first marriage was 29 for men and 27 for women, opposed to 25 for men and 22 for women in the early 1980's, making it an all-time record high¹⁷. This is due largely to the fact that marriage currently competes with other options such as pursuing a college education, remaining single, cohabitating, establishing oneself later in the workforce, and traveling, among many others. These other competing life activities hold significance in that women, and as well as men, now have these opportunities

available to them as well, which essentially changes their view of options and opportunity. Regressing back in time, opportunities outside of the home available to presently-elderly women were limited or scarce, making women more likely to marry, and marry at a younger age ¹⁷.

2.1 Aspirations, Attainments, And Age

In a study by Plagnol and Easterlin ²⁰, aspirations and attainments of those aspirations were found to be important in shaping well-being and fulfillment later in life for both men and women. Through qualitative surveys, women were found to be more likely than men to fulfill their materialistic needs and family life aspirations early in their adult lives. It was also found that once one ages past their late forties, these differences reverse. Men then are more likely to feel they have fulfilled their aspirations and materialistic needs, and rate themselves as generally happier.

In my research that was conducted, it was found to support and extend the above statements. All of the interviewees noted a feeling of finality of their needs for a house, substantial career, children, automobile, home furnishings, and other materialistic things around their mid-thirties. Once one aged to the middle age mark, they expressed a decrease in their overall happiness, yet showing gratitude for their spouse, career, family life, and other involvements. Their children leaving home to fulfill their own needs and aspirations was often a key moment stated by a majority, as while they wanted their children to live their lives, they also felt a great sense of loss, contributing to “empty-nesting” and a sense of unhappiness.

A study conducted by Orden and Bradburn¹⁶ during the women’s movement found that a woman’s freedom to have choices of other life styles was a predictor of marital happiness. However, it was found that if women participated in the labor force out of necessity, rather than by choice, both men and women reported lower levels of marital happiness. This key component holds after controlling for levels of education, life stages, and part time or full time employment. It was also found that a woman’s choice of having a career or different life style strained the marriage only if there were children of preschool age in the home. In choosing a career, it was reported that that was associated with a greater balance between marital satisfaction and tension for both men and women¹⁶.

Black and Hill ³ found that educated married women in their fifties found general satisfaction with their lives, after accounting for their age, education level, employment status, socioeconomic status, life stressors, and attitude. Black and Hill ³ also found that some transitions in general pose as a "trigger event" in marriages with other significant problems, and may cause an upset in one's satisfaction of marriage. Overall, they found that one's coping ability may be predictive of who will better deal with these adjustments and transitions, given they already possess an education along with other acquired opportunities presented to them³.

Through my research, it was often found that the more education one has, the more exploration and subsequent fulfillment women felt in their choices and life outcomes. However, in looking at those who did not attend and/or attain a college education, it was found that their happiness lied in other accomplishments through their career, family, or outside associations and involvements. Some had also experienced great loss and tragedy, which many found to be growth-provoking and an expansion of their coping abilities, resiliency, and worldview. It was also found that those with a greater amount of education had greater tenacity in dealing with life adjustments and transitions in general.

Research has proven that, compared to their single cohorts, married men and women benefit greatly from the union of marriage, as it brings certain protective effects²¹. Marriage also affects men and women differently on a number of things. Two of those would include the feelings of loss of identity and abundance of opportunities ⁵. While both men and women are indeed affected by both, women report higher levels once one surpasses the middle-age years. This is largely due to “empty nest syndrome”, where women with children once had a larger spectrum of involvements through their younger children, but is no longer the case once they leave the home, where a sense of loss is often felt ⁴.

Throughout the interviews, both positive and negative attributes of marriage was expressed by all. They also expressed a great loss of identity once they aged to their middle years, as it was the time when their children left the household, leaving gaps of time that were once busily filled. As many found opportunity through involvement with their children and their activities before, it then seemed to compound the sense of loss after, as the lack of involvement led them to question their physical and existential existence. Those with more education still felt a sense of loss and that of connection, yet pursued further involvement in other activities and opportunities through their career or other interests, both professionally and personally.

2.2 Power And Influence

In a study by LeBaron, Miller, and Yorgason¹², an equal distribution of marital power was found to be greatly important in the feeling of equality and mutual respect in a marriage. From reviewing interviews, "wives' perceptions of marital power processes and power outcomes in heterosexual midlife marriages, relation to concurrent" and eventual marital happiness over a period of fifteen years was analyzed. The results showed that marital power processes and power outcomes significantly influenced women's current marital happiness. Current marital happiness also influenced later marital happiness fifteen years later, showing a correlation between the two.

Many of the statements from the interviewees have shown to support the above assertions. The more egalitarian their marriages were, and the more equality-based power women held in their marriages, the higher their reported levels of happiness. However, it was not always the case that one's current (or past) marital happiness influenced later happiness, in looking at it from a retrospective point. Many expressed the unpredictable aspects of life, in which one can't fully rely on their current or past state of marital satisfaction as a complete predictor in the future. A 58 year-old interviewee stated, "Just as life and society changes with time, so do people and their personalities". Certain life circumstances and unexpected occurrences affect people differently, dependent on personality and other factors, which also contributes to marital and life satisfaction, which may or may not affect pursuit of outside opportunity.

Bulanda⁵ also found that women reported lower marital happiness, marital power, and marital interaction than men. Through using data from the 1992 Health and Retirement Study, it analyzed potential gender differences in feelings of quality and power in long-term marriages, and how life events and transitions influenced the dynamics of marriage. The national survey looked at over 12,000 respondents between the ages of 51 and 61, along with their spouses or partners. Even after controlling for numerous life events and transitions, the differences still held. Results showed that gender differences in the marital relationship are shown through employment, caregiving, health factors, and child-rearing in association with marital quality and power⁵.

Through my research and in other interactions with women, it was often noted that, despite their expression of satisfaction in their marriages and home life, their husbands always seemed to feel more fully satisfied with what they described as "the simple things of life". They felt their husbands felt greater satisfaction over the years with things such as the purchase of a home, a "dream" automobile, boat or other outdoor "toy", sports equipment, or other items. On the other hand, they felt they received greater satisfaction from relationships and involvements with their children, grandchildren, careers, clubs, co-workers, neighbors, and other interests. It was also noted that many of their husbands took pride in accomplishments with home projects, as it often involved the completion of a job or built item. Women, however, felt much less satisfaction with the same, as many of their household duties involved a job that would never technically be completed, such as laundry, dishes, and housecleaning. Other social interaction besides marital interaction was key, since if there were lower levels of marital interaction, women often looked to their close social circles as a supplement for interaction. Their husbands were also socially involved, but at lower levels compared to their wives. Large gender differences were also reported in terms of employment, caregiving, and child-rearing. The majority of the interviewees held jobs that earned significantly lower salaries compared to that of their husbands. Elderly women noted their heavy involvement in caring for their children, where their husbands worked to bring home a paycheck. While some elderly women held a job once their children grew older, they still felt that they took more care of their children once the job ended for the day. Women aged in to their middle years also expressed great involvement in the caretaking of their children, and some had more of their husbands' involvement compared to that of previous generations. As the differences among the generations were noted above, overall, women felt that their husbands were more involved in their children's lives in the pre-teen and teenage years, where women's involvement was primarily in the infant and youth years.

2.3 Meaning

In the article "Marriage and the Construction of Reality", it is proposed that marriage exists as a protective layer against anomie for individuals², where it is essentially an institution representing societal norms. In order for meaning to occur, one's world must be validated by something external (marriage in this case) through the creation of a new world separate from previous or present roles². Marriage is deemed as something that creates a new persona for each individual through the eyes of their significant other, as well as the institution of marriage itself². Marriage also often sets the boundaries of the so-called "settling down" which grounds an individual further into society. Berger and Kellner go on to argue that the construction of a reality that is deemed as "settling down" has positive consequences on the individual level as well as that of society, preventing the occurrence of anomie².

The majority of data supports this notion in looking at relationship and marital norms for women according to their

worldview, age, and time period/societal influences they were exposed to. Marriage is still an institution that is greatly embraced and is often looked to as something that “settles” an individual, which also provides boundaries against normlessness, or “the wanderers and uncommitted” as one woman put it. However, as with every point in time, not everyone follows the norms and rules of society. It is often met with social aversion or rejection from others, which either causes one to reject the norms or follow them in looking for social acceptance. A woman in her early sixties felt that, despite her past rejection of the idea of marriage, when the time came, she did not allow it to define her or their boundaries. Comparing her current life to the idea of marriage that was shown to her growing up, she felt she greatly defied those boundaries and standards in choosing a life of an unconventional marriage, a career travel, and other interests and involvements. Another in her mid-sixties expressed that, despite growing up in the 1960’s and 1970’s, a time where freedom and defiance of social constraints defined the decade, she wanted to be a mother and wife in a large family. Noting the fact that she felt the feminist movement was nonsense in the 1960’s, and that it didn’t align with her personality or future goals, it indicated the relationship of one’s life goals and social influences at the time.

In a study done by Stutzer and Frey, happiness and how individuals made sense of their world before the marriage took place was found to be of great importance²². The study looked at the associations between marriage and subjective well-being in relationships throughout seventeen years. The results showed that happier individuals are more likely to marry, and that there are large differences in marriage benefits between two individuals in heterosexual marriages²². Potential division of labor imagined before marriage, as well as the actuality afterward greatly contributed to spouses’ well-being, especially that of women with young children. One generally marries another individual of similar education level, where large differences in education level hold a negative effect on later life satisfaction²². Therefore, the grounds for marital relationships are founded on meaning attained through happiness, worldview, and the seeking of equality in aspects of daily life.

Statements heard through my own research have both affirmed and rejected the above data. While the women expressed feeling greater happiness before the marriage, it was more so due to having less responsibility than marriage or their spouse. On the contrary, they noted many times they felt happiness through their own involvements as well as their children’s involvements. However, it was felt with a greater sense of responsibility while married with children, as they felt that the happiness of their families was completely reliant on them. A woman in her late fifties stated that, despite her happiness for many years while dating her future husband, she did not feel the need to get married. Her decision to go through with it was based off of her own personal feelings about her husband and his later well-being in looking at it from a financial standpoint. As individuals tend to marry others with similar education levels, some circumstances rendered different outcomes that impacted marital relationships. Two women aged in their seventies who chose to pursue a college education after they raised their children spoke of lingering distance between them and their husbands during and after their pursuit of post-secondary education.

In a study done by Broman⁴, the capacity that race plays in marital well-being was studied primarily in heterosexual African American marriages. The study looked at 2,059 married individuals, where it was found that African American marriages hold lower levels of well-being. Further results concluded that whites are significantly more likely than blacks to describe their marriages as harmonious, and are more likely to be satisfied and fulfilled⁴. These patterns are proposed to be caused by differences in structural factors, such as financial stability and spousal emotional support⁴. A study by Bulanda and Brown revealed that Mexican Americans and whites have similar levels of marital satisfaction, where blacks have much lower levels⁶. Due to blacks primarily living in low-income, single parent households, financial instability and lack of spousal and social support is more widespread and contributes to marital dissolution and dissatisfaction⁶, and opportunity. While the study participants mainly were of middle class, it was noted that the findings could pose a large difference in terms of the relationship between class and marital well-being. It is proposed that if one lies in the lower middle class or lower/working class, the lower marital and life satisfaction one experiences due to financial instability, less social support, less available resources⁹, and therefore less available opportunity.

Due to this study primarily focusing on white, middle-aged, elderly, and mostly middle-class women in the Midwest, the above factors could not be studied in the sample. This limitation was largely due to the general area demographic, and lack of possibility of seeking out sample variability. However, this limitation could be grounds for future study.

In reviewing studies done by Wilcox and Nock²³, it was found that women tend to hold more value in egalitarian marriages, which increases feelings of marital quality. Commitment to the ideals of the institution of marriage as well as the contentment with the division of household tasks were shown as more critical in terms of how women define happiness in their relationships²³. A study of 240 women ages 50 to 82 found that approximately 85% of older women consider their marriages to be equal and fair¹⁹. Although older women were less concerned with inequalities than younger women, equity still seemed of great concern throughout their marriages, dependent on others’ views¹⁹.

Through the interviews, women who were of middle-age and in their early sixties expressed that their marriages

were more equality based compared to their parents' marriages. Due to that and involvement in household and community activities, they expressed higher levels of satisfaction and marital happiness. Each also reiterated the importance of commitment promised to each other and the ideals of marriage according to their own standards, as well as that of society through their religion or other institution that was important to them. However, while many wished for household tasks to be more an equally divided, it did not seem to hinder overall happiness. They noted that detail, but chose to focus on the overall status of the marriage thus far. Compared to their younger counterparts, those who were elderly often justified it with, "It was just the way things were", showing the influence of society and its definition of a wife and mother.

Opportunity is defined as a set of circumstances that makes it possible to partake in something¹⁴, where each individual has their definition of, and circumstance for, opportunity. As many individuals' lives go in the direction of marriage, it greatly affects one's level of satisfaction and opportunity. The previous research done by Plagnol and Easterlin²⁰, Black and Hill³, LeBaron and Miller and Yorgason¹², and Bulanda⁵ found that marriage affects married women differently. The results indicated that the psychological well-being of women in their middle years, women's perceptions of marital power and happiness, marital quality, and attainments and satisfaction of life aspirations all contribute to women's marital happiness and level of opportunity later in life. Through comparing and contrasting the literature, it was found that marriage does not lead to feelings of loss of opportunity in middle-aged and elderly women compared to men.

3. Methodology

In order to attain the data needed for this study, personal one-on-one interviews were conducted. A sample of twenty-five heterosexual women aged in their fifties, sixties, and seventies were studied, with the average age falling at 63. The majority resided in rural and urban Wisconsin and Minnesota, while some resided in suburban California and Colorado. The majority were lower to middle class, with two in the upper middle class, which is a limitation of this study. With little access to diversity in race, all interviewees were white, which is another limitation of this study, but could be grounds for further study. Most were married at the time of the interviews, while one was previously divorced, and three were widowed. The interviewees also had between zero and eight children in total. In-depth interviews were the chosen method of information gathering, as the needed data would be best derived from conversations and accounts of one's experiences along the lifespan. Data from previous semi-formal interviews were also used in the process in order to add to the research. The snowballing method was used to first gain access to persons interested in participating in an interview. In first finding initial interviewees and executing interviews, additional contact information to others possibly interested in participating in an interview were found. From there, those that were interested were contacted by either e-mail or telephone, and then scheduled for an interview during a time and in a setting of their choice. The majority of the interviews were carried out in their homes, as well as local coffee shops and other public places. This led to further analysis of the interviewees and their lives in being surrounded in their place of daily living. Body language and other expressions were also examined to gain more of an understanding of the individual, as well as underlying traits. General superficial open-ended questions were first posed to start the interview, which then led to deeper open-ended questions based on the given information. There was no time limit imposed, as the interviews continued along according to the pace and information given by the interviewees. The interviews generally lasted from one and half to five hours, dependent on the information they wished to share. The in-depth interviews revealed background information, changes of personality and identity throughout their lifespan, experiences, view on the institution of marriage, view on their own marriage, others involved, opportunities, and other additional information. From there, after transcribing the interviews and reviewing field notes and observations, themes and a theory were drawn out using inductive reasoning. After reviewing the themes, they were further analyzed to see whether they supported or negated the previous literature.

4. Data

Through information derived from in-depth interviews, multiple themes were found, in which some were in correlation to the previous literature, while others were not. Overall, it was found that women assess their marriages and views of their opportunities through the lenses of institutions and other factors, including the great influences of society on marriage, gender, and opportunities in relation to gender roles. Women's experiences and perceptions of past

occurrences were also shaped by their interpretations of their individual lives and marriages, as well as the re-framing of circumstances and experiences along their lifespan.

4.1 Societal Influences

The ever-changing ways of society has always greatly impacted human behavior, including that of gender roles and societal norms on women and marriage. The majority of the women interviewed often mentioned the influence or effect of a social institution, societal norm, or societal value on their definition and scope of marriage, opportunity, and of themselves as women. It was shown in the many ways they indicated “the times” in saying, “It’s just the way things were” or “It was just the way it was at the time”, or, “Women didn’t do that back then”. When talking of the possibility of opposing those norms, many said that it was simply what one did at the time, while few went against them. Women often assessed their marriages and views of opportunities through the lenses of institutions and other social factors including gender roles, patriarchy, marriage, economy, education, religion, family, and gender norms and values. Many further noted the influence of the strictly-imposed gender roles and great gender division lines that they became accustomed to during the 1940’s through the 1960’s. A seventy-three year old woman had shown interest in a college education, but also having a family, where, “...at that time you had to choose, it was either or. And the choice was almost already made for you, because, if you did choose something other than marriage and children, you were an outsider...”. Another woman in her mid-fifties spoke of having different interests than the norms at the time in saying, “I never felt a yearning for that life. I had the mindset that went along the lines of... a career and no children, because of the world we could be leaving them. And I simply just wanted to travel and expand my career interests. If I had children, they or other things would have to suffer because of that, and I just didn’t want that”. Despite their acknowledgement of all of the above, their overall satisfaction with their choices in their marriages, spouses, opportunities, and otherwise was always made clear. Additionally, while talking of the good and not so good times and choices in their lives, the upside of the situation, lessons learned, and other opportunities that stemmed from it was mentioned.

4.1 Family

All of the women interviewed held different definitions of opportunities, and for some, it included the production and care of family. Some noted that, while there were certain goals or outside opportunities they wanted to pursue, one of those goals involved the creation and establishment of a family unit and home. The majority of the women in their seventies noted a general lack of choice of having more in their lives than marriage and children. As a seventy-three year old woman stated, “Even if you wanted to do something other than, you know, get married and have kids, it wasn’t really how it was back then. You maybe heard of some choosing something else, but they were sort of...out there”. However, the majority of the women stated that they knew that wanted to get married and have children, which became one of their goals or opportunities they happily pursued. There was also a variety in how one perceived family, shown in one’s socioeconomic status, the era one grew up in, and social expectations. This was mostly noted in the interviews with women in their sixties and seventies, and who were of lower socioeconomic status. However, that was not always the case. An upper middle class woman in her mid-sixties stated, “All I ever wanted to do was to repeat the life of my parents. I went to college because I was expected to, sort of like a finishing school. I didn’t look at it as something to further pursue for a career. I just wanted a large family to take care of”. Those of lower socioeconomic status also saw the creation of a family as one of their few opportunities, and therefore took great pride in the act. In terms of socioeconomic status, many of the women married a spouse that was a step “down” from them on the class ladder, sometimes narrowing available opportunities. However, one stated that her marriage to her husband gave her additional resources and connections that she had not previously had. In her late sixties, she shared that without her husband’s connections, she would not have landed a job she applied for after her children were grown. She later stated, “Being out of the work force for about twenty years, I don’t think I would’ve been able to get a job otherwise”.

4.2 Education

For all of the interviewees, education was held in great importance and seen as a great opportunity, especially a higher education. While there were some that did seek a college education, there were also some that chose not to, or simply did not have that opportunity available to them due to lack of access or means. Those that were raised in lower socioeconomic status households were much less likely to pursue a college education, calling it a dream rather than a possibility. A woman aged in her fifties stated, that while she wished to attend college, “At my high school, not very

many were going to go to college, and I had no one pushing me to go. Getting married and having a family was talked about more than going to college, and that's what I did." Those that were raised in higher socio-economic status households were much more likely to pursue a college education, as it was viewed as unquestionable rather than a choice. In speaking with a woman in her late sixties, it was reiterated that, "For my mother, as well as myself, college was looked at mainly as a finishing school, with no regards really for a career or anything like that. We had other involvements that we felt were important." With those in which higher education was out of reach, other opportunities were sought after, mainly involving family and community projects. For those who viewed a college education as unquestionable, other educational and non-educational opportunities were often found and pursued through their connections. There was also some conflict between one's previous social class and their socialization into modernity, shown in interviews with two women aged in their seventies. As a college education was on the forefront of their minds at the start of the civil rights movement and women's movement in the 1960's, it was put aside due to their impending marriages at the ages of eighteen and twenty. As a husband and family was also an opportunity they wanted to pursue, they chose to delay college and pursue marriage. After raising their family, and especially seeing their daughters pursue higher education, it was then that they chose to pursue one for themselves. This clearly indicates society's influence on one's very definition of opportunity itself, but was also largely due to the influence of previous social class, present socio-economic status, and the social movements at the time. However, despite socialization and divided gender roles, others chose to seek out a college education purposely to reject those ideas and live up to their own standards and previous goals. A woman in her late fifties shared that, "Even though I grew up on a farm with the 'norms' shown to me of being a wife and mom, I just wanted to focus on going to college and eventually working in economics, because it's what I just wanted to do. I thought about having kids at one time, but what I have now were my interests".

4.4 Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status was a large factor that shaped one's definition and scope of opportunity. While each had their own definition of opportunity, it was greatly contingent on one's initial socioeconomic status, and then that of their marriage. Many of the interviewees noted that obviously, the more poor one is, the less one has in terms of materialistic goods as well as possibilities in choices, and vice versa. Wealth, income, and connections also greatly influence one's scope and options for opportunities, where some require more from income and wealth, while some simply do not. However, it was not always perceived that, with less income and wealth came less opportunity, and with more income and wealth came more opportunity. Women generally viewed their opportunity based off of what they were exposed to and given while growing up, as well as the social class they married into, which was often similar to what they originally had. A seventy-eight year old woman stated, "I was enrolled at Stout University to become a teacher. But I got engaged not long after high school, and he didn't think much about me going to college, so I dropped out. I didn't really have any money of my own anyway, and that's just what people did at the time". However, despite growing up in the lower class, a seventy-five year old woman found importance in creating connections in her community that allowed her to own her own piano studio. She stated, "I thought it was going to be slim chances, but I at least wanted to try. I didn't finish college, but I grew up playing in the church, and I also had some education and people that knew me to back me up". However, in the cases where lack of funds was the underlying reason to blocked goals or opportunities, they actually saw it as one for their children and family instead. This was seen across all socioeconomic statuses among the interviewees, but more so in the lower class. In these cases, the interviewees gave their opportunity away to their children, wanting to give them more to improve their life outcomes.

5. Conclusion

The institution of marriage has long been a part of our history, and has continued to be widely embraced throughout society. In the traditional sense, marriage often entails certain contingencies and unspoken guidelines involving gender and gender roles, which is proposed to have a differing effect on opportunity. However, this suggests that that is incorrect, where marriage has been a positive addition to, and/or expansion of opportunity. Despite the acknowledgement of society's patriarchy and rigid gender expectations, women's overall satisfaction with their marriages, spouses, children, and life choices was always made clear. While this study provides evidence from valuable personal retrospective accounts, additional information could be gathered by studying women's accounts of their lives over time in order to see changes along the lifespan, as they revised their expectations. It was the original contradiction that led to research into looking for answers to the question, "Does marriage affect women's

opportunities?” and “What other outside factors have influenced women’s recounts of their marriages and views of personal opportunities?”

Previous research has been supplementary in providing past information, yet the research that was conducted has brought forth new information in providing personal retrospective accounts. Previous research found that one’s aspirations and attainment of those aspirations is crucial in shaping one’s overall well-being and fulfillment later in life²⁰. Further research may include comparing and contrasting the above in heterosexual and same-sex marriages. While previous research also found that the more equality and power women held in their marriages, the higher their rates of happiness⁵, future research may explore how levels of happiness may or may not be different in same-sex marriages. Additional research found that large differences in education levels between spouses led to less marital satisfaction and lower attainment of women’s aspirations⁵. Further research may include looking at the relationship between differences in educational aspirations and achievements between spouses and happiness, which could be explored with retrospective research such as this. While previous research has brought forth initial conclusions, this research looked at women’s retrospective accounts of their marriages and life experiences, and provided new information not previously done in past research.

The previous research and this present research involved the influence of socioeconomic status, education, and social expectations on women, marriage, and opportunity. As the intersections of the above has been discussed in great detail, the relevance of this research on today’s generation, the millennials, could also be grounds for further study. In generalizing, the majority of both men and women now pursue a college education, family, career, and other additional opportunities. Further research could include repeating the same study on women of today’s millennials thirty years or more into the future to explore whether marriage would have an effect on women’s opportunities. In a time where women have more of the above opportunities available, it would be interesting to see if there was an association in the future looking at it from a retrospective point of view. Not knowing the changes society will go through in the future, and what that means for women and their opportunities, other societal factors may come into play that could also add to the research.

In the research process, middle-aged and elderly women’s retrospective accounts of their marriages, life experiences, and opportunities were reviewed. Overall, it was found that society’s previous and present definitions of marriage and gender roles hold great influence. However, in looking at the individual level, the research found that one’s perception of themselves, their overall satisfaction, and their marital happiness is greatly shaped by the re-framing of previous experiences. While women felt one way about certain occurrences and experiences of their marriages at that given time, those feelings were then re-framed as time went on into new awareness, thoughts, and perceptions. One’s definition of themselves as a single entity is often viewed much differently after the conjunction that occurs in marriage. Therefore, women’s views about themselves and their marriages change in relation to their experiences held at a particular point in time that have been re-framed, and are then continually being re-framed over time. This shows that, while findings have been noted in the above section, the conclusions from those findings may be ever-changing, which in itself, could be grounds for further study.

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