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## And they lived happily ever after : the effects of cultural myths and romantic idealizations on committed relationships

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Jordana Lauren Metz  
And They Lived Happily  
Ever After: The Effects of  
Cultural Myths and Romantic  
Idealizations on Committed  
Relationships

## ABSTRACT

This study explored the impact of idealized relationships, present in our media and culture, on committed relationships. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that relationships are impacted by real and idealized relationship discrepancies. In addition, this research provided an initial assessment of the coping mechanisms utilized by partners as problem solving responses to the discrepancies.

Twelve participants, self-identified as in a committed relationship with a partner and living together for over one year, participated in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with questions focusing on how the participants' relationships fit and do not fit into idealized notions of relationships, how their partnership is affected by this relationship discrepancy and the ways that they cope and respond to these effects.

Findings indicated that many participants experienced feelings of discomfort, questioning and doubt in their relationship due to the prevalence of idealized relationships. All of the interviewees identified several coping mechanisms which they found effective in response to these feelings. The most common coping strategy was communication, namely with one's partner but also with friends and family. Among other responses, participants identified taking proactive steps to renew intimacy in their own relationship and demystify romantic ideals put forth in the media.

AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER:  
THE EFFECTS OF CULTURAL MYTHS AND ROMANTIC  
IDEALIZATIONS ON COMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2007

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The divorce rate in the United States has reached epidemic proportions. For first marriages, demographers Martin and Bumpass (1989) estimated that within a forty year time span, 67% would end in divorce. Therefore, the likelihood that a first marriage will end in separation or divorce is now greater than the likelihood that it will continue. At this juncture, the phenomenon is understood in different contexts ranging from personality conflicts, commitment levels, attachment difficulties, communication breakdowns and the American value of independence and autonomy. A less studied aspect of divorce incorporates the effects of idealized relationships, present in our culture through fairytales, myths, movies, music and literature on a marriage.

Fascination with couples fills today's media and shapes our world view. The romantically engaged couple is the icon of our time, consuming our media and subject to endless public appeal and concern. Most people devote tremendous energy to trying to find the perfect partner and the perfect love, an emotion that is supposed to be the cure for all that ails us. People have always been drawn together but the quest for the right mate has taken on a mythic, even frantic quality (Dym & Glenn, 1993).

While to members of this culture, romantic love seems as old as time itself, the idea of romantic love is actually an idea that arose relatively recently. In nineteenth century America, for instance, it was considered too risky to marry someone based on romantic feelings, because romantic feelings were seen to be too evanescent. In addition, what we now think of as the signs of love were viewed as offensive emotions, and those

who acted on them were thought to be morally weak. Rather, in nineteenth century America, the dominant cultural ideal was the notion of spiritual love in which men and women joined together in a morally uplifting marriage (Trachman & Bluestone, 2006).

When people enter a relationship, they bring with them the information regarding relationships which are familiar to them from the larger society. This information will include the ideas about the functions and practices of particular relationships. Therefore, people enter relationships, being that of friendships, dating, marriage or parenthood with extensive cultural knowledge. This knowledge shapes expectations about what a particular relationship should be like, what rules should operate in that relationship, and what characteristics of the relationship make it satisfying, successful, stable, and fulfilling (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000). For example, when asked, most individuals would be able to recount numerous fairytale love stories that end in ‘and they lived happily ever after’. Cultural narratives, such as this one, are embedded in our society and become familiar to us at a very young age. These cultural myths, as they are referred to by social psychologists, have a lasting impact on individuals as they develop romantic relationships.

In some cases, our culture perpetuates certain myths that significantly contribute to marital malnourishment (Sharpe, 2004). The myths identified by Sharpe (2004) are the myth of romantic love, the myth of selfless love, the myth of the nuclear family as the source of all love, and the myth of couple self-sufficiency. These myths influence how people envision their ideal relationship and therefore serve to impact satisfaction levels among partners.

Romantic love is one of the most widely shared, most pervasive assumption and truth about this society (Trachman & Bluestone, 2006). Of course we fall in love, of course we are destined to meet our soul mate, and of course lifelong monogamous love is attainable and desirable. The couple has never before been burdened with such enormous expectations. It's seen as all-encompassing, magic, a cure-all. If we're lonely, the couple will fill the void. If we feel powerless, it will support us. If we need a friend, a lover, a confidant, a family member, we're supposed to find them all through our couple relationship (Dym & Glenn, 1993).

Researchers in the field of intimate relationships have discovered that the expectations about marriage and partnership in our society may be problematic because they may create unrealistic expectations and thus lead to subsequent disappointment. For instance, believing that one's partner should know automatically what one's needs are may result in disappointment once this expectation is unfulfilled, and this may lead to dissatisfaction with one's relationship (Ellis, 1962). As rational-emotive researchers have pointed out, the difficulty with irrational beliefs is that they set such high standards and expectations that no real relationship is able to match them (Baucom, 1989). Therefore, by holding such high expectations and idealized beliefs, individuals set themselves up for disappointment.

According to Sharpe (2004), many therapists and couples, as well as the psychological literature, overlook how much these cultural influences affect committed relationships. It is imperative that we, as clinical social workers, understand the impact of these myths on relationships and marriages and are able to help couples deconstruct the cultural aspects of their conflicts.



The literature on relationship beliefs clearly indicates that unrealistic expectations, and idealistic and romanticized notions about marriage, decrease marital satisfaction. However, the literature does not specify what aspects of marital satisfaction are decreased. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways that relationships are impacted by real and ideal relationship discrepancies. The research aims to gather rich descriptions of individuals in committed relationships, focused specifically on the effects of the discrepancy to themselves and their relationship. In addition, my research will provide an initial assessment of the coping mechanisms utilized by partners as problem solving responses to the discrepancies. Therefore, my research question is: in what ways do cultural narratives and romantic idealizations impact relationship satisfaction and what are the coping mechanisms utilized by couples in response? The following literature review examines existing historical, theoretical, and empirical material regarding love and marriage.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The relevant literature to my topic of romantic idealizations and couples spans several areas. After a brief introduction of the history of romantic love in western culture, I will address the literature on social construction theory because it is the primary means by which individuals receive and hold concepts of romanticized love. Following an explanation and discussion of the most popular romanticized myths relevant to American culture, the literature will focus more specifically on the effects of romanticized myths and cultural narratives on couples.

#### *The History of Romantic Love*

##### *The Transition to a Love-Centered Marriage*

How we understand love and marriage today has not always been the norm for our society. Social scientists first wrote about the dramatic changes in marriage in the 1940s, namely the transition from the “institutional” to the “companionship” form of marriage. At first, love was only one of several other more important considerations in a potential mate, including status, family alliances, and economic security (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992). Before the seventeenth century, marriages for all but property-less-poor were arranged by parents for the economic and political benefits of the kin group. The marriage was a contract with considerations of property, political security and inheritance holding great significance. Romantic love was expected to occur outside of marriage and it was understood that this might lead to adulterous liaisons. By the eighteenth century, individual affections were considered significant to marriage but unions still generally

required the prior consent of parents on both sides (Golden, 1991). This was because The Enlightenment Age, lasting from the mid-seventeenth century to the early part of the nineteenth century, brought with it new theories, including the presumption that humans had the right to happiness and pleasure. Nonetheless, most marriages at the time remained economically or politically motivated.

According to Kayser (1993), the concept of romantic love developed during the nineteenth century when sexuality became tied to both love and marriage. This was during the Industrial Revolution that began in the late 1700s and early 1800s which changed Europe and the United States from agrarian cultures to mechanized urban cultures in which men and women earned money and had individual discretion about their lives in ways never before possible (Galician, 2004). The rise of the importance of the individual and the economic changes in society encouraged a new view of relationships. This new view considered as a right the ability of men and women to choose to marry one another on the basis of emotion rather than economic need or family pressure (Galician, 2004).

As stated above, it was only in the nineteenth century that romantic expectations began to be commonly attached to marriage. In addition to the impact of the Industrial Revolution, the Romantic Movement in literature affected relationships in the nineteenth century. According to historians, it was due to the rise of the novel that society at large accepted the new idea that it was normal and praiseworthy for young men and women to fall passionately in love (Shumway, 2003). The romantic ideology of the nineteenth century promoted the inseparability of romance and marriage. It is this version of romance that was dominant in America in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The most popular narratives of this era, both in print and on screen, unite romantic love and marriage more explicitly than was typical in the early nineteenth century (Shumway, 2003).

There is general agreement among historians of love and marriage that novels were the primary means by which a romantic conception of marriage came to be widely held (Shumway, 2003). Although most readers are clear about the fictional status of a novel, the full experience of the narrative depends on a temporary forgetting of this knowledge. If the story is successful, most readers will not merely comprehend the words or images but also live with and through the characters for the duration of the narrative (Shumway, 2003). As Shumway describes, readers, in surrendering to the story, will typically accept the point or points of identification that the text offers. This means that the reader will emotionally identify with the character as well as accept a whole range of assumptions associated with the character. For example, readers of *Jane Eyre* usually identify much more with Jane, the narrator, than the other characters. In addition, the reader of *Jane Eyre* is positioned not just to want for Jane what she wants herself- to marry Rochester- but also to accept, at least while in the world of the novel, that the desire to marry for love is natural. Such positioning is all the more effective and consequential when, as is the case here, it reinforces the positioning of discourse in general social circulation (Shumway, 2003). Therefore, although the reader may cognitively understand that Jane Eyre is a real person, the reader's emotional experience produced by the novel is real and the repeated experiences of the same kind of narrative pattern might further blur the lines between fiction and reality.

Therefore, although concepts of love and marriage are not new, what has continued to change over time is the ascendancy of love to become paramount in marriage. It has been only recently that finding one's soul mate and choosing the appropriate person to wed has been of the highest importance in life (Galician, 2004). Whereas historically men and women married and stayed married mainly because of certain legal, social, and economic ties, the emphasis in marriage has changed to revolve around the presence of love. Previously, choosing a partner was based on whether the husband was a good provider or whether the wife would be a good mother and homemaker. No longer are these considered by most people to be the most important standards for choosing partners (Kayser, 1993). Romantic love in the West today is a prelude, and often a prerequisite, to marriage (Person, 1995).

#### *Social Construction Theory*

Social construction theory holds the belief that reality is socially constructed and that there is no single reality experienced by all people (Pines, 2001). Rather, different cultures have diverse ways of understanding the world and therefore different perceptions of various occurring phenomenon. The social construction of reality is a theory which assumes that the "objective" reality which each of us lives in is a social construction; and that language and conversation are the primary tools of construction (Dixson, 1995). The theory does not necessarily deny the existence of some kind of objective reality. However, since we are, inherently, subjective creatures, we have no direct access to that objective reality. Therefore, our understanding of the world is gained through perceptual filters formed by socialization. Our language is a large part of that socialization and forms and reforms the categories by which we classify phenomena we encounter and the

symbols by which we give meaning to our experiences, including our experiences of ourselves and our relationships (Dixson, 1995).

Among other conjectures, social construction theory assumes that reality is constructed by patterns of communication, not just interpreted. In essence, what is done, how it gets done, our priorities, our values and our beliefs about how the world works and how social interactions work are socially constructed through our interactions with others in repeated patterns of behavior (Dixson, 1995). Therefore, since we believe certain social interactions should work in certain ways, we make this so by our behavior.

As a result of the social construction process, certain social norms and gender-role stereotypes become privileged in different cultures and in different time periods. Cultural myths and social ideals tell us what we can expect from our lives, what lifestyles or possessions we should value and what we should seek to attain (Pintar, 1992). Social construction ideas have been applied to many areas including intimate relationships and romantic love.

### *Love as a Social Construction*

Within our own culture, romantic love and romantic passion are sanctioned and generated by the cultural stories and attitudes present in our society. We are taught about romantic relationships from a very young age. Children learn how relationships work from their parents (Dixson, 1995). In addition to living in a home and witnessing our own parent(s)' interactions, the media serves as a source of information. If one were to look to the opera, literature, drama, movies, television, magazines, newspapers, and advertising of our past and present, one can see how deeply the concept of romance has influenced our cultural heritage (Crosby, 1973). In a study by Tanner and Lund (2003)

on Disney feature-length animated films, an overarching theme regarding romantic behavior emerged. The researches noted that all couples shown in Disney movies were heterosexual. In addition, in 18 out of 23 movies, the notion of love at first sight was a theme. In a majority of the movies, the couples fell in love, got married, and “lived happily ever after” which produces an image that love is easy and requires no work. Furthermore, the researchers found that in most Disney movies, couples are depicted in ways that are consistent with traditional gender stereotypes.

Disney movies, very popular in American culture, contribute to the creation of our society’s dominant cultural narrative. The fact that Disney movies are targeted primarily for young audiences suggests that our children are socialized in such a way that the marital expectations are out of proportion to an actual marital situation. This socialization continues in adolescence and adulthood with movies, television, music and magazines.

Socialization is the process whereby individuals are made aware of the behavior that others expect of them regarding the norms, values, and culture of their society (Galician, 2004). Agents of socialization include the family, school, friendship groups, religious institutions, and the mass media. One body of theory suggests that the mass media are indeed powerful socialization agents from which we learn and model many behaviors, both healthy and unhealthy (Galician, 2004). Specifically, social learning theory considers the mass media to be primary socialization agents, along with family, peers and classroom teachers (Bandura, 1986). Social learning theory asserts that we learn by “modeling” the behavior of fictional characters through imitation, the exact replication of behavior, and identification. According to Bandura (1986), both imitation

and identification result from three processes: observational learning, which is copying what we see or hear, inhibitory effects or avoiding behaviors that we see punished, and disinhibitory effects-copying behaviors that we see rewarded.

### *Cultivation Theory*

Cultivation theory addresses the relationship between television content and viewers' beliefs about social reality. It holds that television viewing significantly assists in creating or cultivating a view of reality that is biased toward the highly formulaic and stylized narrative content of television. The theory posits that heavier viewers of television will have beliefs about the social world that are more consistent with televised social representations than will light viewers (Gerbner, 1972). Research on cultivation theory has shown consistent correlational support for the assertion that television programming, with its constant and relatively narrow messages, produces a conformity of social perceptions, norms and values (O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997). Television has this homogenizing and mainstreaming effect because its dramatic content is fairly consistent in its deviation from reality. Even selective exposure to specific programs, for the most part, does not limit viewers' exposure to television's dominant themes (Perse, Ferguson and McLeod, 1994). Enough studies have replicated cultivation with multiple controls, longitudinal designs, and even field experiments that most scientists are convinced that an effect exists (Hawkins, Pingree and Adler, 1987).

Communication experts have proposed that we all learn the values, norms and stereotypes disseminated by television primarily by growing up and living in this specific culture. Given the enormous extent to which television and movies disseminate stories of human experience, and the extent to which these stories permeate the entire culture,



television functions as an important component of forming social reality. The repeated experiences with stories that we witness through the media cumulate over time to effect our own beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, expectations, etc. (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

In the context of marital expectations, cultivation theory suggests that in portraying idealized images of marriage, the media is cultivating unrealistic beliefs about what marriage should be (Segrin & Nabi, 2002). According to Segrin and Nabi (2002), television is a source which adds to the romanticized and idealized views of marriage. Based on a survey of 285 never-married undergraduate students, 78% White and 22% people of color, the authors concluded that viewing television programming that focuses on marriage and close relationships is associated with idealistic expectations of marriage. A similar study with an experimental design found the same results over a number of media modalities including film, television and print (Bradford, Rhodes, & Edison, 2005). The authors contextualize their argument in cultivation theory.

By “idealized images of marriage” the authors identify portrayals that include, for example, a great deal of romance, physical intimacy, passion, celebration, happiness, “love at first sight”, physical beauty, empathy, and open communication. Although the study showed a correlation between the viewing of romantic television programs and idealistic expectations for marriage, causality cannot be determined. It is possible that individuals with high idealized images of marriage may be watching more romantically-themed media. Nevertheless, those individuals would have developed the idealized images and expectations somewhere, perhaps in children’s media.

A study done by Shapiro and Kroeger (1991) showed a similar relationship between attitudes about intimate relationships and the popular media. Popular romantic

media was considered by the authors to include television, movies, novels, magazines, tabloids, music, and fairy tales. According to the authors, their research on 109 adult subjects supported their hypothesis that subjects who strongly endorse unrealistic beliefs about intimate relationships would score higher on a measure of exposure to popular romantic media than those who do not. Additionally, the authors found a trend in which married women who were more exposed to the popular romantic media were less satisfied with their current intimate relationships. Since the data is correlational in nature, there is no clear indication of causation. However, the theme is clear that individuals who are more exposed to popular romantic media will have more unrealistic beliefs about intimate relationships.

#### *Mass Media and their Influence*

A model of the mass communication process was provided more than half a century ago by political scientist Harold Lasswell (1948) when he said, “Who says what to whom through which channel with what effect?” “Who” is called a sender or source in communication theory. In mass communication, the sender is usually a team of professional communicators working within a media institution, like a publishing company or a television network, rather than an individual. Mass communicators have three basic reasons for sending messages: to inform or educate, to entertain and to persuade (Galician, 2004). In fulfilling these functions, the mass media also serve a larger purpose of function: transmitting the culture and socializing us. “What” is a message that the sender wants to send or share. Another name for message in mass communication is content or meaning. Mass media senders create or construct their messages, using symbols such as words or pictures or sounds to convey their meanings.

The media are also agents of personal and social change. Many critics argue that the media are the primary influences of personal and social change, although the actual influence is sometimes unintentional (Galician, 2004). “To whom” is the receiver or audience. In a mass communication, the receiver is not in the same place as the sender. The audiences which are receiving the messages are typically diverse and very large. “Through which channel” is the vehicle or medium of mass communication: books, newspapers, magazines, comic books, movies and animated films, radio, recorded music, television, music videos, and certain aspects of the internet. These media are technical devices that enable the sender to reach very large audiences dispersed over time and space. “With what effect” is the impact, influence and consequence of the message on the audience.

Therefore, the mass media disseminates messages that inform us, entertain us, and persuade us. The media also transmits the culture and socializes us. The primary way that the media does this is through stories. Another media term for stories is narratives. According to Baran (2002), a culture’s values and beliefs reside in the stories it tells. Baran argues that our stories help us define our realities, shaping and reflecting the ways we think, feel, and act. The author believes that the stories disseminated in the media are used by audiences not only to be entertained but to learn about the world and to understand the values.

### *Idealized Love and the Media*

Most of the mass media’s stories of love and romance are mythic and stereotypic. Silverblatt, Ferry and Finan (1999) asserted that the media has assumed a vital role in the transmission of cultural myths. Olson (1999) agreed that cinematic and televisual

language is almost always mythic even though they appear to the viewer to convey some deeper, self-evident, and universal truth about life.

As children, most members of our society watch fairy tales such as *Snow White*, *Goldilocks*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Aladdin* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Given that tales such as these form a child's language, his or her sense of narrative coherence, and his or her general outlook on the condition of society and nature, it is not surprising that they continue to have meaning for adults in the same culture (Olson, 1999). For the adult, these stories are reiterative and reinforcing of what has already been learned and what is still believed. One of the reasons that myth is so powerful is that it is inclusive and the reader senses from myth that it is speaking directly to him or her, and that it has something relevant and useful to convey (Olson, 1999).

Because one of the functions of the media is reinforcement, television and film narratives targeted at adults never stray very far from the fairy tales aimed at children. The farther they stray, the less familiar, less accessible, and less coherent these narratives become (Olson, 1999). Therefore, one common technique of the media is the retelling of fairytales to different generations. The 1998 film *Ever After*, a postmodern retelling of the Cinderella story rated PG-13 in the United States and therefore aimed at teenagers and young adults rather than small children, is just one example. Popular culture not only reflects but also reinforces cultural attitudes, values, behaviors, preoccupations, and myths. Numerous media analysts have agreed that the media serves to reinforce existing values rather than to invent new ones (Olson, 1999).

Media content can reveal cultural preoccupations, the relative importance that a culture places on particular issues, as well as disclose cultural myths. Cultural myths are

sets of beliefs that may not be true but nevertheless tell us about ourselves and our culture. Over time, cultural myths can assume a mythic reality as people buy into them.

#### *Examples of Idealized Relationships in the Media*

Two popular romantic comedies released in 2001 glorify typical romantic myths. In *Serendipity*, Kate Beckinsale and John Cusack play characters who meet as customers at a New York City department store glove counter one Christmas. Each has a significant other but they are struck by the love-at-first-sight connection that they feel with each other (Galician, 2004). Cusack's character (Jonathan) wants to pursue the connection immediately but Beckinsale's character (Sara) believes that if they are fated to meet again and be together, they will. In order to test her theory, Sara writes her name and contact information in a book with the intention of selling it. She instructs Jonathan to write his name and number on a \$5 bill that she puts into circulation. At that point the two part ways. A year or two go by and each gets engaged to other partners although they think of each other now and then. On the eve of his wedding, Jonathan decides that he must find Sara. In a series of events that defy logic, Sara gets the \$5 bill and Jonathan is given the book by his fiancée. Sara and Jonathan finally find each other and, in celebration of their fated union, dump their respective fiancés (Galician, 2004).

In *Kate and Leopold*, the meant-to-be lovers are separated by a century and a quarter. Kate (Meg Ryan) is a successful New York City advertising executive of our time who cannot find the lover she wants until 19<sup>th</sup> century Leopold (Hugh Jackman), an impoverished but brilliant British aristocrat, comes into her life and charms her (Galician, 2004). After their meeting, Leopold goes back in time to his 19<sup>th</sup> century and is about to

make a fateful marriage proposal to another woman when Kate arrives in the past just in time for Leopold to choose her (Galician, 2004).

Both *Kate and Leopold* and *Serendipity* share similar romantic myths common in Hollywood movies. Firstly, both have aspects of love-at-first-sight. The music in the movie reinforces the myth by setting the tone and convincing us of the rightness and majesty of such moments (Galician, 2004). In addition, each of the movies portrays an aspect of cosmic destiny. Magical signs show the characters in the films who they are “meant” to be with. Viewers of these movies witness the almost cosmically predestined and long-awaited union of soul mates.

Idealized images of love and romance are not only popular in Hollywood, they are also fashionable in other cultures’ movies and television programming. For example, in Bombay, the Los Angeles of India, also known as Bollywood, a formula noted in the majority of their movies involves the following events. First the boy and girl meet. They fall in love amid mild adversity and much song and dance. Then, they marry and live blissfully ever after (Marquand, 1999). The author notes that more recently the love story in Bollywood has changed to a story line extreme in fanciful romantic tearjerkers mostly due to the influence of the West. A good example is Bollywood blockbuster, “Kuch Kuch Hota Hai” (“Something Happens”). Patterned after “Sleepless in Seattle”, the film opens with college scenes of a man and his two close female friends. He married one who later dies giving childbirth. Then, at age 8, the child conspires to put the man together with his other old girlfriend, who has sacrificed loyally for years, never saying how much she wanted the man. Cut to a rosy, tearful ending (Marquand, 1999).

According to one Indian news reporter, Hindi films have culminated with a happily-ever-after snapshot of a bride and groom surrounded by a dotting family because filmmakers prefer to portray young love, which is usually childlike in its innocence and naively disconnected from complications, emotional or sexual (Chopra, 2006). Director Tanuja Chandra believes that in order to have a commercial blockbuster, a film must have a love story. He thinks that viewers “want complete fantasy, a world minus problems since all Indians know they have another hard day tomorrow” (Marquand, 1999).

Telenovas, or Spanish speaking soap operas, popular on the network Telemundo, a major Spanish television network, appear to have a similar format to both Hollywood and Bollywood. According to James McNamara, president of Telemundo, the telenovela is not character driven but instead is all about story (Carter, 2004). The formula of the storyline popular among the Telenovas focuses around a central romantic couple. According to McNamara, the couple will always meet in the first episode. They are then kept apart for 120 episodes and then reunited to live always happily ever after, usually concluding with a wedding scene (Carter, 2004). Roman Escobar, who commissions new novellas as the chief programmer for Telemundo believes the form is not completely rigid but that the pillars have to be worked with. The pillars that Escobar refers to include the central romance of two characters, a clearly defined villain, and a happy ending. Within those pillars, however, the form can accommodate a wide range of storytelling styles from westerns to social dramas to romantic comedies (Carter, 2004).

### *The Cultural Narrative of Relationships*

It is the idealized images of romance, passion and happiness common among fairytales, movies, television, music, and popular culture which create the overall cultural narrative associated with relationships. The cultural narrative, as explained by Dym and Glenn (1993) is the sum of society's messages about how people are supposed to do things. The cultural narrative is the means by which a culture puts forth, promotes, and imposes its standards on its members. Therefore, all experiences in a relationship take place against the backdrop of this cultural narrative. Since almost all couples are more or less part of racial, ethnic, regional, or community subgroups, it is fair to say that each of us experiences the cultural narrative through subcultural filters (Dym & Glenn, 1993). In general, however, the ideology of romance and romantic love is consistent among the literature. Based on an analysis of ethnographic material, researchers have found at least one indicator of romantic love (also referred to as passionate love) in 88.5% of the diverse cultural groups in their 166 society sample (Janowiak & Fischer, 1992). The authors further acknowledged that the meaning of this folklore and other ethnographic material for members of the given society may differ. In addition, Janowiak and Fischer recognized that cultural factors may contribute to the likelihood that members of a given society will experience romantic love given that romantic love is valued and perceived differently by different society members.

Romantic myths popular in the western, collectivist cultures include such beliefs as love conquers all obstacles, true love lasts forever, love is the primary basis for marriage, and that love at first sight is possible (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). In addition, the belief that there is one true love for everyone, that true love inevitably leads to



happiness, and that nothing is more important than love are also part of Western notions of romance (Weaver & Ganong, 2004). The myth of romantic love tells us that there is one perfect person out there for each of us. A woman waits for her true love, the “armored knight” who will “sweep her off her feet.” A man attains his true love through searching for and, presumably, “sweeping away” the perfect women (Pintar, 1992).

### *The Impact of Romantic Ideology on Relationships*

#### *Romantic Beliefs and Relationship Quality*

The most widely used tool to measure the romantic ideology of love is the Romantic Beliefs Scale (ROMBEL) developed by Sprecher and Metts (1989). The ROMBEL contained 15 items with Likert scale responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The 15 items were broken down into four subscales that were labeled *Love Finds a Way* (‘If I love someone, I know I can make the relationship work, despite any obstacles’), *One and Only* (‘I believe that to be truly in love is to be in love forever’), *Idealization* (‘The relationship I will have with my true love will be nearly perfect’), and *Love at First Sight* (‘When I find my true love I will probably know it soon after we meet’). The researchers found that those individuals with a higher romanticism score tended to love and like their partner more, experience more passionate love, and report a fewer number of dates before experiencing love (Sprecher & Metts, 1989). It is important to note that the survey was conducted on a predominantly white (88.6%) and middle class sample.

The same authors then did a second study to assess whether romantic beliefs are associated with qualities of the relationship less closely tied to romantic love, specifically satisfaction and commitment (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). This longitudinal study,

conducted on 101 dating couples over the course of four years, found that romanticism was highly correlated with relationship quality (love, satisfaction, and especially commitment), for both men and women. The researchers also found that overall romanticism decreased significantly over time for both men and women. This decline in romanticism was evident among those couples who remained together over the full four years of the study as well as those who broke up. Although this study provides valuable information due to its ability to show change over time, the study is not generalizable considering its participants were 97.5% White and 86.6% middle or upper-class.

There has been some research on the validity of the Romantic Beliefs Scale (ROMBEL) with diverse groups. For example, Weaver and Ganong (2004) did a comparative study of the ROMBEL between African American and white/European American college students. The authors found only one factor of the scale to be similar for black and white respondents but that the overall score was fairly consistent. Therefore, the authors suggest possible differences between how romantic love may be conceptualized in some ways for the two groups. However, due to the correlation between the total ROMBEL scores, there is some support to the idea that both black and white young adults hold romantic beliefs that are similar (Weaver & Ganong, 2004).

#### *The Impact of Cultural Narratives on Relationships*

Multiple factors may contribute to the development of unrealistic marital beliefs. In general, individuals' beliefs about marriage are not based on systemic and formal training, but instead are developed from observing marriages, being exposed to media images of marriage, and through other socializing agents that share cultural values and norms (Sharp & Ganong, 2000). It is through the interaction of our experiences and

society's cultural myths that we develop an understanding of love. For example, our perceptions of who is a suitable object of our love are shaped by the culturally defined conventions of acceptability (Baell & Sternberg, 1995). In addition, the manner and timeline that a romantic relationship unfolds is understood in culturally prescribed ways. These scripts inform societies about what is normal and therefore often have an impact on how people perceive their own relationship. These cultural scripts are present and influential during the courtship process as well as during engagement and marriage. In a quantitative study conducted by Holmberg and MacKenzie (2002) on 30 dating couples in college, mostly of Euro-Canadian descent, the researchers found that as a correspondence between individuals' personal and normative courtship scripts increases, so will relationship well-being. In other words, those who see their own relationship as developing in a manner that conforms to their typical expectations for a relationship tend to experience their own relationship as more positive (Homlberg & MacKenzie, 2002).

As with courtship expectations, a correlation also exists between the well-being of married couples and the romantic beliefs that the couples subscribe to. In a quantitative study done by Eidelson and Epstein (1982) on 150 couples, the authors identified a correlation between marital functioning and specific relationship beliefs. The authors identified the following relationship beliefs as dysfunctional: a belief that disagreements regarding values, attitudes, goals or preferences are threats to a secure, loving relationship and represent a lack of love; that partners who truly care about and really know one another should be able to sense each other's needs and preferences without overt communication; that intimate partners can change neither themselves nor the quality of their relationship; and that one must be a perfect sexual partner. Given the

results of their study, the authors argued that these beliefs contribute to marital distress because the individuals are experiencing their relationship as different from the cultural norm. This study was conducted on an older population than the other studies cited in this chapter which have been conducted mostly on college students. The mean age of participants in this study was 33 years with the couples' average time married at 7 years.

There are different understandings as to how these cultural narratives and romanticized myths become a part of a person's experience. Sternberg (1996) argues that since all of us organize our individual experience into stories, the themes of our cultural narratives are translated into ideal story plots. The stories shared in our families and in the media are embedded in a cultural matrix so that the stories we tell vary with time and place. Therefore, although each relationship that we enter becomes its own experience with its own story, we often enter into relationships with idealized images and understandings of partnership depending on our cultural values (Sternberg, 1996). These ideal story plots could be unconsciously known but affect the individual similarly by the guidelines that they impose on plot and character slots. In his quantitative survey of sixty undergraduate students, thirty male and thirty female, Sternberg found that, for the most part, we find people to fit the parts that we need to fulfill our stories. For example, a person who has a fantasy story plot may be waiting for the knight in shining armor or a princess to come along and engage in a relationship. If a person is engaged in a relationship that is not according to this plot, he may either come to a negative conclusion about his partner or attempt to remake his partner into his ideal (Sternberg, 1996).

The concept of an idealized marriage has been well researched by psychologists. Results from a study by Bonds-Raacke, Bearden and Carriere (2001) showed that

individuals engaged to be married had significantly higher idealistic distortion scores than did either married individuals or those in extended dating relationships. The questionnaire, given to 104 students, 23 men and 81 women, involved 15 married couples, 19 engaged couples and 70 couples in extended-dating relationships. The authors also found that length of relationship was negatively related to marital satisfaction, suggesting that marital happiness decreases over time. There is no data as to the race or ethnicity of the participants so it is unclear for whom these findings are relevant.

Research by Sternberg and Barnes (1985) on 24 undergraduate and graduate couples has also shown that people have ideals for relationships, and that these ideals are every bit as important as the actual relationship itself. Furthermore, the researchers found that these ideals control not only how we form our actual love story but also how happy we are in it. We compare our ideal stories to our actual ones and feel good when we sense a match. Whereas the cognition of a match generates positive emotions, the contrary realization, that the match we hoped for did not occur, will generate disruption of a kind that leads to negative emotions (Sternberg & Barnes, 1985).

The discrepancies between individuals' perceptions of their partners in reality and the ideals they have for their partners can affect both the individuals' own satisfaction with their relationship and their partners' satisfaction (Ruvolo & Veroff, 1997). One reason for this is that people with large real-ideal discrepancies about their partners may express negative feelings to them, thereby decreasing those people's marital well-being.

In Kelly and Burgoon's (1991) longitudinal study of real-ideal discrepancies about communication, 206 married couples served as respondents. Initially, the

respondents rated their satisfaction in their relationship. After a delay of 1-8 weeks, each wife first rated 'how a husband should behave' and 'how my husband does behave' with respect to various communication behaviors and each husband rated 'how a wife should behave' and 'how my wife does behave'. In most areas of communication, respondents' discrepancies about their partners predicted the respondents' own relationship satisfaction. In addition, the husband's discrepancy about the wife's non-composure during communication (being frustrated, distracted, and not relaxed) predicted the wife's satisfaction, and the wife's discrepancy about whether the husband treats her as an equal during conversations predicted the husband's satisfaction (Kelly & Burgoon, 1991).

### *Marriage Disillusionment*

Beliefs about relationships serve as standards against which an individual evaluates the quality of a relationship. As these standards become more unrealistic or irrational, rigid or extreme, the probability increases that they will result in disappointment, disillusionment and distress in relationship development (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981). Epstein and Eidelson found that unrealistic beliefs about marriage accounted for significant variance in expectations for improvement of the relationship, desire to maintain the relationship, and marital satisfaction. For example, spouses who believed that 'My partner and I should always see things the same' did not expect their relationship to improve, were not committed to maintaining the relationship, and were less satisfied with their marriage than spouses who did not endorse this belief (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981).

Researchers involved in relationship studies have documented the term disillusionment to represent the feeling that spouses have when their partners' behavior

was not what they had expected. In other words, the reality of their marriages and their partners was not living up to their dreams, fantasies, and expectations prior to marriage. One explanation for this is related to romantic idealizations and posits that during courtship feelings of closeness are experienced, but are perpetuated by romanticism and idealistic perceptions of the partner and the relationship (Kayser, 1993). That is, in a new relationship, the person is viewing the partner as he or she would like him or her to be, and the feelings of closeness are enhanced by this idealized perception of what the partner is like (Kayser, 1993).

When describing feelings of disillusionment, spouses often made a comparison of the partner before and after the marriage. They emphasized radical and inexplicable changes in the partner's behavior after the wedding. What had changed, for the most part, was not the partner but the respondent's perception of their partner (Kayser, 1993). Beck (1988) describes the change in perception as switching lenses through which one sees the partner. Negative labels are now attached to the same characteristics that had been previously described in glowing terms. The partner's easygoing manner and free spirit is now described as "flakiness" and what was once viewed as playfulness is now considered childlessness (Beck, 1988.)

Waller (1938) was the first scientist to propose that divorce may have its roots in spouses' disillusionment early in marriage. According to Waller, courtship is a period of time when partners' passion and love for each other grow, and when individuals wish to show only some of their personality characteristics in order to live up to the images they believe their partner may have of them. During this time, dating partners tend to discount information that might undermine their romantic feelings for or commitment to each

other and, therefore, perceive both the partner and the courtship in an idealized fashion (Niehus & Bartell, 2006). As partners settle down to the daily tasks of married life and become increasingly interdependent, they also get to know each other better and become less concerned with impression management (Waller, 1938). Once marital vows are exchanged and commitment to the institution of marriage is made, spouses are no longer in the initiation phase but move into the maintenance phase. They no longer have to work to attain their partner's love since they have already achieved this goal (Kayser, 1993). As a result, individuals' illusions about their partner and their relationship dissipate, and problems that were latent during courtship begin to surface, leading to spouses' disillusionment and eventual divorce (Waller, 1938).

Marital disillusionment has been shown by researchers to have a significant effect on the stability of a relationship. For example, 264 adult participants in a study by Niehuis and Bartell (2006) who reported higher marital disillusionment also reported greater declines in love, affectionate expression, and perceptions' of the spouse's responsiveness, and greater increases in feelings of ambivalence. Similarly, individuals who reported greater marital disillusionment also experienced lower marital satisfaction (Niehuis & Bartell, 2006)

The disillusionment model, in summary, suggests that newlywed spouses tend to behave in ways that are consistent with idealized conceptions of marriage, embellishing their displays of affection and avoiding conflict and muting negative feelings. Simultaneously, newlyweds are motivated to view their partner in the best possible terms. For example, spouses see each other as possessing attractive or responsive traits and as lacking unattractive or contrary traits. Given their behavioral and psychological



tendencies to augment the positive, newlywed spouses should be deeply in love and feel little ambivalence about their union. If disillusionment sets in, as reflected in losses of love and affection, rises in ambivalence, and changes in spouses' views of each other's responsiveness, couples may become distressed and may decide to divorce (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith & George, 2001).

### *Coping Strategies*

Marital stress can take its toll on a spouse's well-being, as well as the well-being of the relationship. During Kayser's (1993) study of the disaffection process, respondents were asked how they were coping with their marital distress. Respondents reported that a wide range of coping strategies were being used to deal with marital doubts and growing disillusionment. During the initial phase of disaffection, avoidant and passive types of coping strategies were most frequently used. More than half of the respondents (53%) reported that they kept silent while about one third (35%) stated that they employed denial as a means of coping (Kayser, 1993). Kayser suspects that many of the disaffected spouses suffered in silence because they were reluctant to admit marital problems to friends and family. Because the majority of respondents had experienced marital doubts during the first year of the marriage, Kayser posits that it may have been too embarrassing to these spouses to admit dissatisfaction so early in marriage. In addition, there is a taboo in our culture that discourages spouses from talking about their marriages (Kayser, 1993).

Therefore, the research is fairly conclusive that people experience real-ideal discrepancies about their partnership. These idealized images come from the media and from our society's collective cultural myth about romance. Unfortunately, media images

and popular portrayals of marriage are likely to promote unrealistic beliefs of relationships. The result of this cultural narrative is that many individuals go into marriage believing that it will fulfill their social, financial, sexual and emotional needs, and, most importantly, lead to happiness (Crooks & Baur, 1996). Research has indicated that higher endorsement of unrealistic relationship beliefs is associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction (Larson & Holman, 1994). When our lives do not conform to these idealized images, we tend to question the worth of our experiences rather than the validity of our experiences (Pintar, 1992). Whereas it is clear that these unrealistic expectations can lead to distress among relationship partners, it is unclear which aspects of the relationship are challenged and how individuals experiencing this are coping in response. Therefore, my research will include an exploration of the specific areas of the relationship impacted by these myths as well as the ways that individuals in relationship cope with the particular distress derived from social expectations.

Much of the research discussed in this chapter has been derived from a particular group of individuals, mostly White, and middle to upper-class. Holmberg & MacKenzie (2002), Eidelson & Epstein (1982), Sprecher & Metts(1999), and Sprecher & Metts (1989) all had participants in their study who were mostly white and middle-class. It was only the Weaver and Ganong (2004) study which included participants with a range of ethnicities. As a result, I attempted to carry out this study on participants of varying ethnicities.

In addition to race, the previous research on this topic has mostly been conducted on young people. For example, Sternberg and Barnes (1985), Holmberg and MacKenzie (2002), and Bonds-Raacke, Bearden and Carriere (2001) all used undergraduate students

as their participants. Only Kelly and Burgoon (1991) and Eidelson and Epstein (1982) had adults as their main subjects. Therefore, in an attempt to widen the range of the research, I conducted my interviews with people who are out of college and between the ages of 23-35.

Turning now to study design, aside from Sprecher & Metts (1999) and Kelly and Burgoon (1991), who conducted longitudinal research, all of the studies cited were quantitative survey studies which did not explore the phenomenon in depth. To get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in question, this researcher interviewed the participants and analyzed the qualitative narratives that emerge from our conversations.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to explore the effects of the cultural narratives and relationship myths on romantic partners in a committed relationship. Specifically, in what ways do cultural narratives and romantic idealizations impact relationship satisfaction and what are the coping mechanisms utilized in response? The second aspect of the study, which focuses on the external and internal processes which an individual utilizes in order to negotiate the discrepancy between the real and idealized relationship, is especially of interest since it has not been previously explored in the scientific community.

#### *Research Method and Design*

In order to conduct the research, this researcher used a research design that was qualitative, using flexible methods. Traditionally, flexible method research has been used at early or formative stages of research on a given topic (Anastas, 1999). Therefore, flexible methods research is an appropriate design because, due to the limited research of theory, this study will be exploring the phenomenon of idealized relationships with the participants. Due to its exploratory nature, it was important that this researcher had the ability to ask additional questions depending on the participants' answers. Flexible methods allowed for the in-depth interviewing process. This method was particularly important in the areas of this study that had not been previously researched, such as the aspects of the relationship affected by the romanticized myths as well as the individuals' ability to negotiate the real/idealized discrepancy.

There are two terms used in this study which must be defined. Because this researcher was interviewing a person in a relationship where both individuals formally committed to one another, commitment level is one. Rusbult and Buunk (1993) have defined commitment as a long-term orientation, including feelings of attachment to a partner and desire to maintain a relationship, for better or worse. Some of the subjects in this study were married but marriage was not a requirement as to allow the participation of those couples who are not allowed to marry or do not believe in marriage as a requirement for commitment. A second term used is the 'ideal love story'. This term was defined as those stories that are shaped by the interaction of our personalities with our culturally embedded experiences and which represents the person's perfect relationship (Sternberg, 1996). For this study, the researcher defined idealized relationship as those relationships represented as perfect, or better than in reality. The images of idealized relationship often come from fairytales, folklore, pop culture media, and family values.

### *Sample*

Selection criteria for participants included: self identified as being in a committed relationship with a partner who one has lived with for over one year and are over the age of twenty-one. It was important to only interview those individuals who have lived with their partner for at least one year in order to reasonably assume that the couple was no longer in an idealized state. Sprecher and Metts (1999), in their longitudinal study of romantic beliefs over four years, found that overall romanticism decreased significantly over that time. Therefore, individuals who have been dating at least one year prior to verbally committing to each other met the requirement for this study. Any potential participant who had not been living with his or her partner for at least one year was

excluded from this study because of the greater risk that the individual may still be experiencing increased romanticism in the relationship. If an individual is experiencing increased romanticism, the participant will be less able to speak about the discrepancy between the romanticized ideal and the actual relationship. For this study, it was crucial that participants were no longer in the idealized phase of their relationship so that they may be able to reflect upon their relationship, with the intention of describing a relationship discrepancy. Had an individual been interviewed while in the idealized phase, the participant may be unable to view his or her relationship with a critical lens. This researcher aimed to interview individuals in the beginning stages of their partnership, about one to five years after the individuals made a conscious commitment to be in a monogamous relationship. Preferably, the interviewee's idealized romantic image would still be easily recalled but not necessarily still operative.

Exclusion criteria were individuals who had previously been married, or individuals who were in a relationship but who were not monogamous. This latter exclusion is included because the effects of idealized relationships may not be as relevant to those individuals who are not in a monogamous relationship. Similarly, someone who has previously been married will have gone through a different process regarding the effects of idealized relationships and their ability to answer the research questions would be compromised. Participants were also excluded from the study if they had children due to the increased pressures that raising a child places on a partnership. A couple who deals with the stress of child rearing will be less likely to identify the problems in the relationship which are due particularly to the relationship discrepancy.

The participants comprised a nonrandom sample selected for their self-identification in a monogamous relationship with the person they have lived with for over one year. In order to obtain my sample, the researcher asked friends to think of any acquaintances who lived locally and who met the selection criteria. The sample consisted of eleven females and one male. Nine of the twelve individuals interviewed resided in the Western Massachusetts area whereas two participants resided in Boston and one in Philadelphia. Their ages ranged from 23 to 33 years of age. All of the participants were Caucasian and identified as heterosexual. It was disappointing not to have found a sample which was diverse in terms of race or sexuality. One reason for this could have been that I recruited using my friends' acquaintances and the majority of my friends are white and heterosexual. However, two people of color were contacted as possible participants but both refused to partake in the study. It is unclear if their racial status was involved in their decision to refrain from participating. One homosexual female was contacted as a possible recruitment but did not return this researcher's phone calls.

The recruitment and selection of the participants was conducted using a nonprobability, convenience sampling method (Anastas, 1999). For this research, a random sample was neither feasible nor necessary since the purpose of the study was not to make a general description of relationship strategies but rather to obtain a rich data that would explore the effects of romantic myths on relationships. Therefore, this researcher contacted friends and acquaintances and asked them to circulate the recruitment flyer (see Appendix F) among their friends. The individuals who were interested in the study contacted this researcher by phone or e-mail. In an attempt to increase the diversity of the sample, this researcher asked friends and acquaintances for names and contact

information of individuals they knew who were of color or homosexual and who matched my selection criteria.

Once contacted, a brief screening form was conducted by the researcher along with an introduction to the research study. If the individual expressed a desire to participate in the study, a convenient time and place to meet and perform the interview was determined. Many of the interviews were conducted at the participants' homes; however, one interview was carried out at a local library and one interview at an office.

### *Data Collection*

Prior to conducting the recruitment process, a human subjects review application (see Appendix C) including all measures and consents used for this study were reviewed and approved by the researcher's thesis advisor and the Smith School for Social Work's Human Subjects Review Committee (see Appendix D). Data collection involved conducting interviews using a semi-structured format where the participant and researcher sat face to face during the interview. A standardized open-ended interview format was employed for its ability to yield thick descriptions. In addition, face to face interviewing allowed for observation of facial expressions and increased comfort with the exchange of information. The interview consisted of reading and signing the consent form (see Appendix E); completing a brief demographic form (see Appendix B); and answering open ended questions (see Appendix A) intended to solicit information about the respondents' knowledge of romantic myths and the effects of these myths on their relationship. All interviews were digitally audio-taped, and the researcher took notes when necessary to refer back to during and after the interview.



Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research project. Identifiable information, such as names, was removed and participants were assigned a code number. In addition, all signed Informed Consent forms were kept separate from completed interviews. Furthermore, all illustrative vignettes and quoted comments of volunteers are carefully disguised. All data will be kept for three years as required by federal regulations. This includes all data, all notes, and all recorded interviews. After three years, the data will be kept stored and safe until this researcher destroys it.

Efforts were made to provide access to help for participants who might have been upset by the interview. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were referred back to their copy of the informed consent form where names and numbers of professional clinicians were listed. After a brief check-in, partakers were encouraged to seek help if they reported feeling distressed or uncomfortable.

#### *Data Analysis*

After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and reviewed by this researcher. Interviewer notes were added to the transcription as side notes to enhance the understanding and analysis of the material. The analysis consisted of a qualitative content analysis intended to identify central recurrent themes, similarities and differences in subjects' responses, and concepts discussed in the literature review. Coding categories paralleled the interview questions: qualities of idealized relationships; the way that the relationship lives up to these qualities and ways that it does not; the effect of the discrepancy between the real relationship and the idealized; the aspects of the relationship most impacted by the discrepancy; and the participant's response to the feelings associated with the discrepancy.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The literature on relationship beliefs clearly indicates that unrealistic expectations and idealistic and romanticized notions about marriage tend to decrease marital satisfaction. However, the literature does not specify how or which aspects of marital satisfaction are decreased. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways that relationships are impacted by real and ideal relationship discrepancies. In addition, this research will provide an initial assessment of the coping mechanisms utilized by partners as problem solving responses to the discrepancies. Therefore, my research question is in what areas cultural narratives and romantic idealizations impact relationship satisfaction and what are the coping mechanisms utilized by couples in response?

The following chapter presents the information and insight gained from interviews with twelve individuals who are currently in monogamous relationships. The chapter begins with a review of the participant pool and includes the demographic information and relationship history of the interviewees. The findings are grouped by theme and share the interviewees' experience with romantic myths in our society. The framework of the interview was based on seven areas of inquiry: (1) what are the romantic myths and idealized relationships present in our culture; (2) where do these myths come from; (3) how does your relationship fit these idealized notions of relationships; (4) what are the ways that your relationship does not fit these idealized notions; (5) how does the discrepancy between idealized and actual relationship affect your partnership; (6) which aspects of your relationship are most impacted by the

discrepancy; and (7) what are the ways that you have responded to cope with the discrepancy?

### *Description of the Sample*

This study sample consisted of twelve individuals who are in committed relationships. Although this research anticipated that the sample might reflect diversity, the interviewees are in many ways a homogenous group in terms of gender, race and sexual orientation. However, the participants differed in their age, the amount of time they have been with their partner, and the status of their relationship. Out of the twelve study participants, 91% were women (n=11) and 9% were men (n=1). In terms of age, 16% (n=2) were 33, 9% (n=1) were 32, 9% (n=1) were 31, 16% (n=2) were 30, 9% (n=1) were 29, 16% (n=2) were 27, 9% (n=1) were 26, 9% (n=1) were 24, 9% (n=1) were 23. In the participant pool, 41% (n=5) have been with their partner for three years, 16% (n=2) have been with their partner for five years, 25% (n=3) have been with their partner for six years, 9% (n=1) have been with their partner for seven years, and 9% (n=1) have been with their partner for ten years. Of the twelve participants, 9% (n=1) had been living with their partner for one year, 33% (n=4) had been living with their partner for two years, 33% (n=4) had been living with their partner for three years, 16% (n=2) had been living with their partner for five years, and 9% (n=1) had been living with their partner for eight years. 58% (n=7) of the participants had previously lived with a partner while 41% (n=5) had not. Of the participants, three were married to their partner, one engaged, and eight were neither married nor engaged.

## *Interview Findings*

### *Introduction*

Do individuals in a monogamous relationship feel that our cultural myths about relationships impact their own relationship? If so, in what ways do idealized notions impact individuals in relationships? How do people find their relationship to fit into and to differ from these cultural idealizations? What impact does the discrepancy between the real relationship and the idealized relationship have on the individual in the relationship? Finally, what is their response to these effects?

### *Cultural Myths and Romantic Idealizations*

#### *Prince Charming*

When asked to describe cultural narratives and idealized notions of relationships popular in our society, participants uniformly felt that fairytales portray themes of a certain ideal which revolve around the Prince Charming Character saving the heroine. The saving of the heroine is commonly linked with the image of her getting swept off her feet as one interviewee reported when asked to describe images of an idealized relationship:

I think of *Pretty Woman* or *Beauty and the Beast* where the man, “Prince Charming” comes and saves the woman...he saves the day. The woman was in the dumps and he comes and turns it all around. The man would come and take care of her and pay attention to her since she is helpless or naïve. So the story usually goes: He comes and sweeps her off her feet and she becomes very happy and loves all the attention.

This notion of the heroine being saved was echoed by numerous participants and restated in this narrative:

What comes to mind is *Cinderella* and Prince Charming sweeping you off your feet. The man taking care of the woman is the idealized image- that’s how it’s

supposed to be. The Donna Reed character, for example. The woman is the helpless character and the man swoops in and saves the day...and on top of it gives you flowers and gives you this litany that you are the most amazing, beautiful, and wonderful person.

Aside from fairytales, the rescuing fantasy is portrayed in alternative contexts as one participant explains:

The whole rescuing factor is a theme in a lot of fairytales but it's also a big factor in romantic comedy movies. These movies suggest that every girl wants to be rescued and maybe some women do and some women don't but I feel that it's still the same underlying theme, even among shows that try to be more modern. The girl isn't fulfilled enough just being an independent working woman and even if she has a great life, it seems like she's not complete until she has the man which will make the whole packaged deal.

That other movies aside from fairytales exhibit a rescuing theme is further shown in the following narrative of a twenty seven year old female:

I think for my generation, it's not so much *Cinderella* as it was TV bopper movies like *You Can't Buy Me Love* or *A Cinderella Story* and other movies that have been redone. You have the girl or the guy who is down and out and the most popular guy comes and sweeps them off their feet and they find each other. They connect on an emotional level and they get past the bad looks or the no beauty but then somehow they have a makeover and all of a sudden the girl that wasn't pretty is now beautiful and they date and fall in love and everything has a happy ending. No matter if you're down and out, it always ends up that you are beautiful and happy. You could have been the loser but then you find the guy and you put on some lipstick, take off your glasses, and your hair comes down, and you're, all of a sudden, a supermodel.

#### *Happily Ever After and a "Perfect" Romance*

Aside from the plotline of the girl being saved by the man, the previous narrative also mentioned the story line of 'happily ever after' which was touched upon by most of the interviewees. Interestingly, of the participants that mentioned the idea of 'happily ever after', none of them were able to convey exactly how it is illustrated in the movies. When asked how 'happily ever after' was portrayed, one interviewee responded with a

similar question, “The movie ends and the couple comes together and kiss for the first time and decide that they’re going to be together but what is the actual relationship and what are the consequences of the partnership? What does happen next?” Another respondent stated, “I don’t know. It’s hard to say because the marriage is usually the end of the movie. I mean, they don’t show the part of the movie where the girl has morning sickness or they don’t have enough money to make rent. That just doesn’t happen. Usually the movie ends and there is a marriage or a commitment. And then you don’t get to see what happens afterwards.” When asked to imagine what ‘happily ever after’ entailed, the individual continued, “the happily ever after probably involves the couple not growing apart and not hating each other. They don’t cheat on one another and get divorced- it’s just great from the commitment onward.” Another participant had similar remarks shown in the following narrative:

‘Happily ever after’ is always left to your assumption. Going back to movies or TV shows, a lot of times you’ll see high school sweethearts going to far away colleges but making a commitment to stay together when you know in real life that it doesn’t usually last. But they’re usually like ‘oh, we’re going to write each other every day’ or if the people are older in the movie it’s more likely that the scene closes with them kissing and walking off into the sunset. It’s left up to your interpretation that they ended on a good note and so you assume that they were happy and got married and had a family and everything was perfect.

The notion that movies ending in happily ever after destined that everything was “perfect” was also offered by another participant who stated, “When you find your soul mate in the movies, everything is perfect. Maybe they fight a little, but never too much. Things are romantic; there are flowers and vacations, and their sex life is great all of the time.” The portrayal of relationships as forever intimate and sensual was a notion of idealized relationships displayed in this narrative:

I think this idea of forever being attracted to each other and forever having this fun, flirty relationship is a quality of idealized relationships. Forever having something to talk about and sitting across the table from each other at dinner and still wooing each other with thoughts and observations, a constant stimulating conversation. Plus, there's this idea that love gets stronger and maintains its vibrancy, youth and sexiness. Like when you're 80 years old and your boobs are hanging down to your knees and the husband says 'I find you more beautiful today than yesterday.' There's this level of intimacy, tenderness and caring that seems to be pervasive in those relationships...the sensuality and sexiness lasts forever. You see pictures of couples that have children and it's still very sexy still. I think that they still have that spark.

This ideal was portrayed in the following narrative by another woman:

In Hollywood they portray the two people who get together and they have intense passion and everything is so tight and perfect and wonderful and it's never supposed to explode. Things are romantic, there are flowers and vacations and great sex. Also, everyone says the perfect thing at the perfect time.

#### *Romeo and Juliet and the Conflicted Romance*

Participants were quick to point out that not all of the idealized relationships portrayed start off happily. Many respondents noted that although many idealized relationships end in 'happily ever after', there is often a conflict associated with the relationship at its creation. As one interviewee noted, "in the movies, some initial obstacle that is coming between the two people has to be overcome so that they can go back to being happy and in love. Once that obstacle is taken over, it's a cake walk. It's just easy love for the rest of your life." Another respondent agreed, reporting, "there's always a conflict in the beginning of the relationship but it's a hump that's overcome. It's a bump in the road in the beginning but then it only makes them stronger and they grow and understand each other from there." Two other participants related story lines that involve overcoming obstacles. One mentioned the story of *Romeo and Juliet* and spoke about how their two families did not get along. A third interviewee mentioned the

movie *Titanic* which involved “the male character and the woman overcoming drama and different lifestyles to be together.” Another respondent mentioned the film *Grease* and its similar story line which she describes as the following:

I was thinking of *Grease* in relation to idealized love stories. I loved that movie when I was little. In it, she is a new student at the high school and she is prim and proper and he’s the greaser boy in the T-Bird so he’s cool and kind of a rebel. It’s hard for them to get together because they are from such different social groups but then they spend a summer together and fall in love. Because of their social differences, they couldn’t get it together at first but then she starts becoming cooler. She is beautiful and thin and they dress her up in all these sexy clothes...in the end she changes more into his kind of clothes like leather but he also changes into more of her preppy style. So there was some conflict leading up to them getting together but once they got together, everything was good and the movie ends with them driving off in the distance.

A theme in the respondents’ answers relating to relationship conflict was their observation that the problem is often one that focuses on the two characters initially getting together rather than a conflict relating to the couple staying together over time. One respondent noted, “it’s as if all the work that goes into the relationship happens to create the relationship. Once the two people overcame their obstacle and united, there was no more conflict.” A second individual described a similar plotline, “maybe there’s something that happens that keeps the man and the woman apart for a while and they struggle against all odds to be together. So there’s a sense that they overcome adversity to be with that person.” Respondents often related this to the concept of soul mate in that it often appeared that the two characters insisted on being together, despite the obstacles, because they felt it was their destiny and that they were meant for each other.

### *Soul Mates*

All twelve of the interviewees spoke in detail about the inclusion of the soul mate as a function of idealized relationships. Whereas some respondents named the term “soul



mate”, others referred to it as “the one”. As one thirty-one year old woman put it, “you’re lucky if you found ‘the one’ for you and you’re screwed if you don’t.” When asked to elaborate on what ‘the one’ meant to her, she responded, “it’s sort of when all the pieces fit and there’s somehow this magical understanding of the other person so that they get each other instantaneously.” That there’s some sort of magical underpinning in the finding of your soul mate was a response picked up by four interviewees. One woman described ‘the one’ as “the one person waiting out there that you need to let fate find.” One participant said, “all the stars align and everything falls into place and you’ll be together forever.” Two respondents identified the term ‘soul mate’ and ‘the one’ as the same. One participant mentioned the soul mate as “the one person out there that you’re in search of which totally completes you” and another said ‘the one’ was “the one person that you will be happy with forever and ever. In the movies, they usually suggest that there is just one person who will make you happy.”

Other participants, when they spoke about ‘the one’, felt that it implied a feeling of certainty with regard to the relationship. For example, one participant stated the following:

It is as if the woman knows that everything will work out perfectly. There was never any doubt or discussion for her. Everything falls into place and there is no debate. She knew that this was ‘the one’. The pieces fit together and there are no problems. The lust is there and everything fits right in place. I had my idea of the guy I wanted to marry, and here he is on my doorstep and it’s perfect. There is no questioning, just lust and giddiness.

A similar statement was echoed by another participant who spoke about the idea that you just know: “When movies talk about ‘just knowing’, that seems like an aspect of an idealized relationship. Being able to know immediately that the person is for you, and

that goes along with the idea of a soul mate. I'm not sure what it is that you are supposed to 'just know' but apparently it's a feeling. You would 'just know' that the person is for you and it just seems to happen easily. They do nice things for you and satisfy all your needs."

### *Conflict as Portrayed in Idealized Relationships*

Aside from feeling certain that 'the one' is who you are meant to be with, some respondents claimed that 'the one' implied an ease in the relationship. As one participant put it, "once you find the right person, love shouldn't be hard or difficult, it should just flow. You won't have to do any work in the relationship." One of the reasons for this, as stated by a thirty-three year old participant is because of mind reading: "Your soul mate is supposed to understand you indefinitely. They're supposed to get it without you having to tell them. Not just emotionally, but also physically- they are supposed to understand your body without you having to tell them." The concept of mind reading was cited by one female participant specifically in relation to adornment and gift giving. She stated:

Men are supposed to surprise you with flowers every once in a while on their own, without you nagging them that you wished they would get you flowers. Partners are also supposed to be good at giving gifts for holidays and birthdays. I think there's a myth that a partner should know exactly what you want without you telling them or they should come up with something that is perfect. Like if I tell him that my fingers are really cold when I bike, I think that he should pick up on that and get me bike gloves as a present.

Another woman agreed, saying, "Guys are supposed to bring home flowers or do nice things for you unannounced like clean off your car when it snowed 5 inches or prepare a romantic dinner, spontaneously."

Most respondents agreed that there was some fighting in idealized relationships but they pointed out that most arguments portrayed in the movies are around superficial disagreements. One participant related the sense that fighting is usually comical when seen on television, “I’m thinking about the scene in a TV show where the guy is watching football and the wife and he fight but it’s funny-mad. It’s more a comical scenario than someone actually getting mad or deeply upset about something, it’s more surface level.” One thirty-three year old male participant stated his opinion of how fighting is portrayed in idealized relationship in the following narrative:

In the stereotype, you have little spats and lovers’ quarrels but you always kiss and make-up and that’s a sweet part of the relationship. In the movies, the guy leaves during the fight and then realizes that he’s made a mistake and comes running back. Then, the relationship is even better- it’s like, whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. Usually the fights in the movies are a misunderstanding of some sort, as opposed to a general disagreement. In the movie, the fight is usually a circumstance; it’s not anything major that makes the person question compatibility. Rather, it is some kind of miscommunication or misunderstanding. In the movies, the fight is often caused by some external circumstance whereas in my experience that rarely happens because it’s usually more of an interpersonal conflict.

One participant mentioned the television show *The OC* and described the relationship of the parents: “They adore each other. They challenge each other and are there for each other, supporting one another. Any problem that they have, they deal with perfectly, in the most supportive way. They disagree with each other but the arguments are still dealt with in a supportive manner.”

All twelve of the participants pointed out that the notions of reality portrayed in television are not realistic. One individual spoke at length about how daily life is not portrayed:

The relationships always take place in big beautiful apartments and on TV, I never see any couples at work. I often think about *Friends* and how the characters always had all these relationships and nobody ever seemed like they were working. And even in books and magazines, it doesn't seem like a very realistic picture. They don't take into account doing chores and stuff like that. Instead, everything is very romanticized and it's all about cuddling. The idealized relationships don't bring into account the realistic factors that everybody has to deal with- movies never show the couples washing dishes and cooking dinner. Well, they do show people cooking dinner but it's always romanticized and they're feeding each other bites of food and nobody is talking about who wants to cut the onion because nobody wants to do that. Washing the dishes and taking out the trash is never mentioned- it's only all the good parts like sitting and cuddling together and going out on dates.

Another respondent who explained that movies tended to end in the 'happily ever after' moment spoke about the next step: "In the sequel, when you actually see these people living together you wonder what it looks like. What is it like to go to the bathroom in front of each other? To fart together? That isn't portrayed...so there's this idea of perfectionism and romanticism that doesn't include real life and getting your hands dirty and fighting and working through it."

#### *Gender Roles Portrayed in Idealized Relationships*

Some participants mentioned demographic qualities of idealized relationships portrayed in the media such as their tendency to be heterosexual and middle class. In addition, some participants spoke about the gender roles and characteristics of both the man and the woman in the idealized relationship.

When I was a little girl, I definitely thought that life was a fairytale. I was expecting the guy to take care of the woman and the family- to provide safety financially and physically. I thought the relationship would be very romantic and we would be very connected. But I also thought that the guy would be kind of rough, like a man's man with a tough outer shell but sensitive on the inside. I also thought the guy would be the pursuer and the girl's role was more to say 'no, no' and be persuaded into the relationship even though deep inside she secretly very much wanted to be in the relationship.

A second participant stated that she thought men in the relationship were supposed to constantly adore the woman. She said, “I remember being in junior high school and watching soap operas and seeing how these actors would talk to the women. They would say, ‘Oh baby, you’re amazing and blah, blah, blah...’ And I always thought that’s what men said to women. They compliment and told the woman how fabulous and wonderful she was and without her they were nothing and she was the greatest thing.” Another respondent discussed the portrayal of people in relationships as being all encompassing:

There’s this idea that the guy is everything: they’re rugged but tender, fun but smart. They can fix a leak and take care of the bills. The perfect couple can ski, play tennis, do the New York Times cross word puzzle, cook amazing dinners, fix their own house...it’s just never ending, you can do everything. I’m thinking of an SUV commercial where the couple is driving through this gorgeous mountain range and they pop on their skis. They’re each other’s best friend, yet there is still an intimacy and sexiness. You can sit and eat gooey cheese French Fries and be friends at lunch and then wear a sexy black dress and be elegant and romantic at dinner.

#### *The Etiology of Cultural Myths and Romantic Idealizations*

All twelve participants indicated that the previously mentioned idealized images of relationships stemmed from the media. As one respondent voiced, “movies, songs, magazines...any media.” Some participants elaborated more specifically about certain media aspects as shown in the following narrative:

Every form of media. Books, movies, magazines. The pressure of love is insidious. When I go through magazines, the word sexy, sex, or love are in the vast majority of the magazines. In Seventeen, you’re taking quizzes to find out if the man is right for you. So it’s insidious, it’s amazing how prevalent it is. Even people who are very intelligent and know it’s bullshit, you can’t be immune to it.

Another participant reported:

These idealizations come from romantic comedies and even old classic romantic movies. Although I feel like in older movies, relationships had more conflict

even though they were still romanticized. Like *Casablanca*, this is a classic love story but still brought conflict into the story. The romantic comedies today always have a happy ending. *The Break-Up* is a movie that didn't have a fairytale ending and that sticks out as being very unusual. Mostly the movies are all about the happy ending. Aside from movies, I would say books, TV shows, fairytales, and music. Overall, there are more images in the media that end up happily ever after than ever before it seems. Even *Sex in the City* which I was a big fan of because it seemed to strive to portray independent city gals. But, when the series ended, they all ended up married or in a committed relationship. So it seemed a little hypocritical because I feel like they tried to portray these women as different in that they didn't need the fairytale or the Prince Charming, but in the end they all ended up with a guy. It's not to say that they didn't all face conflicts leading up to that and I think it was a fantastic show portraying a lot of the realities of relationships because they showed more of the nitty gritty. But in the end, they all ended up walking into the sunset with their partners. They all found happiness and settled down with these guys who were being portrayed as their Prince Charming.

Another participant described the portrayal of idealized relationships on sitcoms. She stated, "It's prevalent, even as far back as the '50s where they obviously had the same problems and relationship issues that we have today. For example, *Leave it to Beaver* where it's the wife homemaker who says, 'Bye, Honey, when you come home I'll have dinner on the table' and their kids bicker but they always learned a lesson from it at the end."

Television soap operas were also identified as portraying idealized relationships by another woman participant:

I think for me, the idealizations came mostly from television. I grew up in the generation where the show *Dallas* was popular. My mom and I would watch it together. I also remember being a kid and watching soap operas with my girlfriends in junior high school. So it was in sitcoms that you saw the perfect little happy family, like the show *Growing Pains*. But then *Cinderella* and *Snow White*- they had the image of waiting for the men to save them.

In addition to television and movies, two participants named advertising as a prime culprit in the dissemination of idealized images along with their products. For example,

one woman participant identified diamond advertisements and the couple who say, “we finally found each other.” Another male respondent stated:

Idealized images are also in advertising. The goal isn't necessarily to convince people to fall in love; the goal is to excite people with the idea of falling in love in order to sell something. Look at ads on the television- if it's an ad for some geriatrics thing, it's a happily married older couple saying, “I've been in love with you for fifty years and...” It's selling that idea of blissful happiness and we're constantly trying to buy that idea in our products. The capitalist aspect of falling in love is a very lucid concept. Falling in love is for sale and it is why we buy a car and sweaters and everything else.

### *Ways in Which Relationships Fit the Idealized Notion*

#### *The Falling in Love Period*

The majority of respondents reported that the beginning part of their relationship fit into the notions of idealized relationships because there was a lot of romance and excitement. As one participant phrased it, “The falling in love part of our relationship that is portrayed in the movie was real for me. In the beginning of our relationship I was googly-eyed and we were talking on the phone for hours each night. That's where the movies can capture a certain reality- that initial phase.” Another participant echoed that opinion in the following statement:

We had that initial excitement that is shown in the movies when we were first dating. I remember wondering if he was going to call and having butterflies and excitement when I was going to see him. It was that new kind of exciting crush at the beginning. And that's something that is out there in movies, especially the teenybopper movies with the high school kids. It's that excitement when you're discussing what you're going to wear and wondering if you should call or if you should wait for him to call or find a time and place where he's going to be and bump into him. It was that early and exciting and spontaneous beginning romance that is shown in the movies.

One twenty three year old female participant noted a parallel process when she said, “When we were in high school and went on a school trip junior year, we got together.

Before that we would flirt. I was on the tennis team and he was on the football team and each day, I would be at practice and he and his team would walk by the tennis courts and I would always make sure that I was standing by the fence so that we could say 'hi'. I would get butterflies and get all excited before he would walk by each day." A thirty year old woman participant explained the beginning of her relationship in a similar fashion:

I think that our relationship was really romantic at the beginning. There were a lot of gifts and surprises, like leaving each other notes and cute things like that. I think that the beginning of a relationship is really magical and romantic. You have sex three times a day and your feelings are so strong. There's a certain infatuation quality which I think is what is portrayed in the media. It's the infatuation, it's not the long term commitment that's portrayed. Also, I got butterflies and got excited when I saw him and I wanted to be with him every second because it was so fun. It was also really romantic. We went on trips and would do stuff. It was really easy, too- no issues, no fighting. We weren't living together either so we weren't worried about who was going to pay the bills and we hadn't had to do much compromising. It was romantic and exciting.

Another participant reported that she actually experienced a movie scenario during the beginning of her relationship when she realized that she wanted to date her acquaintance:

After having a great date with this guy, I told him that I couldn't commit to him right then since I felt like I had to clean my plate of the other people I was seeing at the time. When he called me to see if we could go out again I told him, 'I can't do this right now. It's not that I don't want to and I'm really sorry.' A week later, I'm on the subway train and have a movie moment. The movie I think of is *When Harry Met Sally*. Billy Crystal says at the end of the movie "Once you realize who you want to spend the rest of your life with, you want the rest of your life to start right away." And then Billy Crystal runs and runs and finds the girl at the New Year's Eve party. I invoked the image of Billy Crystal saying that. I thought that exact line in my head when I was on the subway train and I realized that I wanted to be with this guy. I ran as fast as I could to my apartment and called him up and said, 'I'm ready. I'm sorry. I'm crazy. Of course I want to be with you.' I went up to the farm for our next date. We were on the phone with each other for hours every night and seeing each other on the weekends and three weeks later we literally wrote a letter to our future children and left it in the glove compartment of his very prized truck. We were sort of joking but really believing



in that moment. With us, it just felt like everything fit. We've been together ever since and got married two years ago.

A fifth woman participant had a comparable experience in which she had a sense that she wanted to marry her boyfriend soon after they got together due to their connection:

The way we met was very romantic. I developed a crush on him because he was in one of my classes, and then there were all these little times when we would pass each other on the trail and I remember getting really excited. And, I still remember the first time our hands touched. The first meeting was cute and romantic- it fit a typical movie where you talk about him with your friends and you get all excited when you run into him by chance or you're walking and you hope that they see you. Once we actually got together, it hit hard. I knew that we were going to get married because I had never felt what I had felt before. I had such intense feelings for him, and I had never felt safe and comfortable before. I hadn't felt a connection like we felt. That was in November and I remember asking for a body pillow for Christmas that year because I thought that if anything ever happened and we broke up, I would never get another good night's sleep. I just couldn't see my life without him.

### *Intimate Connection*

In addition to the initial feelings of excitement mentioned in the previous narrative, the respondent also touched on strong feelings of comfort and safety which other participants also noted as an aspect of an idealized relationship. As one participant illustrated:

I knew from the first time I met him that he was someone that was going to be around for a while. I didn't think right away that I was going to marry him but I did think that he would be in my life for a long time. Quickly thereafter, probably after a month, I thought that I would marry him. The only way I can describe it was that it was complete comfort with him. I didn't have to explain myself. I had fun with him and I was completely myself and I wasn't ashamed or scared of that. He loved my complete self. It was a combination of the feeling of being myself and the complete comfort that is instantaneous. It's sort of like with a friend- that you can be friends with someone and it takes six months to get to know them and finally you know that person but with him it was that I instantly knew him and I was instantly comfortable.

Another theme in the respondents' narratives focused on the romantic aspects of their

relationship. Two participants used the term “love-dovey” to describe the ways that they were romantic with each other. As one participant noted, “I felt fairly early on that I could marry him because he was very romantic and he is very thoughtful and he continues to be. We used to send each other lots of greeting cards and write each other notes and he still does that so we still have that little love-dovey stuff which I think are important to keep going in the relationship.” Another woman participant felt similarly as shown in the following narrative:

I think that my relationship lives up to some of the idealized images in the way that we both articulate to each other how we feel and what we think about the other person. And sometimes it can be construed as love-dovey because we’re saying things like “you’re sweet, baby” and “you’re great”. But it’s also very concrete too about telling each other, “you did a really great job at work” or “that was really nice when you did that,” so I think we meet up to those idealized images because sometimes it has that mushy flair. But sometimes it’s more about telling the other person what you appreciate about them.

### *Personality Qualities*

One woman participant spoke about how her partner had similar qualities to men portrayed in the media in idealized ways, “My partner definitely has the tough guy ‘I’m in charge’ persona but inside he’s a sensitive creampuff. He has this image that ‘he’s going to work and take care of his family’ type of attitude. He also has that protective feel.” Finally, there was one participant who reported that there are no ways that her relationship fits into the idealized notions of relationships portrayed in the media and our culture.

### *Ways in which Relationships did not fit the Idealized Notions*

There were four major themes within the participants’ responses related to the ways that individuals felt their relationship did not fit into the idealized notions of

relationships. They included feeling like their relationship required more “work” than relationships that are idealized, having a relationship that was not as romantic as they would have thought, having doubts about the relationship when most idealized relationships do not divulge doubts, and experiencing logistical problems in their relationship that were unexpected.

#### *The Amount of Effort Put into the Relationship*

The majority of respondents reported that their relationships required more work than was portrayed in the movies. For example, one respondent reported about her relationship, “We’ve had to work hard to be on the same page, it wasn’t something that came easily. It’s not like in the movies when you’re running on the beach together and totally free of all the real-life worries and blissfully in love. Life is not a honeymoon all of the time. You have to deal with real problems all the time.” Another respondent made a similar statement regarding the work that is done in her relationship:

Our relationship does not live up to the idealized images in the sense that you do have to work at things. It’s not like you have to work really hard but there are certain topics here and there that we know we don’t agree on and work to find the common ground when we disagree. Like maybe I’ve dealt with my money one way and he dealt with his money another way and we have to find a common ground. Those sorts of things aren’t even touched upon in the movies. So for us it’s not a fight and it’s not a disagreement but it’s more tension. It’s everyday tensions that occur because you’re still two different people who have two different ideas and two lives and those everyday little occurrences that you never even thought about can be different.

Two respondents spoke specifically about how the longevity of their relationships has required that both partners make compromises. One male respondent has defined these compromises as the main work in the relationship as shown in the following narrative:

We've had to work to make our relationship good. I've had to swallow my pride and I've had to convince her to be different than who she is without changing her from who she is and also accept her for who she is but also make sure that we are making decisions that are good for both of us...to be able to compromise. The things that are frustrating and difficult about someone don't surface right away because they are overshadowed by the initial falling in love period. It's after that wears off that you change your mind from thinking that some behavior is cute to the same behavior being annoying. So this kind of work seems to be different than the work that is portrayed in movies. Our work is about listening and learning.

A female correspondent maintained a similar stance:

Overall, we've been together for a few years and there's more work involved than there was in the beginning. The work is usually about compromising about stuff and having to work on how we communicate with each other and how we make decisions because that can be hard sometimes. I think that there are things about every relationship that are hard and that you have to work on and are you willing to live with those things for the rest of your life? Or are you willing to work on those things for the rest of your life? I've had to ask myself those questions.

### *Logistical Struggles*

Some of the work identified by three of the interviewees, which was inconsistent with idealized portrayals of relationships in the media, centered on logistical problems the couple was experiencing. For example, one female individual conveyed a struggle in her relationship due to the difference in religion between her and her partner. "My partner and I have had some logistical problems. I was concerned that since I am Jewish and he is Catholic, he would not want to marry me. We've talked about it with regards to each other and have had some discussions about how we would raise our kids, but not everything is settled and we'll have to continue to discuss how we will deal with our inter-religious relationship." Another woman respondent noted that her main difficulty with the relationship has focused around logistics related to where they live:

I question certain aspects of my relationship and the main questioning these days has been how our relationship is going to work realistically when our two families

are far apart when we are both very much connected and close to our families. I really would like to move back to Colorado at some point but he's very rooted in Pennsylvania. I'm not sure how this is going to happen. The movies don't show you the logistical challenges. How do you make the relationship work in the context of our families being so far away?

This particular challenge was echoed by a third participant who spoke about the difficulty she and her husband have had compromising on a place to live. The interviewee explained that she "would prefer to live in a major metropolitan city while her husband prefers the country and farmlands." She reported that they have not yet decided upon a location to buy a house and that it is a constant stress in their relationship because the compromise is difficult.

#### *Uncertainty in Commitment*

In addition to individuals reporting the work involved in their relationship does not meet idealized images, and that logistical issues play a role in causing unexpected problems, three respondents reported they felt doubts in their relationship about committing to a long term partnership. As one male respondent put it, "I wanted to have the experience of 'you just know' but I didn't. It took work. I made a thoughtful decision but I was expecting to 'just know'. It was a hard decision to make; it was not an easy one. In the movies, there is no questioning because it's obvious that this person is 'the one'. I didn't have that experience, I was questioning it." The feeling of 'you just know' that the respondent recalled in the previous quote was echoed by another respondent:

One other thing that's not portrayed in our movies is someone in the relationship having doubts. I've had doubts if I want to continue to commit to the relationship with my partner and if I even believe in marriage and if I do, do I want to get married to this person...and how do you know if this is the right person. You don't see doubts being portrayed, instead it's "You just know." That's bullshit.

How do you “just know”? You can feel really sure in the moment but it doesn’t mean that you don’t grow apart in ten years and that you don’t meet someone else that you fall madly in love with. I’ve never been one of those girls that can’t wait to get married. I’m terrified to get married! How do you know when and why?

A response by another participant was similar:

I was expecting to “just know” because that’s such a popular thing in the movies and I thought that’s just how it was. But instead, I made a very thoughtful decision. I had to decide to commit, it didn’t just come naturally and without thought. You have to make a decision if you want to have a long-term relationship. I know that there are other people out there for me and I think that’s the reason that I haven’t been looking for my “soul mate”.

#### *Lack of Continued Romance in the Relationship*

Four participants poignantly noted that their relationship is not as romantic as relationships portrayed in the movies. As one woman participant stated, “There isn’t romance like you see in the movies. He’s bought me flowers a handful of times but that’s it. He doesn’t plan things or take me out for dinner or take me on a horse drawn carriage ride.” Two participants spoke specifically about how “real life” realities like work and chores get in the way of being romantic. One interviewee noted, “In one sense, even though you know you have to do all that realistic sort of stuff like go to work and do the laundry, the romantic image would be that every night would be a romantic dinner and neither one would have to cook it or wash dishes, so it would be nice if neither one had to do work so that you could always sit on the sofa and cuddle or do something together and never have to worry about that other stuff.” Another woman interviewee made a similar statement:

My fiancé will often surprise me with little things to make me smile, be that lighting candles or starting a fire. But there are also times when things aren’t picture perfect. I can remember one time when he was napping and I prepared a candlelight dinner for us. When he got up he wasn’t interested in the candlelight dinner, he was tired and wanted to watch sports. I, of course, was thinking ‘but I

just made a candlelight dinner, you're supposed to sweep me off my feet.' But we ate and watched TV instead of having a romantic dinner. It's like the long days that people have at work are not incorporated into the movies. Whenever you see someone that has a long day at work in a movie it usually leads to drinking and divorce and it becomes a depressing movie. But, in all reality, people have long days and if you made a candlelight dinner, it might not go how you planned.

A fourth interviewee noted the lack of romance due to their friendship-style marriage as shown in this narrative:

We are really good friends, we have no self consciousness whatsoever, we are completely comfortable with each other. But, we have a hard time transitioning to being a lady and a gentleman rather than in the movies where the transition seems to go very smoothly. We're very good at being equal and sharing responsibility but we're not good at taking on the roles of the gentleman and the lady that I want sometimes because I want to feel like a lady. I want to feel beautiful, sexy, wanted and desired. So even though I'm strong and independent, sometimes I want to be taken care of. Also, I don't get flowers and I don't have chivalry. The whole sensuality and intimacy is something that we don't have. I guess in general, we don't fit that "it's always vibrant and excitement" theme. It's not always vibrant and sexual and we don't always have stimulating conversations- we're not always blowing each other's minds or being intimate with each other. I've always wanted more romance in our marriage. He says that he comes up behind me and kisses my neck but I remember that happening once when I was skinning chicken-which is the worst time to do that. It's not sexy when I have raw chicken in my hands to kiss my neck. And I also think that he does do some of the things that people do in the movies, like glance at me from across the room, but I don't see him doing it. In the movies, the camera is guiding the scene and will zoom in as the guy looks across the room at his wife in admiration but in real life, we don't see it. If I'm at a party, I have no idea if he's looking at me longingly from across the room but I want that. I want him to be doing that. And who knows, maybe he does do that sometimes but those things go overlooked and unnoticed because they are so subtle. So I guess I don't get the feeling of romance from our relationship that I do from movies or whatever else.

#### *The Ability to get all Needs Met*

The final theme of this question reflected interviewees' statements which focused on getting their needs met by their partners. Two participants spoke about how their partners do not fulfill all their needs. As one woman put it, "I think that there is a whole

other me that he doesn't get and that he doesn't satisfy. And I think that's true for him too. I think that our minds are very compatible with each other but the lifestyles that we each want to live are completely different." This sentiment was echoed by another woman participant as shown in the following narrative:

My desire to travel all over the world with him is not a desire that he can fulfill right now at this moment because he's not interested. In some ways I'm a little sad that I can't bring him stories and be excited to go volunteer in South America. It makes me sad because I would like to share these things with him but he's not ready for it yet. I have to bring it up slowly. I don't feel like I can be myself. I think that he's learning about me even as we go. I think that I mostly do not share with him these certain aspects of myself and my desire to travel or live around the world. Traveling freaks him out a little bit because he's a very rooted person. He's discovering my traits as we go and sometimes I think that he doesn't really get it all yet, he's getting there. I think he might be pushing those parts of me away because it scares him.

#### *The Effect of the Discrepancy to the Individual*

##### *Questioning and Uncertainty*

The discrepancy between the participants' real and idealized relationship did appear to effect the way they experienced their relationship. Interviewees spoke openly about questioning their relationship due to the discrepancy between their real relationship and idealized versions. As one woman participant reported, "I think I may have experienced the 'you just know' moment, but there was much more questioning than there is in the movies. And in that respect, my relationship doesn't live up to the ideal. As a result, I've been thinking a lot about the commitment piece. Can I live the rest of my life with this person? Can I commit for the rest of my life to this one person?" A second interviewee had a similar experience of questioning her ability to commit to the relationship. An important piece that she mentioned and that other interviewees pointed



out was that the questioning of the relationship goes hand in hand with an assessment of the partnership. That assessment is shown in the following account:

I struggle with the fact that it's not a honeymoon all the time. And then I question if I'm putting too much pressure on my partner. Also, there have been times when I've questioned how far I want to commit to him. I would think, 'if it's this way now, what's it going to be like when we're married and have a family.' My grandmother always said that whatever you don't like now, you won't like 100 times more when you're married and have kids. So I've worried about it. I worry that I'm always going to have to be the responsible one since my partner is pretty lackadaisical with finances. In general, I am very cautious in how I proceed in my relationship and am very conscious to actively think about if this is what I want forever. So I guess when I'm thinking about these things, I'm really assessing the relationship. Sometimes I start to think about what the chances are of it changing. I start imagining how it might be better or different and try to figure out if I'm going to be OK with things not changing or in ten years am I going to be pissed off because it hasn't.

The exact reasoning for the questioning of the relationship seemed to differ from individual to individual. One interviewee made a correlation between the amount of romance in her relationship and her questioning. She stated, "As a result of our relationship not being vibrant, I question whether we are right for each other. Since I wanted the romance, I would question if this was right. I was also assessing myself and my needs. At one point, we took a break because I wanted to have more romance." A second interviewee identified the level of romance in her relationship as a struggle and reported that she finds herself comparing her relationship to those relationships shown in the movies:

The discrepancy between my relationship and those idealized relationships definitely affects me and I think that mostly the effects are negative. I think that as much as I feel like I have a handle on some of the romantic propaganda that's out there, it still affects me. I watch these movies where the sex is great and they look perfect and it makes me distressed. I have gone into tailspins thinking about how my relationship doesn't look like it does in the movies. In my tailspin, I was worrying and doubting and questioning where the fire and the passion in my relationship was. And I think it's wrapped up in a fear of commitment because

you can go out and have hot sex with some hot guy, and that sounds fun sometimes but I don't think that's really me. So I think I was worrying and doubting and analyzing the discrepancy between what we have and what you see in stylized media moments. The other reason that I doubted my relationship was because I did not have that 'I just know' certainty. Not having that certainty made me feel confused which led to me having doubts about my relationship. If you don't 'just know', is something wrong? Is the person not your soul mate? That position of not knowing is scary for me and it was really hard to be there.

Another participant responded that the physical beauty of his partner is what led to the questioning of if his relationship:

I've had to grapple with the physical attractiveness of my partner. She wasn't my type, physically speaking, and I expected that my wife would have a certain physical beauty so I had to think about if it was going to be a problem...and sometimes it is. Sometimes I'm not feeling like I want to rip her clothes off. That's challenging because it makes me wonder if I'm supposed to be feeling physically attracted to my mate all the time. So I started to question myself. Is there someone with the right intellect and the right look? Is that person out there? I was questioning a lot and I think ultimately you never know for sure. The questioning causes anxiety and it causes a rift.

As another participant explained, the questioning of the relationship can also result from two people who have different values:

I think I question the relationship when it involves religion...usually I question the God thing. In my family, we're fairly religious and in my partner's family, they're the opposite. And he's open in a lot of ways but not in that way and that's a conflict. I guess I'm sad about it because my parents are probably going to be disappointed and hurt. I don't know how it's going to work, especially when it comes down to the kids because I would like to at least expose our kids to it. I think sometimes I get resentful because with the God thing, I guess I thought that he would just go along with it. And it seems like he's putting his foot down. He says that it makes him feel weird and that he's already been exposed to it and that he's not interested.

### *Strong Emotions*

For three female participants, sadness and resentment were prevalent feelings when asked about the effects of the real/idealized discrepancy on their relationship. One interviewee reported that when she and her partner were unable to find a common ground

about some issues, she began to feel doubt about the relationship. “After feelings of doubt, I usually worry and then feel sadness that it might be over. I start to feel anxiety, too, when I start to question our relationship.” Another participant identified resentment as a feeling that builds up for her when her partner does not go out of his way to do nice things for her:

I have no doubts about wanting to be with him but I have mixed feelings about some of the things that he’s not able to offer me. Occasionally I get resentful, like when I had to plan my own 30<sup>th</sup> birthday party because I knew that he wouldn’t. So sometimes I can get annoyed and resentful that he doesn’t step-up and do some things that he wouldn’t normally do that would make me happy. We end up talking about it and I know that he feels bad about it and I think that sometimes he feels that he can’t live up to the expectations that I’ve set for him.

As one female participant noted, the resentment can also build up when two people disagree about lifestyle choices. “Sometimes I’ll blame him for not doing anything to make me feel like a lady and then he’ll get disappointed in me for wanting jewelry and buying into some of that commercialism stuff. But what other resources do you have to show your love? What other actions would demonstrate love other than the ones that are shown on the media? Telling me that you love me is not enough all of the time.”

#### *Aspects of the Relationship Affected By the Real/Idealized Discrepancy*

##### *Dissatisfaction*

Whereas the previous section presented the ways in which relationship discrepancies affect the individuals in the relationship, the following section will offer a discussion of the effects to the relationship as a whole. The interviewees spoke openly and personally about the cost of the discrepancy to their relationship. One theme that was particularly present for multiple participants was the impact of the questioning process on the relationship. As one participant put it:

It's hard to love someone when you're questioning if this is the right person. It makes it hard to accept someone else's love when you're in a state of questioning about the person and in a place of more uncertainty. There were times when I felt that I was less certain of the relationship. Therefore, I felt pressure to be more certain and that was stressful. I have also been in relationships when I was the more certain one and that is painful. It's very hard because you don't want to show your love too much if you're afraid that you're going to get hurt. If the two people love each other the same amount and are certain about the relationship the same amount, then that leads to trust and confidence as oppose to distrust and insecurity which are the things that come from a lack of balance.

Another participant had a similar experience in that the questioning of the relationship led to dissatisfaction. "All of my worrying about if this is the right relationship can potentially suck all the air out of the relationship and not make it as exciting. The worrying can really affect the exciting part of the relationship because it takes away the desire. Plus, when we're arguing about something or I'm nervous about if things are going to ever change, we're not connecting. When we're not getting along, we usually argue about things and that interrupts our daily life because you're not talking and you're not connecting with each other."

#### *Disruption in the Connection*

Feeling a lack of connection due to the relationship negotiation with a partner was a sentiment expressed by two additional participants:

I watch some of these television shows where the husband and wife are all lovey-dovey with each other and I think, 'I want to be like that. That's a good marriage.' So we'll get into arguments about being more romantic and we'll get frustrated at each other. When we're frustrated, usually our sexual intimacy goes down and we won't connect with each other. When we don't feel that connection, we'll usually bicker and get annoyed at each other. He'll annoy me and then I'm a bitch and I act that way towards him which will hurt him. He'll say things back at me which express his pain. Sometimes when I hurt him, I'll feel a need to recover and then try to make him feel better. When that happens, we connect again. So I wonder if I provoke him so that I feel needed and then we connect, like I would pick fights so that then we can make-up and be close to each other.

A similar statement regarding a lack of connection is shown in the following narrative:

Being in a state of constant assessment around if this is how it's supposed to be has impacted my ability to be present in the moment. I think I'm busy wondering if this is the right person and if I would know that and if I wouldn't know that...I wonder how I even go about making the decision of if this is the right person and the right relationship. And you really can not have a relationship when you're in that space. You're too busy worrying and feeling anxious and doubting yourself about how you will know if this is the relationship for me and what if it's not, then what happens or if it is, how will I know. All these questions lead to you not being able to connect with each other because you're in your head. Eventually I would wonder if the problem was my partner. I was being judgmental and then I realized that if I'm in that anxious and doubting place then I'm taking him for granted. I'm not seeing the really great things about him if I'm worrying about figuring out if our relationship is right or not. I think that led me to being more withdrawn and more in my head and not as spontaneous. In some ways I think I tried to escape the situation so that I didn't have to worry about these issues anymore. Or I would fantasize about dating someone else and wonder if that person is really the one. Then I usually look back when I think those things and get frustrated because I don't even believe in 'the one'.

One female participant noted that her relationship has had increased fighting and power struggles due to her and her partner's struggle to establish certain compromises:

I think we end up in a lot of power struggles related to our dissatisfaction in some aspects of our relationship. In some ways we feel like we're being deprived or we've lost control of our lives because we have to be accountable to this other person. Sometimes we're having an argument over something that elicits this sense of a power struggle and it may be about whether we should put more salt in the food but in my mind I realize this is really about the fact that I want to live in New York City and not about whether we should put more salt in the food or that I don't want him to tell me that I shouldn't put more salt in my food. Power struggle is my biggest answer and by recognizing it we've been able to work on it and we've made it a lot better. But that's the cycle and the pattern.

### *Coping Skills and Responses*

Some themes emerged in the participants responses regarding coping mechanisms used to manage their relationship in the face of the negative consequences relating to the real and idealized relationship discrepancy. For example, communication was the most cited coping mechanism used by couples, followed by proactive steps to renew intimacy

in their own relationship and demystify romantic ideals put forth in the media.

Interviewees also identified the process they followed to make a commitment to their partner while experiencing doubts as a way to come to terms with feelings of uncertainty. For two participants, that commitment has also resulted in feelings of sadness and grief as the realities of a long-term relationship, such as compromise and sacrifice, are experienced. Finally, some participants identified coping mechanisms such as reading self-help books and talking to a therapist as key elements which improved their relationship with themselves and their partners.

### *Communication*

Six of the interviewees identified communication as a key strategy that they employ to maintain their relationship. As one woman participant responded:

I talk to my partner about my turmoil and express my doubts. In some ways it is helpful and in some ways it's not because he can get stressed out. But he needs to know where I'm at or else it doesn't seem fair because if I decide to leave and go to California, he should know what my thinking is. So even though it causes stress, I've decided that it still has to be discussed. Plus, I value that honesty and I think that he can handle some ambiguity. He won't forever and he's said that. But for now he's willing to hang out there. I want to have this be a dialogue about what we both want and how we can make the decisions together as more of a relational process rather than we all go off to our separate worlds and decide what we want and report to the other person.

A similar response was given by another participant who stated, "We definitely communicate. Sometimes it's a struggle when one or both of us are avoiding things, it can be hard to get the conversation rolling. But eventually we do talk and we are pretty straight with each other. It's taken a lot of work and maturity to get to the place where we're able to talk so candidly and openly." One other participant mentioned that she communicates with her partner about specific problems. "We're pretty good about

recognizing what it is that we're really angry about and then we talk about it. I'm a fairly self-reflective person in general and I work hard to be aware of my feelings and name them for what they are. I think a lot about things and I'm always sure to voice my opinion when I'm not happy about things." Another respondent had this to say about the role that communication plays in her relationship:

I'm a big talker so we talk about stuff a lot. I feel that by talking about stuff, and keeping the communication lines open, it prevents anything from building up. If I'm upset or annoyed by something, it's pretty obvious and I'll say exactly what's on my mind and we'll talk about it right then and there so that it doesn't get any more conflicted than it already is.

As shown above, communication between partners is identified as an important strategy. In addition, communication with friends and family members was also recognized by two participants. For example, one woman participant reported the benefit of speaking to her friends, as shown in the following narrative:

Speaking with other people in relationships and finding that other people are having similar experiences is helpful. Finding out that other people have the same problems helps me to realize that it's normal. I've heard the same complaints that I have from other people in relationships and that is comforting. And then I usually will laugh at the problems. When it used to be you dealing with the problem by yourself it can be hard to deal with and stressful but then you find out that others are going through the same thing, it starts to become a joke. It becomes tolerable and laughable instead of something that annoys you.

Another female participant explained that talking with her friends and hearing about their experiences in relationships helped her feel that she was not the only person who did not have the 'you just know' moment:

I think my friends might have helped me form that opinion that you can be comfortable even if you don't 'just know'. None of them has really had a for sure, you just know, experience. It's always been working through things. My two friends starting dating their boyfriends after being friends for a few years and they didn't know right away. I also have another friend who has had many boyfriends but she hasn't had that "I just know" experience ever either. So then I

thought that it was normal to not 'just know' and I think maybe that's how I became comfortable with it.

### *Deciding on "the One"*

Three of the participants spoke about the thoughtful decision that went into committing to their partner in the face of uncertainty. As one female interviewee noted, "Eventually you make a choice; there's no magic to it. You either choose to be with that person and commit further or you don't. You have to have fruition and responsibility in your choices." A second participant made a similar statement:

There comes a point and you just decide if what you have is good enough. Or are your troubles getting in the way too much that you're going to end up hating the person. Or are you going to decide that this is the way it is and am I going to stay and deal with that as it comes up and work on it. It's a very conscious decision. You know what is in front of you and you decide if you're going to be fine with that. If the answer is "no" then you leave and if the answer is "yes" then you move on with it. It doesn't mean that you don't deal with it again and again and again.

Another participant said that waiting out the uncertainty and being able to tolerate it is something that he has learned to do:

I started out questioning our relationship a lot, but it has decreased. The more successes that we have as a couple, the less I question. A lot of this has been waiting it out. Every once in a while I would go through a period of questioning and I wouldn't tell her. I would try to hide it and that was hard but I would try to wait it out and it would go away. Inevitably, I would go back to feeling good about it. I didn't know that it was going to go away at first but what I've come to realize is maybe that's what long-term relationships are- it's not walking away the second you question it and the second that it's not perfect. If you did that, you would walk away from every relationship, undoubtedly.

A sense of maturity and experience which was noted by the interviewee quoted in the previous statement was similar to an understanding noted by one other participant. She states, "I think that the ways that we do not meet up to idealized expectations is somewhat about the relationship but it's somewhat about life and getting older and



realizing that all of your dreams don't necessarily come true and that you have to work with your resources and not give up the dream and keep trying to make the dream happen but at some point be a little bit more grounded."

### *Being Proactive*

Another theme identified by this researcher was the proactive steps that individuals take in order to improve their relationship. These steps vary from making time to go on dates and making time for one another at home. The importance of romantic dates is expressed by one interviewee in the following narrative:

Romantic date night is something that we always did in our relationship. When we started living together we would be hanging out and then realize, 'Oh, we have to cook dinner, it doesn't just magically appear'. We used to go out for dinner a lot but when we started living together we realized, we have to cook, we have to do the laundry, we have to do the grocery shopping, but we can still have romantic date night. So he'll still take me out for date night because it is fun and we don't want to lose that. I think that's really important. I always tell him that I want to be 50 years old and still going out on dates because it's the most important thing in a relationship. A lot of parents that I babysat for will go out on a date night and they will tell me that it's the best thing for their relationship. And my parents never went out on dates towards the end of their marriage and I wonder how their marriage would have been different if they had. With all of the stress in life like kids and jobs, it's very easy to lose the romantic side but I think that's when relationships go down hill. Marriages can easily break-up when you don't have that romance- you need to have that romance.

Finding time for romance is an approach identified by a second participant. She stated, "We've made some changes with how we make time for each other and how we interact sexually. For example, we weren't having sex that much because of our work schedule and we were tired and exhausted so we changed that pattern and made time to be intimate together in the morning." A third participant had a similar comment:

I'll take steps to add some spark into my relationship. We'll try to have date night to spark things up and I'll try to make myself sexy. I'll set the mood and I'll do things to promote intimacy. I'll change the sheets and clean the bedroom to set

the scene and get me feeling sexier. I'm also planning on remodeling my bathroom to include a large bathtub so that I can have that movie experience that I want- the one where I take a bath and he sits next to me and strokes my hair while I'm bathing. So I'm currently actively trying to change the physical environment to get my romance needs met.

For one female participant, redefining the definition of romance was a key strategy to reconfiguring her romantic ideal. As she explains, "As I've gotten older, I've been more exposed to other ways of viewing romance. For example, we get an REI catalog that features outdoor gear and there are pictures of a man and a woman in shorts and hiking and I think that is really romantic. I feel like we fit that picture more and that has helped reshape my thinking and realize that there are things that we do which are romantic. We go hiking in beautiful places together, but we don't do candlelight dinners. I used to feel badly about that but I don't as much anymore."

#### *Deconstructing Cultural Messages*

A strategy identified by multiple participants to counteract the effects of idealized notions of relationships is to deconstruct the messages and the facets of idealized relationships portrayed in the media. Participants spoke both about questioning media messages as well as questioning the unrealistic expectations. As one woman participant noted, "I've started to question my questioning of the relationship and I've tried to figure out what expectations have come from the media. In the back of my mind, my expectation is that my partner will fulfill all my needs, even though when I think about it consciously I know that is a ridiculous thought. Who can do that? Nobody can do it. It's impossible. I've also started to wonder if it's fair to be questioning and instead I think that if you love someone, you should just love them- not put pressure on them for the ways that you want them to be different and put all these expectations on them." Another

female participant spoke directly about how she made an effort to analyze movies and deconstruct their messages:

One thing that has helped me, I think, is analyzing movies and TV shows, which I do a lot. A lot of times I'll watch movies and think that it's totally not realistic. I think to myself that she's not doing the laundry or whatever it may be. I realized that although part of me wants that romantic part, you have to be aware that it's not like that all of the time. I'm not sure when I realized that. Maybe in college, but I'm not sure. But once I realized that, it alleviated a pressure that it's not going to be perfect all of the time and it's not going to be romantic all of the time. Once you come to that realization, I think things are a lot smoother.

One male participant made similar comments regarding the effort that he and his friends have made to demystify Hollywood romance and "relearn the reality of what love is":

My friends and I have started a counter culture where we talk about other parts of our relationship that are romantic. Romance has been redefined in a realistic fashion among my friends and me; it's become more of an intellectual thing. It's become hip in my group to socially construct the romantic myths portrayed in Hollywood and to find the beauty and romance in other things that are not typically displayed in movies. There are other types of love than just batting your eyes and kissing and skipping down the street together. Being able to use the same bank account successfully together- there's a love that comes with that- as well as feeling that there is romance in the work that is done together in the relationship. It's like we're changing the notion of romance from what the movies say to what you as an intelligent person understand. I have been relearning what love is and I talk to other people about how they relearn what love is. The original learning of love is what my culture taught me. What I'm relearning is the reality of it. I have learned what love is through experience, because you can't know until you do it.

One female participant noticed that sometimes she reminds herself after a disagreement that life does not always look how it does in the movies. "I definitely have times when I'm irrational and when I jump to conclusions but I make an effort to remind myself of the realities of a relationship...like that he can't read my mind. Sometimes it's more after the fact. It's hard when you're in a moment of bickering to pull yourself out of it and sit back and remember to think about those things but it does happen in moments of

reflection. I will come back and say I'm sorry and that I shouldn't have expected certain things. So it's not always immediate."

### *Grief and Sadness*

Two participants spoke about how they managed the strong negative emotions they felt from not experiencing an idealized relationship. One female participant cited coping mechanisms related to feelings of sadness and disappointment, "Sometimes I manage my feelings around the discrepancy by lashing out and expressing my anger to him. Sometimes I manage that feeling by really thinking about all the wonderful things that this relationship brings to me and the life that we're living together brings to me. Sometimes I just sit with the disappointment and sadness about it. Those are the things that I do." Another female interviewee referred to feelings of loss and recalled a grieving process she experienced as shown in the following narrative:

I think I finally grieved with my mom about it. It sounds funny but it was almost like grieving about the loss of a particular ideal- of realizing that relationships take work and effort when I just wanted it to either work or not work. I expected to just know at some point, to come to some realization that now I'm going to get married, to have that "you just know" feeling. But I think that it's a complex decision to marry someone. The grieving process was mostly crying to my mom a bunch and letting myself be down about it. I think it helped.

### *Utilizing a Therapist*

Two female participants reported the utilization of a therapist to help manage feelings of uncertainty in a relationship. Both accounts are similar in that a therapist was used to help with the critical process of reflection:

I don't think I need someone to flower me with romance and attention like they do in the movies. Although, I used to think that my husband would make me happy when I got married. I thought that that's what their job was. I thought that when you got married you made each other happy and that was the other person's role. It was after the break-up of my first serious relationship that I realized that I

am the one responsible for my happiness in the relationship. I definitely remember coming to a realization that I was in control for the most part of how I felt about things. And I could choose to be happy or be sad on a daily basis. I choose if I'm going to be happy in a moment or sad or whatever. And that I shouldn't depend on someone else for that. I don't want to make it seem like I don't need anybody else to feel good about things. But I reached a point where I realized that I need to do what I need to do – give love and get love, but I'm not going to be waiting around for someone else to make me happy because that's not somebody else's job. It was a struggle to get to this place. I think a lot of it had to do with being reflective and delving into my past. I was in therapy for probably two years and I did a lot of thinking about my past, my parents' relationship and just about everything.

A second female participant identified her therapist as a key player in helping to raise her self-esteem which in turn helped her stop blaming herself for failed relationships:

I remember being curious and questioning why my relationship wasn't like it was in the movies. At first I thought that I was doing something wrong because I figured I was the reason why my relationships weren't like what they were in the movies. I figured that I wasn't capable of being happy in a relationship. I also went through a period of thinking that if I wasn't happy then I shouldn't be with the person. So eventually I transformed into thinking that it was me that was the problem into thinking that it was the relationship. But I was certainly questioning myself for some time. I think I stopped questioning myself when I got more mature and self-confident. I saw a therapist during that time and that definitely helped as well because it allowed me to stop blaming myself.

Similarly to utilizing a therapist, three female respondents reported reading books with their partner as a way to gain insight into their experience and try out recommended suggestions for a certain problem. As one interviewee noted, "I read a lot. Not necessarily self-help books but I read a lot of magazines- from *People* to *Psychology Today* which has a lot of tips which remind me to communicate and to be open. One of the things we're going to have to work on is figuring out how we're going to raise our kids because he's Catholic and I'm Jewish. So I'm planning on doing a lot of research and reading up on the issue and have us sit down and talk about the logistics of how it

might be.” Another participant found the book *Women are from Mars, Men are From Venus*, helpful in clarifying some of her and her fiancé’s misunderstandings:

We started reading *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* and it was uncanny how their stereotypes are portrayed so accurately in the book. They talk about how guys would go into their cave and they don’t want to be cuddled, they want to turn on their sports and that’s how they deal with what’s bothering them, that’s how they forget about it, and how women like to talk about a problem. Every once in a while when I’m asking my fiancé to open up to me and tell me what’s bothering him, he’ll just say “Babe, I just need my cave right now.” We read that from the book and he refers to it now. Sometimes you have to be told because we’re not mind readers. And it helps me because I know not to take it personally and that he just needs his space. So, one of the things that we’ve learned is that there’s no reason to take anything personally. If he’s upset and wants to vent by watching sports I had to learn that it’s not that he doesn’t want to talk to me, it’s just that watching TV is how he deals with things. Women by nature verbalize everything but a lot of men don’t do that. I want to nurture and he doesn’t always want to be nurtured. He wants to solve problems and I don’t always want my problems solved. It’s OK to remind someone about that and it’s better to remind them and feel good about it than to be annoyed and bury that inside of you and start to lash out at your partner.

### *Conclusion*

Themes emerged in all question categories among the interviewees’ responses. In regards to aspects of idealized relationships, most of the participants noted the following: that couples live happily ever after; the existence of a soul mate who will complete you; a notion of a prince charming who will come and sweep the woman off her feet; that a partner should satisfy all of one’s needs; and that life is mostly a fairytale romance with few interpersonal or external conflicts. In addition, all twelve respondents noted that the media as a whole is responsible for the promotion of these images. The interviewees reported that movies, television, magazines, and books all portray relationships in an idealized fashion. Furthermore, two respondents alleged that advertisers promote

idealized relationship images and attempt to sell the love ideal in their efforts to entice consumers into buying their products.

There were also similarities within the responses related to the ways in which the participants' own relationship fit into the notions of idealized relationships. Most commonly, interviewees reported their experience during the falling in love period with their partner replicated that same stage portrayed in idealized relationships because there was an increased amount of romance and excitement. The participants' answer to this question did not produce as much range as other questions and it appears that for many participants, their real relationship does not widely fit the notions of idealized relationships other than in the courtship period. Only one participant reported that her relationship did not fit into any aspects of idealized relationships.

Much variation existed in the ways that interviewees felt their relationship did not fit into idealized notions of relationships. Several respondents mentioned the amount of effort put into the relationship and the level of conflict in their relationship as two ways that their relationship did not meet expectations of idealized relationships. Furthermore, several participants noted that logistical challenges, such as where to live, impacted their relationship and was incongruent with idealized versions. In addition, interviewees noted that the level of doubt they felt in their decision to commit to their partner did not meet their expectation that they would "just know" when they were with the right person. The decreased level of romance was the finale theme recognized by participants as an example of how their relationship did not fit into idealized notions of relationships.

Some synchrony appeared to be present among the effects of the relationship discrepancy on the interviewee. Most participants reported that the discrepancy made

them question their relationship and implored them into a state of assessment with regards to their relationship. However, differences existed among the interview group in the cause for questioning and assessment of the relationship. In addition to questioning and assessment, three participants recognized feelings of sadness and resentment as a result of the relationship discrepancy. The effects of the questioning and assessment on the relationship were fairly uniformed. Most participants reported that the questioning and assessment resulted in dissatisfaction in the relationship as well as a disruption in the connection with their mate.

Some themes emerged in the participants responses regarding coping mechanisms used to manage their relationship in the face of the negative consequences relating to the real and idealized relationship discrepancy. Communication was the most cited coping mechanism utilized by couples as well as interjecting energy into one's own relationship. Interviewees also identified their process of coming to terms with doubt in their commitment level and noted the resulting feelings of sadness and grief as the limitations of the relationship were experienced. Finally, some participants identified coping mechanisms such as deconstructing media images, reading self-help books and talking to a therapist as key elements which improved their relationship with themselves and their partners.



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored the impact of idealized relationships, present in our media and culture, on committed relationships. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that relationships are impacted by real and idealized relationship discrepancies. In addition, my research provided an initial assessment of the coping mechanisms utilized by partners as problem solving responses to the effects of relationship discrepancies. A review of the literature reveals that current writings on this topic essentially focus on: (a) the evolution of a love centered marriage, (b) common myths and unrealistic expectations of love and marriage, (c) the mass media's influence on society members, (d) the means by which individuals receive and internalize concepts of romanticized love, and (e) the connection between idealistic and romanticized notions about marriage and their tendency to decrease marital satisfaction. However, on the topic of specific effects of idealized relationships and the coping skills utilized by individuals within a relationship to combat these effects, there continues to be a gap in the literature, which this study aims to fill.

#### *General Findings*

The respondents overwhelmingly identified similar myths of romantic love, ascertained in question one of the interview. Most of these myths are identified in the literature review and the ROMBEL (Romantic Beliefs Scare), the most widely used tool to measure the romantic ideology of love. For example, the belief that there is one true

love for everyone, that you will “just know” when you have found your true love, that true love inevitably leads to happiness, and that nothing is more important than love were mentioned by almost all of the interviewees. Also mentioned is the myths that there is one perfect person out there for each of us and the gender based roles that include a woman waiting for her true love, or the “armored knight”, who will “sweep her off her feet” (Pintar, 1992). It appeared fairly easy for the participants to identify and elaborate on cultural myths and notions of idealized relationships popular in our society. That there was significant overlap among the responses suggests a high level of formulation and stereotype among the media outlets. The familiarity with the qualities of idealized love stories in the participants’ answers also speaks to the level that love and romance have been socially constructed. It is as if the complex and multifaceted experiences of love and romance have been transformed into sound bytes which members of society understand as simple fact.

Therefore, this study reveals the large extent to which our cultural foundations have become institutionalized. The narratives of love are clichéd and conventional and appear to transcend well known realities; for example, that over fifty percent of marriages end in divorce. Our cultural stories of love air-brush out the realities of a long term relationship such as negotiation, compromise, cooperation and disappointment, which are inevitable when two people choose to share their lives.

#### *Deciding to Commit to the Relationship*

One unforeseen finding revolved around the process that several individuals reported when choosing to commit to their partner. Many respondents seemed to have similar experiences in that they expected to “just know” when they were with the right

person but instead felt that they made a thoughtful and rational decision to commit to their mate. This finding was especially interesting because the “you just know” attitude was identified most widely as a relationship myth that people seemed to truthfully expect to experience in their own life. As one participant reported, “that’s one part in the movies that I’m always asking ‘How do you know’. And how come this has never happened to me? I eventually decided that you don’t necessarily really know for sure.” Most of the respondents, who found out that having a “you just know” experience in real life was not automatic, seemed to come to this realization on their own. One of the interviewees reported that because she was originally so uncomfortable with the sentiment, she surveyed her friends and family and was relieved to hear that other people had similar experiences in their decision to commit. However, not everyone who was interviewed reported a similar finding. One participant, who also reported surveying her friends and family, came across several people who promoted the experience of “just knowing” and encouraged her to seek out that specific feeling. These conversations seemed to have led the individual to further questioning and confusion. However, this woman might have benefited from knowing that other people, even among the small sample interviewed in this thesis, have had these same feelings. This knowledge might provide some normalcy and therefore may make a person who is questioning a relationship feel as though his or her experience is common, appropriate, and will not necessarily lead to terminal unhappiness in a relationship.

A little less than half of the respondents described their thoughtful decision making process when choosing to commit to their partner. This response was unexpected because the process was described in rational terms and appeared quite opposite from the

romanticized and mythical “you just know” experiences portrayed in idealized relationships. Given the relative similarity of this decision making process, it is rather startling that this process is not a well known, documented phenomena. Rather, it seems that our culture has been promoting the narratives where the key words “true love” and “soul mate” are entailed. Perhaps these images have become wrapped up in the American dream or it may be something more insidious such as the connection between love and commercialism.

### *Disillusionment*

The experiences of distress and disillusionment portrayed by the interviewees appeared to be similar to those which are described by this researcher in the literature review. The literature section reviewed the discord and disappointment that married couples experience when their relationship does not live up to the idealized versions. The literature also described the popularized scripts that individuals in our society are expected to follow when falling in love. Both of these experiences were echoed by participants in the study. For the most part, respondents recalled the pressure they felt to experience their relationship in socially prescribed manners, such as love at first sight and happily ever after.

A disconnection to one’s partner and overall feelings of worry, ambivalence and questioning appear to be common experiences for a person in a relationship when faced with a relationship discrepancy. In addition, the disconnection not only results from the discrepancy but also from the assessment process which further takes a toll on a relationship. As one respondent reported, “You can’t have a relationship when you’re in that confused space. When you’re in a state of constant assessment around if this is how

it's supposed to be and wondering how I make my decision if this is the right person and the right relationship?" As stated in the literature, beliefs about relationships serve as standards against which an individual evaluates the quality of a relationship. As these standards become more unrealistic or irrational, rigid or extreme, the probability increases that they will result in disappointment, disillusionment and distress in relationship development (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981). As shown in the responses, feelings of disappointment, confusion and dissatisfaction are common results of the discrepancy between one's real relationship and idealized relationships.

### *Coping Strategies*

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the coping mechanisms, utilized by individuals in response to relationship discrepancies, have not previously been investigated in the scientific community. Considering the novelty of this research, this researcher had little basis by which to anticipate and expect certain responses. Furthermore, this researcher assumed that these individuals were negotiating these feelings without a predetermined script. This is primarily due to the fact that although the falling in love period is a familiar experience, dramatized in movies and television and written about in novels and popular magazines, long term love is less commercialized. Therefore, it is surprising that many of the participants reported similar experiences and processes by which they managed feelings associated with relationship disillusionment. For example, that practically all interviewees relied on communication with their partners and various trusted family members and friends was an unexpected finding. However, of all the responses noted by the participants, communication with one's partner is likely the most common recommendation from popular psychology.

That interviewees reported questioning the portrayal of relationships in the popular culture was also an unexpected finding. Primarily, this coping skill, named as demystification, points to the natural cognitive process present in independent thinkers. According to Pintar (1992), when our lives do not conform to these idealized images, we tend to question the worth of our experiences rather than the validity of our experiences. This was shown by the interviewee's responses to be half true. For example, one individual pointed out that in order not to be self-blaming and instead be comfortable not conforming to the idealized versions of relationships, she had to move to a place of increased self-confidence and acceptance:

I started being curious and questioning why my relationship wasn't like it was in the movies. At first I thought that I was doing something wrong because I figured I was the reason why my relationships weren't like what they were in the movies. I figured that I wasn't capable of being happy in a relationship. Eventually, I transformed into thinking that it was me to thinking that it was the relationship. But I was certainly questioning myself for some time. I think I stopped questioning myself when I got more mature and self-confident.

However, the interviews showed that a conflict often remains between a person's understanding of what they know to be true in real life and the expectations due to the level of pervasiveness and influence of idealized and romanticized relationships. For example, it appears that for one participant, even though she was aware of the media's skewed depiction of relationships, she was still affected by it. She said, "I critique the movies. I think I take most things with a grain of salt and doing some women studies in college and reading cultural critiques is really helpful. But there's a way in which the images still get in your head." Therefore, although one may know that real-life couples have to work to be in a successful relationship, one may be continually influenced by the

portrayals of relationships in the media to the extent that he or she may doubt their own experience in the world.

### *Points of Interest*

#### *Participants of Divorced Parents*

As noted in the literature review, children learn how relationships work from their parents (Dixon, 1995). Several of the participants referred to their own parents' relationship as a major source of information regarding the norms of romantic relationships. A few interviewees noted they made a strong effort to have a different experience with a partner than the relationship they witnessed of their parents. For example, one participant said, "My parents were divorced so they taught me a lot about relationships in terms of what not to do. They never talked, never fought and didn't communicate." This is also noted in the following excerpt by a female participant:

I think that the relationship that I saw with my own parents was a relationship that I didn't want. I wanted the complete opposite. And I still went out and got their same relationship with my first boyfriend but I don't think I knew any better on how to get what I wanted. They say that you marry your father and you get what you think you deserve or what you know. So I think that my first relationship was my parents' relationship. It wasn't until I was in it and seeing the dynamics that I realized what I had done. From my own parents, it was two people that just didn't like each other that were married to each other for a long time so it was really hard growing up through that. When they were apart then you have a whole other set of issues but then when my mom was with a new man I saw her being happy. So it certainly impacted me in some way.

The effect of divorce on a child and its ability to differentiate notions of idealized relationships from real relationships was noted by another participant who made a similar statement:

My parents' divorce was somewhat disillusioning and disappointing. For a while I said to myself 'I'm never going to make these mistakes' and I think it's the reason why I'm so committed to being a good communicator in my relationship.

My parents did not communicate and I think it led to their divorce. Communication is one thing that I always said I would do in a relationship, that I would be honest. It's scary when you read that more than half of couples end up divorced. Nobody ever wants to believe that they're going to be one of those people. So you just have to do the best that you can and be open and communicate about important stuff, like money and kids and those things that people fight over the most.

A fourth female respondent recalled a different experience with her parents' divorce. She reported, "I didn't even see my parents fight, so as far as I knew I thought they were happy until they were telling us that they were getting a divorce. So it seems like parents hide the fighting and it's behind closed doors so even according to their children, they have a fairytale relationship." Therefore, children experience their parents' relationships in varying ways. Although it appears to have a lasting impact, divorce is not guaranteed to demystify idealized notions of relationships for children. Furthermore, children of non-divorced parents do not always maintain an idealized view of relationships.

According to one participant, whose parents remained married, "I saw my parents and I saw that they weren't happy and in love all the time. I knew I didn't want the marriage that they have where my mom does everything for my dad and my dad chain smokes and watches television." In this instance, the participant's parents were not divorced; nevertheless, she had a negative view of her parents' relationship and made a commitment to have a different experience with her partner as a result.

#### *Previous Romantic Experiences*

A common rationale for why some participants reportedly did not experience unrealistic expectations in their relationship was due to their previous romantic experiences. As one participant recollected, "I think I probably learned from my first



long term boyfriend that it wasn't like it was in the movies." This sentiment was echoed by another participant:

I didn't go into my current relationship thinking it's going to be a picture perfect relationship because in the past I've found that you can set yourself up for disappointment because it's putting this notion of a relationship up on a pedestal and then when it's not met, you're disappointed. You just never have that image of a relationship and if you did, you quickly figure out after your first boyfriend that it's not how it looks in the movies.

Having a previous experience with a partner seems to be a significant marker for people in recognizing the realities of a long term relationship. Therefore, in addition to experiencing one's parents' relationship second-hand, participants noted that their first serious relationship was influential in informing oneself about relationships.

The social context in which these relationships take place should be noted because it is likely that people in this century have more ability to have multiple long-term relationships. The level at which society has tolerated people to be in relationship for longer periods of time prior to marriage has changed over time. Adults today seem to marry later and are therefore more likely to have had more relationships prior to choosing a mate. It has also become more acceptable to live with someone for a long period of time prior to getting married or engaged. Therefore, an individual is more apt to understand the complexities of living with a partner prior to making a formal commitment.

### *Gender Differences*

Although this researcher interviewed only one male, it is noteworthy to report differences in his responses versus the female respondents. Because the sample size of the one male participant is so small, these differences cannot be generalized to the larger

male population. The most significant difference between the male response and the females' responses was that he included a larger discussion about attractiveness. With regards to the images of idealized relationships popular in the media, the male interviewee was the only one to mention the physical attractiveness of the male movie characters. Whereas most people mentioned the physical beauty possessed by men and woman in idealized relationships, the male respondent had a different opinion. He reported, "Everyone in idealized relationships is beautiful, although not necessarily always the man, but the women are always young and beautiful. Even if you're not an attractive man there is an expectation that you will date an attractive woman." This expectation led to the attractiveness discrepancy that he reported experiencing with his wife:

My partner does not live up to the cover-girl expectation that I had as far as beauty. I had this expectation of the physical beauty of someone that I was going to marry and my partner does not live up to that. I don't know if that is more difficult for men but that was something that I grappled with. Sometimes I'm not feeling like I want to rip her clothes off. That's challenging because it makes me wonder if I'm supposed to be feeling physically attractive about my mate all the time.

This participant's mention of the physical attractiveness of his partner was unique among the responses. Although it is impossible to draw a definitive conclusion, it is worth mentioning that it is possible that men have relationship discrepancies which focus on the physical aspect of attractiveness while women tend to focus on the romantic aspects. As previously mentioned, this finding cannot be generalized to the larger male population due to the small sample. Further investigation into the male's perception of idealistic relationship discrepancies is warranted.

## *Limitations*

### *Sample Size and Make-Up*

There are several limitations which should be noted in this research. The sample size was small and consisted solely of participants who lived in Massachusetts, which limits the generalizability of the study. Most prominently is the relative homogeneity of the sample. All twelve participants interviewed for this research were Caucasian and college educated. In addition, all participants were heterosexual and female except for one male. The similarity amongst participants was most likely the result of the convenience sampling technique. This researcher, a heterosexual Caucasian female had the most access, via her social network, to other college educated, heterosexual, Caucasian females. The lack of diversity among the participant sample limits the generalizability of these research findings. Furthermore, because this researcher used a nonprobability method of convenience sampling, the external validity of the findings to the larger population is threatened. However, because this study was aimed at compiling detail about peoples' experiences, not generalizing to the larger population, it is not a significant limitation.

It would be interesting to research a similar topic with a diverse sample. Would individuals in minority groups experience similar effects of idealized images portrayed in the American media on their relationships? Furthermore, how would individuals in homosexual relationships be affected by and respond to the portrayals of idealized relationships in the larger culture? Currently, idealized relationships portrayed in the media do not typically include homosexual couples. Therefore, it is unclear how

individuals in homosexual relationships experience effects of idealized relationships such as unrealistic expectations.

### *Pre-Screening*

After completing half of the interviews, it became apparent that some individuals did not connect with the line of questioning put forth in the interview. As the researcher, I felt as though a few participants did not identify a clear discrepancy between their relationship and notions of idealized relationships which they've named. In hindsight, this researcher should have pre-screened individuals prior to their enrollment in the study. As cited in the data, individuals who are more exposed to the popular romantic media will have more unrealistic beliefs about intimate relationships. The prescreening could have explored the individual's exposure to romantically themed media and his or her identification with idealized images portrayed in the media. As a result of the prescreening, this researcher could have chosen for the study only those individuals who have acknowledged the effect of idealized relationships on their current partnership and experience a real/idealized discrepancy. Using only participants who outwardly experience the effects of relationship discrepancies could have resulted in this researcher gathering richer data. However, in this study, an assumption was made that most people experience some measure of discrepancy between real and idealized relationships.

There are a few explanations for the disparity among participants' experiences of relationship discrepancies. One reason is that the participants are using denial and minimization as a coping skill and therefore do not consciously recognize the effects of idealized relationships and do not experience a relationship discrepancy. As noted in the methodology section, many of the participants were either engaged or newly married. It

is understandable that these individuals have an investment in maintaining a certain confidence in their relationship. One study noted in the literature review has demonstrated that individuals engaged to be married had significantly higher idealistic distortion scores than did either married individuals or those in extended dating relationships (Bonds-Raacke, Bearden and Carriere, 2001).

For anyone to admit and acknowledge, either publicly or privately, that one's relationship is not ideal is disturbing and can be uncomfortable. Denial can be an effective defense against this discomfort. As noted in the research of Kayser (1993), during the initial phase of disaffection, avoidant and passive types of coping strategies were most frequently used. More than half of the respondents in his study (53%) reported that they kept silent while about one third (35%) stated that they employed denial as a means of coping. Kayser suspects that many of the disaffected spouses suffered in silence because they were reluctant to admit marital problems to friends and family. Therefore, it could also be that the participant was not in denial but rather too embarrassed or uncomfortable to disclose to this researcher. It is possible that an individual is more likely to expose her relationship to a confidante rather than to a stranger, which this researcher was to the participants. However, it could also be that some respondents were more likely to disclose personal feelings to this researcher because of our stranger status.

A third explanation for the disparity among answers is that some interviewees may not experience a discrepancy or may have another primary concern regarding their relationship that is unrelated to the discrepancy between one's real and idealized relationship. For example, an interviewee struggling with a specific issue such as a

quarrel with his or her partner's extended family, may be more likely to identify family relations as a main cause of distress and be less inclined to discuss the issues which this researcher was investigating.

#### *Clinical Use*

The findings in this study are highly relevant to social work and clinical practice. As noted by Dym and Glenn (1993), some couples are not aware that societal expectations affect them because it is not made known or discussed in our society. It is important that we, as clinical social workers, understand the impact of cultural myths on relationships and marriages so that we are able to help couples deconstruct the cultural facets of their conflicts. Although there has been a significant amount of research which has focused on the existence of a real/ideal discrepancy in terms of relationships, the clinical community would benefit from a deeper understanding of the effects of these discrepancies on a relationship and the processes by which individuals and couples negotiate these effects. Furthermore, many of the respondents reported proactive steps which they have taken that are helpful. As clinicians, it is our job to disseminate this information to other people who would be serviced by it.

#### *Future Research*

As noted earlier, the relative demographic similarity among the study participants was a major limitation. Therefore, conducting a similar study with a diverse sample is recommended for future research. Specifically, a researcher may want to focus on the relative similarity and differences among the qualities of idealized relationships identified by people of color and members of the LGBTQQ community. Coping skills recognized by diverse participants would also be of interest although researchers should control for

issues related to racism and homophobia which are present and inevitably effect relationships.

Future research in this area should also involve a prescreening tool which would help assess the level that the potential participant relates to the real/idealized relationship discrepancy. However, prescreening may lead to tailored results that do not reflect the general population. It could be possible that while some individuals experience discrepancies and their negative consequences more intensely, others may have developed a strategy to provide themselves with the specific experience they are seeking. However, a prescreening tool to identify the level of idealism and the individual's accepted relationship discrepancy would service the researcher in further manipulating the study to focus specifically on strategies utilized in the face of disappointment and distress.

A study done over a period of time may also produce diverse and significant findings. A longitudinal study may first assess the level of idealism inherent in the individual as single or newly coupled and then interview the participant in yearly segments to research how the person's views of the relationship change over time and what coping skills are utilized in the face of disillusionment. Interviewing across different relationship periods in time (1-3 years, 4-7 years, over 7 years) could provide further insight into how discrepancies are dealt with as the relationship progresses. Furthermore, interviewing individuals who are in their first relationship may increase the level of idealism present in the participant and therefore may help to develop an extensive and clarified list of coping skills relevant to a relationship discrepancy.

### *Conclusion*

The majority of research participants were able to identify and elaborate comparable notions of idealized relationships. This similarity speaks to the level of internalization of idealized relationships common among members of this society. Furthermore, the real/ideal discrepancy that undeniably occurs due to the internalization process had similar effects to the interviewee. For the most part, the effects included questioning and doubt which lead to some participants experiencing disappointment and disillusionment in their relationship. For some, the discrepancy was not as blatant or large as others. Typically, this was due to the individuals having a pre-understanding of relationship expectations, either due to a previous partner or watching one's parents' relationship. For those individuals who felt a discrepancy, there were many coping skills recognized which were effective in maintaining the relationship. The results of this study are limited in scope due to the relative similarity in race, class, gender, sexuality, and education of the participants. Further research on this topic with a wider, more diverse sample is warranted.



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## Appendix A

### Open Ended Interview Questions

1. Describe images, sayings, ideas and qualities of idealized relationships which you feel are familiar to you?
2. Where do you think these images and ideas of relationships come from?
3. In what ways does your relationship live up to the idealized images? Please give an example or tell me a story relating to this.
4. In what ways does your relationship not live up to the idealized images? Please give an example or tell me a story relating to this.
5. How does this discrepancy between idealized and actual relationship affect your partnership? Please elaborate on this question and explain to me the different ways, personal and interpersonal, that you and your relationship have been affected.
6. Which aspects of your relationship are most impacted by the discrepancy? Could you give me an example that illustrates this?
7. What are the ways in which you negotiated feelings around this discrepancy? Are there certain themes in discussions that you've had with yourself or others that relate to these feelings? What are there other strategies which you have used to move to a place of acceptance?

## Appendix B

### Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How do you identify yourself in terms of race and ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How do you identify yourself in terms of sexuality? \_\_\_\_\_
4. How long have you been with your current partner? \_\_\_\_\_
5. How long have you been living together? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Are you engaged or married? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, for how long? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Have you previously lived with a partner? \_\_\_\_\_  
If so, how long did that relationship last? \_\_\_\_\_  
When did that relationship end? \_\_\_\_\_  
How long did you live together? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Do you have children? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Human Subjects Review Application

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**Project Title:** “And They Lived Happily Ever After”: The Effects of Cultural Myths and Romantic Idealizations on Committed Relationships

#### **Project Purpose and Design**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how romanticized myths affect relationships and how individuals in committed relationships negotiate the discrepancy between their idealized relationship and their lived experience. Many sociologists and psychologists have found that romantic myths influence how people envision their ideal relationship and that this expectation often causes marital distress. It is hoped that this study will further the understanding of the areas of the relationship impacted by these romanticized myths. In addition, my study will explore the internal and external processes that individuals use to negotiate the real/ideal discrepancy, an area overlooked by the current research.

The study will involve a brief demographic questionnaire and a face-to-face semi-structured interview with at least twelve individuals currently in a committed relationship. A content analysis will be conducted on the transcribed data which will be analyzed for recurrent themes and topics in the individuals’ narratives about their relationship and negotiation process. Interviews will be digitally recorded and kept in a locked box for three years, as required by federal regulations. The data will be used for my thesis and for professional presentations and publications on this topic.

#### **Characteristics of Participants**

The participants will comprise a nonrandom sample selected for their self-identification in a committed relationship. These individuals will be over the age of 21 and will represent a range of ethnic and racial identities and will be a mix of sexual identities. My sample size will range between 12 and 15 participants. Exclusion criteria will be individuals who have previously been married, or individuals who are in a relationship but have not made a formal commitment. I will be recruiting participants using a sample of convenience as well as the snowball technique.

#### **The Recruitment Process**

Recruitment materials will be placed at various sites around downtown Northampton, including coffee shops, laundromats, restaurants and colleges. Interested participants will be asked to contact me by phone or e-mail. During a phone or e-mail screening, volunteers will be asked several questions to assess the length and

commitment of their relationship. Questions regarding previous relationships will also be asked for exclusion purposes. Initial demographic information will be requested in order to achieve diversity standards. If efforts to recruit for diversity are unsuccessful, I will place recruitment posters in Springfield and Boston with the intention of reaching a more diverse population.

### **Describe precisely the nature of the participation in research.**

During screening, participants will be asked initial questions about the relationship to assess if he or she meets the recruitment criteria and if they are comfortable with the questioning. If so, the participant and I will meet at a mutually convenient place and go over the informed consent form. I will ask participants if recording the interview is acceptable. At the beginning of the interview, demographic data such as race, age, length of relationship, religion and socio-economic class will be collected. I will then conduct a semi-structured interview, lasting approximately one hour. Interview questions will focus around romantic myths and cultural narratives, the impact of these romantic myths on the individual's relationship, and the negotiation process utilized by the individual in response. The following questions will be used to guide the semi-structured interview with participants: Describe your "ideal" relationship? Where do you think these images/characteristics of relationships and an "ideal relationship" come from? In what ways does your relationship live up to the ideal? In what ways does your relationship not live up to the ideal? How does this discrepancy between ideal and actual relationship affect your partnership? Which aspects of your relationship are most impacted by the discrepancy? What are the ways in which you negotiate feelings around this discrepancy?

Follow-up interviews and member checking may be utilized during data analysis in order to assess validity. Interviews will be digitally recorded following the participants consent. Following completion, a hard-copy of the interview will be constructed through transcription. I will be transcribing all recorded interviews.

### **Discuss potential risks and benefits of participation in the research**

There are some possible risks of participating in this study. Due to the personal nature of the questions, it is possible for the participant to become distressed when reflecting on difficult issues in his or her relationship. Participants will be made aware of this risk in the letter of introduction and consent. A list of at least three referral support services will be provided to the participant at the time of interview. This list will be provided to the individual regardless of if it is requested. Another possible risk of participation is regarding confidentiality. Although all information provided by the participant will be kept in confidence, it may not be possible to keep confidential the fact that a person is participating in this study. Compensation will not be paid to the participants.

A possible benefit of participation in this research project will be for the participant to understand the possible affects that romanticized myths has had on his/her relationship. This can be a positive outcome in the sense that it may help to enlighten the individual regarding experiences he or she has had in the relationship. In addition, participants may benefit from knowing that they are giving knowledge that can be better

used to assist individuals who are struggling in their relationship due to cultural expectations.

**Describe the informed consent procedures to be used**

Participants will be asked to sign a written informed consent form in person before the interview takes place. The consent will be explained and the participant will have the opportunity to ask questions of clarification. The consent form will be signed and given to the researcher prior to the start of the interview. Individuals will be given the opportunity to withdraw at any point in the interview process.

**What precautions will be taken to safeguard identifiable information about individuals?**

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research project. Identifiable information, such as names, will be removed and participants will be assigned a code number. In addition, all signed Informed Consent forms will be kept separate from completed interviews. My research advisor will have access to the data after the identifying information has been removed. Once the publication is prepared, all illustrative vignettes and quoted comments of volunteers will be carefully disguised. All data will be kept for three years as required by federal regulations. This includes all data, all notes, and all recorded interviews. After three years, the data will be kept stored and safe until the researcher destroys it.

**Student's Signature:**

**Date:**

**Advisor's Signature:**

**Date:**



## Appendix D

### Human Subjects Review Approval

November 27, 2006

Jordana Metz  
36 Orchard Street, Apt. 1  
Northampton, MA 01060

Dear Jordana,

Your second set of revisions has been reviewed and all is now in order. We are happy to give final approval to your study.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your study. It will be most interesting and useful to find out what people have to say on this subject. There has been a fair amount of literature saying that marriage has been very burdened by enhanced expectations! Remember Mama in *Fiddler on the Roof* when Tevya asked her if she loves him?

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Claudia Bepko, Research Advisor

## Appendix E

### Informed Consent Form

Dear Potential Participant,

I am conducting a study on the effects of romanticized myths and their effect on relationships. My hope for this study is to better understand how cultural myths impact relationships. I would also like to see how the discrepancy between the real and idealized relationship is negotiated by individuals in a partnership. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Social Work degree at Smith College. The research may also be used for presentation and publication.

Thank you for showing interest in participating in this study. You have been selected to participate because you are currently in a monogamous relationship and because you are over the age of 21 and because you and your partner have lived together for over one year. Individuals will be excluded from the study if previously married or in a non-monogamous relationship. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked demographic information before the interview begins. During the interview, you will be asked to describe your current relationship and how it fits or does not fit into notions of idealized relationships which are familiar to you. By 'idealized relationships' I mean those relationship qualities that are represented as perfect, or better than in reality. These images often come from fairytales, folklore, pop culture media, and family values. I will then ask you several questions about the effects of these idealized images on your relationship and the ways that you have managed any feelings associated with the discrepancy between your real and idealized relationship. The interview should take approximately one hour. With your written consent, I will record our interview using a digital recorder and then transcribe the interview to produce a hard copy of the discussion.

The potential risk of participating in this study is experiencing distress due to reflection on difficult issues in your relationship. Should you find anything unsettling about participating, please bring this to my immediate attention. If you wish to seek professional support after participating in this study, please find the list of psychotherapists provided below who are available for you to contact.

A possible benefit of participation in this research project will be for the participant to understand the possible affects that romanticized myths has had on his/her relationship. You may find it beneficial to contribute to the very limited body of research around romantic myths and their effects on relationships. In addition, I hope that the stories which you and the other participants share with me will help clinical social workers and psychologists support individuals who are challenged in their relationship due to culturally derived expectations. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and there are no financial benefits for your participation.

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research project. Names from each interview will be omitted in order to protect confidentiality, and data collected from this study will be stored to preserve confidentiality. Identifiable information, such as names, will be removed and participants will be assigned a code number. My research advisor will have access to the data after the identifying information has been removed. Once the publication is prepared, all illustrative vignettes and quoted comments of volunteers will be carefully disguised. The tapes and transcripts will be kept locked and secure by the researcher for three years, as required by Federal Regulations. After this time, all data including tapes and transcripts will continue to be kept secured or will be destroyed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You reserve the right to refuse to answer any questions and may terminate the interview at any time. Once the interview is complete, you may withdraw from the study at any time until **April 1, 2007**, when my final report will be completed. Upon withdrawal, all data describing you will be destroyed.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION; THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Signature of participant:

Date:

If you have any questions or wish to withdraw your consent, please contact:  
Jordana Metz            [jmetz@smith.edu](mailto:jmetz@smith.edu)

Please keep this copy for your records so you can contact me later or use the referral numbers!

Child and Family Services, Easthampton, MA            1-800-232-0510

Service Net, Northampton, MA            413-585-1300

Brightside for Families and Children, Springfield, MA            413-748-9000

Appendix F

Recruitment Flyer



# RESEARCH STUDY ON RELATIONSHIPS

ARE YOU CURRENTLY IN A MONOGAMOUS  
RELATIONSHIP AND HAVE LIVED WITH  
YOUR PARTNER FOR OVER 1 YEAR?  
WILLING TO SHARE YOUR STORY?

Graduate student looking for volunteers who will talk about how their current relationship compares to their expectations of what their relationship would be.

Participants will be interviewed for one hour and their responses recorded in a master's student research project.

**For more information, e-mail**  
**[couplesresearch@gmail.com](mailto:couplesresearch@gmail.com)**

All research is strictly confidential.

Volunteers must be at least 21.

This is an unpaid study.

