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CREATING MEANING IN ENGAGEMENT:
GENDER, HETEROSEXUALITY, AND COMMITMENT TO MARRIAGE

By

Erica Hunter

A Dissertation

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York

In Partial Fulfillment of
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ABSTRACT
This dissertation examines how heterosexual couples use engagement to create meaning in their intimate relationships. In-depth interviews with 44 men and women who identified as engaged to be married uncovered three pathways through which couples construct meanings of commitment to marriage within their partnerships. Neotraditional couples view marriage as a ritual tied to adult life and family planning. Promisemaker couples use engagement as a way of creating commitment to the partnership. Nestbuilder couples enact engagement because they viewed marriage as a natural step for long term commitments. Frameworks of gender, heteronormativity, and the ambiguity of courtship norms in post-dating culture played a major role in how couples enacted and constructed meaning in their marital engagements. Implications from this dissertation include a need to integrate an understanding of heteronormativity into research in relationship processes and the value in using dyadic data to study partnering.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The process of finding a partner has historically been highly institutionalized among the privileged classes in U.S. society: one courted or dated, became engaged, married, and started a family. Men and women had a clear understanding of their obligations towards how their adult life would play out: they would find a suitable partner and share the rewards and responsibilities of raising a family together. Early courtship and marriage during this time led to partnerships based on producing goods needed for survival. The rise of industrialization and consumer culture changed marriage in significant ways; individuals started to invest more in their intimate relationships and to build marriages based on companionship, not economics or survival (Coontz 2004; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Seidman 1991). While the meaning and appearance of marriage changed over time, marriage remained the normative way for individuals to become adults and form families of their own from early U.S. history through the mid 20th century.

However, starting in the 1960s American society started to reject accepted notions of how adult life and relationships worked. The processes for forming intimate relationships and families became less clearly defined. Individuals started to postpone marriage, but did not necessarily postpone forming intimate relationships or starting families (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988). Nonmarital cohabitation, nonmarital sexuality and births, and the acceleration in the long term rise in divorce rates started to dramatically influence and change the way adult and family life looked. This transition to a more loosely defined sense of how individuals form commitments and families has led to a dramatic change in the way people experience courtship, marriage, and adult life today (Bailey 1989; Cherlin 2004; Ferguson 2007).
While many people still find partners and move in and out of different kinds of unions, research is lacking to provide details on how people find partners and make commitments in today’s post-dating culture. Theoretical arguments for the nature of intimate relationships today (e.g., Bawin-Legros 2004; Beck-Gernsheim 1998; Bulcroft 2000; Giddens 1992) note the influences of modernization and its ethic of individualization, which promotes the formation of partnerships based in love and desire, not need or duty. The consequence of this transformation is that individuals are seen as having the right to leave unions with which they are unhappy (Giddens 1992).

Much attention has been paid to marriage and couple relationships, but research on how people move from being single to married—that is, research on courtship and weddings—is underdeveloped (Sassler 2004). Scholarship, particularly feminist, in this area has focused much attention on specific rituals associated with the transition to marriage, such as weddings (Ingraham 1999; Otnes and Pleck 2003; Wallace 2004) and bachelorette parties and engagement showers (Montemurro 2002, 2003, 2005; Montemurro and McClure 2005). However, specific information about the different transitions couples face, such as the engagement period, has been overlooked. This period is unique in that it is a major transition time between when a couple “forms” and when the couple legally becomes “legitimated.” The result of this is that sociologists know very little about the experiences of engaged couples from the perspective of how couples experience engagement, what engagement means as a part of the courtship process, and its implications for heterosexual marriage today.

During the Baby Boom and prior, engagement appears to have been a fairly clearly defined part of the courtship process within normative U.S. social groups, usually designed to allow the couple time to prepare themselves for their transition into marriage (Otnes and
Pleck 2003; Wallace 2004). For a majority of couples, the engagement period linked the time between their courtship and their marriage; in other words, engagements usually ended in marriage (Otnes and Pleck 2003; Wallace 2004). Engagement often allowed the couple to start exploring the privileges of married life, such as having more alone time and increased sexual involvement (Bailey 1989). Today, however, it is normative for non-engaged couples to engage in activities once reserved for engagement and marriage. Nonmarital cohabitation, childbirth, and less formal courtship systems have transformed the way people find partners and, as a result, changed the meanings of many aspects of partnering (Cherlin 2004). For example, the meaning of marriage has changed and many life course events that were once relegated to marriage, such as cohabitation and childbirth, are no longer confined to marriage. In addition, absent in both periods is an understanding of what engagement meant to couples as a stage of the relationship process.

**Context**

Today, studies in marriage, courtship, and cohabitation have demonstrated that the institutional framework courtship once possessed has lost much of its influence in the process of becoming a couple. Coupling is no longer clearly or consistently defined by highly gendered relationships and rituals. In addition, marriage provides less regulation and structure in terms of how to “do” couple relationships. This curious situation provides much of the grounding for the main themes this dissertation seeks to explore: with so many options available for couples in terms of how to ‘do’ their relationship, how and why do couples choose to have an engagement, when other routes into marriage are accepted? What does engagement mean, in terms of both becoming a couple and as part of the marriage process?
How do different statuses, such as gender and class, affect how individuals experience and understand their engagements?

Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to start filling in gaps within contemporary courtship and couple relationship processes. A problem with much of the existing engagement/wedding literature is that it is not grounded in sociological methods and, in many cases, the issues addressed by the authors appear to follow very normative notions of what engagements and weddings look like. For example, they focus on rituals and “white weddings” without taking into consideration or acknowledging that couples might experience their intimate relationships in other ways. For example, while the ‘white wedding’ may be normative in terms of cultural ideas of how to “do” weddings (i.e., Edin et al 2004; Ingraham 1999), how do different couples use this knowledge in (re)creating their own engagements and weddings? In addition, these authors often fail to provide a basic understanding for why the events occur by assuming (through omission) that the “facts” of engagement and marriage are “common place,” which further reinforces the ideologies that marriage is a hegemonic couple status.

The goal of this dissertation is to develop a more complex understanding of what engagement means in contemporary American culture. First, I want to provide a better understanding of where engagement fits into the development of intimate relationships today. I am interested in finding out the purpose of engagement today in terms of how couples transition into unions that are more permanent. In addition to this very practical question, I also hope to provide an understanding of engagement as a part of the larger picture of marriage today. Since the 1970s, changes in the nature of intimate relationships have led some scholars to argue that marriage today is a much more symbolic (versus practical)
institution than it was in the past (e.g., Cherlin 2004). Additionally, research on weddings (e.g., Ingraham 1999; Wallace 2004) demonstrates that they have become larger and showier than weddings merely half a century ago; does engagement today reflect these changes in normative marriage and wedding culture? I am also interested in understanding how couples experience engagement: when is the right time in a relationship for a couple to become ‘officially’ engaged? Does becoming ‘engaged’ change how they view their relationship and/or the relationships they have with others? What do engaged couples do that makes engagement different from other aspects of the courtship process? How do life experiences, like work and school, and statuses, such as gender, class, and age, shape the coupling process?

Research questions

This dissertation will examine five key questions based in two themes: how couples experience engagement and what engagement means as a part of contemporary courtship processes. Here, I am interested in developing a full picture of what engagement means to individuals today, from the ways couples experience it to the ways they challenge or reproduce normative courtship and marriage ideologies. In addition, I want to complicate the limited literature on engagements and weddings by making gender and class more salient in our understanding of late term courtship.

The first, and most sweeping, question examines engagement and how fits today in the process of becoming a couple. Prior to the 1970s, courtship, engagement, and marriage appear to have happened in a fairly linear pattern for many groups in U.S. society. However, couples today have many viable options available to them in terms of how they move
through their relationships. As a result, the meaning and uses of the engagement period today is of key interest in trying to put together an understanding of contemporary coupling.

The next two questions focus more specifically on couple relationships, examining *when engagement occurs in a relationship* among those who become engaged and *what engagement means to both men and women and the couple*. The limited research on engagement, such as Sassler (2004) and Sassler and Miller (n.d.), discusses engagements that occur after couples cohabit for a while, which suggests that exploring when couples decide it is time to become engaged as a part of the long-term commitment process is needed to understand more fully the relationship between engagement and relationship processes. This work also highlights gender difference in how couples understand their “roles” as it pertains to decision making concerning their engagements. In addition, no work to date has explored what engagement means to couples. A review of courtship over time suggests that many of the ‘old fashioned’ ways to find a partner and create long-term relationships have gone out of style, such as calling or ‘going steady’ (Bailey 1989). As a result, engagement may have a deep, personal meaning to couples that has remained despite having more freedoms today in how they choose to enact their relationship, and, as a result, may affect the way couples and their friends and family see them as a couple. Here, how does engagement change how men and women perceive their relationship? What similarities and differences are present in how men and women form a couple-ideology of their engagement?

The fourth question examines *what engagements today look like*. Historically, the engagement period provided a time for the couple to prepare for married life; today, there is little research that provides an understanding of what happens during an engagement. Common perceptions and sources, such as bridal magazines, suggest that the engagement
period is intended to allow time to plan for a wedding; no research explores the ways that couples ‘do’ engagement apart from wedding planning. Here, I am interested in both how couples experience different engagement rituals, such as the proposal and parties, and how gender affects the way that one experiences engagement.

Finally, the last question seeks to understand how engagement fits into our understandings of gender and institutionalized heterosexuality. This question is much broader in scope compared to the first four; however, I feel it is important to situate engagement among changes in how gender is viewed in couple relationships and how the normative status of heterosexuality influences how couples “do” engagement. Although participants will likely be unable to speak to this question in detail, I plan to examine their narratives for discussions related to gender and heteronormativity in addressing this question.

Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is composed of eight chapters. The second and third chapters both focus on reviewing relevant literature: union formation and marital engagement. Chapter four describes the methodology used in this research. Chapters five, six, and seven will detail the findings of this study and focus on relationship transitions into engagement, enacting and experiencing engagement, and engagement as a public status. The final chapter will offer a summary of this work, discuss limitations and implications, and highlight areas for future research.
CHAPTER 2: OVERVIEW OF COURTSHIP AND UNION FORMATION

The process through which individuals find partners for marriage has changed considerably over the course of U.S. history. While courtship and marriage have always varied in many aspects due to differences such as social class and race/ethnicity, this literature review will focus on white, middle class experiences and ideologies; those that are considered “normative” in the literature. Ideologies of courtship, love, and marriage have changed to take into consideration new institutions and influences affecting people’s lives, like urbanization, consumer culture, and gradual shifts away from building families of obligation to families of choice (Coontz 2005; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Rothman 1984). Absent in much of the courtship and marriage literature is any real understanding of engagement. If mentioned, it is often brushed over in a sentence or two. However, the engagement period is a unique period in the couple relationship: they are actively involved in the process of getting married, by doing things such as setting a date and planning the ceremony, but at the same time they have not yet formed a legal union.

The changes in engagement over time can be expected since courtship and marriage have changed considerably over the past century. The shift to commercial production of goods reduced the reliance of young men and women on their families for their livelihood (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988). This change also provided new opportunities for young adults to find prospective marriage partners. The move away from having to rely on the family for survival due to the developing consumer culture meant that young couples and families could invest more time into their relationships (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988). As a result, the ways people found partners and settled into marriage changed. However, even during this transition, we must remember that finding partners remained highly
institutionalized, especially for the privileged classes: one courted, became engaged, married, and started a family. While the meanings individuals found in their relationships shifted, the ways and need (both practical and social) to partner and marry continued to be maintained (Coontz 2004; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Whyte 1992).

This literature review is divided into two sections. First, I will provide a history of the first two historical periods of courtship: courting/calling and dating. Second, I will provide an overview of courtship today, highlighting the deregulated nature of courtship by highlighting two aspects of contemporary courtship: “dating” and finding partners and cohabitation/transitions to longer-term unions. While providing this review, I will highlight how gender plays into how men and women experience their courtships.

**Overview of Early Courtship and Engagement**

In order to understand courtship and engagement today, we first must examine how normative patterns of finding marriage partners and engagement have changed over time in America. Like any other process in the family, engagement—both how it is played out and what it means as a part of the coupling process—has meanings that change as views of courtship, love, and marriage change. The first two periods of courtship in America, referred to as courting and dating, provided a highly institutionalized setting through which many people found partners. Courting was almost exclusively a system through which to find a partner for marriage, whereas dating allowed more experimentation through the creation of less formal couple arrangements that, if the relationship ‘clicked’, could develop towards marriage (Bailey 1989; Whyte 1992). Both of these systems, however, were highly regulated in terms of gender roles and social norms; there was a clear framework for how one went about finding a marriage partner and transitioning into marriage.
A major concern in understanding courtship is the representative nature of the research materials being used to piece together how couples experienced courtship. The bulk of the literature on early courtship, when sources of information are noted, is based on secondary sources, such as diaries, letters, and newspapers (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Rothman 1984; Seidman 1991). Seidman (1991) notes some of the methodological issues involved in doing data analysis, especially as it pertains to examining historical documents. One issue to note is that the normative expressions of courtship are generally based in the privileged classes—those who have the leisure time to write about their own experiences but also those who can spend time writing popular literature on how one should behave in relationships. While authors writing on dating and more contemporary courtship do a better job in bringing in a diversity of experiences (i.e., Bailey 1989; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988), much of what scholars have studied remains the courtship practices of the privileged.

Today’s post-dating literature also tends to focus on normative patterns as being white middle class; the literatures focused on, for example, the online dating and “hooking up” is actually mostly about the experiences of college students and young adults in certain privileged settings, not those, for example, who are repartnering after divorce. In addition, other authors, such as D’Emilio and Freedman (1988), have noted some of the ways unrepresented groups experience courtship and how they actively help to shape normative patterns or incorporate the patterns into their own courtship rituals. The result is that many of the normative patterns we see in courtship are not formed in a static way among the privileged; they are both influenced by other social groups and help shape how less privileged groups understand courtship and marriage (i.e., D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004).
Here it is important to note that the available courtship literature tends to represent and discuss normative patterns within the white, middle class. While this dissertation is not seeking to look solely at white, middle class engagement, I have chosen to frame my review using this literature for three reasons. First, I am interested in normative patterns of courtship and these have historically been defined through the behaviors of the white, middle class (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988). I acknowledge the class and cultural diversity in how courtship and marriage has changed over time in America, but I find that efforts to really delve into non-normative patterns tend to pull away from the goals of this dissertation—that is, understanding normative engagements today. In addition, much of the literature available on the history of courtship and marriage, especially early work (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Rothman 1984; Seidman 1991) is based on evidence such as letters, diaries, and public records. For example, only the privileged classes were literate and had the time and resources to spend writing letters and diaries (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Rothman 1984; Seidman 1991). Lastly, my interest in this dissertation is in the norms of engagement today and its relationship to normative gender and sexuality. Given the great diversity in how people experience courtship today, which I discuss later in this section, it would be hard to attempt to understand engagement from any viewpoint other than a “normative” one. This is why my definition of engagement incorporates what the literature suggests to be traditional or normative aspects, e.g., the proposal (Schweingruber, Anahita, and Berns 2004).

Courting and keeping company (mid 1800s-early 1900s)

Courting and keeping company appear to be the prominent courtship methods in early United States history, at least for white middle class society (Rothman 1984; Whyte 1992). This courtship system involved young couples meeting at the home of the woman under the
supervision of her family. This is the earliest and longest lasting courting method, occurring in at least the two centuries prior to the dating period (1700s-1800s); there is evidence that less formal systems of calling assisted young adults in finding partners during the Colonial Period (Whyte 1992). The norms and rules of courting developed mostly in the middle and upper classes, which, by the end of the 19th century, had formalized courting as the prominent way of pursuing a partner (Coontz 2004).

Courting involved a young man calling on, or visiting, a young woman who had invited him to her home for a visit (Coontz 2005; Whyte 1992). Young couples would meet at local functions, such as church and community events, and young women would identify a variety of young men with whom she was interested in being better acquainted. Specific times of the week were set aside for young men to accept their invitations to visit a potential partner at her home. Men would visit women from whom they received an invitation and would continue to visit until there was no more interest in pursuing a relationship. When a woman and her family decided that a man was not a good choice for her, she would stop seeing him by having a family member tell him she was unavailable (Whyte 1992). After being unreceived after a couple of calls, a man was expected to understand that she was no longer interested.

A woman was expected to keep a number of suitors visiting her until she found a man with whom she had a special connection. At this point, she would stop inviting men to call on her and would start keeping company with her potential mate (Whyte 1992). During this period, the couple visited each other exclusively and were expected to spend more time getting to know each other in preparation for a potential marriage match; keeping company can been seen as similar to ‘going steady’ (Whyte 1992). Couples also engaged in letter
writing, where the male partner would mail letters to the female proclaiming his love for her (Rothman 1984). Supervision became more limited during this period and couples were often left to visit on their own when together. If the couple got along well and wanted to continue with their relationship, they would become engaged and marry.

A key aspect of calling was that it was controlled by women. In addition to inviting young men to call on her, the young woman’s mother often would provide refreshments and supervision during visits (Coontz 2004; Whyte 1992). Young men were discouraged from asking for an invitation to visit or calling unexpectedly, even though they were expected to make their feelings and intentions about a particular love interest known (Rothman 1984). Gender played a large role in why courtship favored females. Virginity and virtue were important traits for a “good” woman to maintain until marriage; by having her and her family supervise and control courtship, it was easier for them to make sure her honor was maintained. Women’s economic dependence on men required that they married well and found a husband with whom they could build a partnership. Since marriage was an economic arrangement for a man also, it was in his best interest to find a woman of good moral character; he wanted to be certain that the children she bore were his so that lineages and inheritances could be passed on to rightful heirs. This courtship system assured that women were kept in a position not only to maintain their virtue, but also to ensure she found a good marriage partner.

Once a good match was found and a couple became engaged, their engagement focused on preparing for married life. A historical overview of engagement by Otnes and Pleck (2003) suggests that it is mostly a time filled with ritual in preparation for the upcoming wedding. Historically, the engagement period served as a time for the couple to
announce their intent to marry and allow any dissenters to voice their concerns (Otnes and Pleck 2003). In addition, it allowed for undesirable events, such as one partner already being married or a pregnant mistress presenting herself, to surface before the wedding was made legal. The engagement period also allowed time for more practical things. For men, engagement allowed them to secure a home and their financial position, whereas women would take the period to gather items needed for housekeeping, such as dishes and linens. More personally, the engagement period also let young couples get to know each other better and start envisioning their future roles. For many couples, the engagement period included more sexual freedom. Courtship during the latter part of the couple’s courtship period allowed premarital sex since any children conceived would be born during the marriage (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988). Indeed, couples could playfully flirt with each other and some practiced bundling, or spending the night together, as part of the courtship process (Rothman 1984). For engaged couples during the Victorian period, premarital sexuality was less common but still occurred (Whyte 1992).

Institutionalized dating (Late 1800s-early 1970s)

A dating system of courtship started to emerge in the late 1800s among the working class in the United States (Coontz 2004). By the early 1900s, dating replaced calling for most of America’s youth. Dating differed dramatically from calling in many ways. Changes in women’s gender expectations and industrialization provided a bulk of the movement behind this shift. Higher education, service sector work, and other opportunities allowed women to develop identities apart from being a wife and mother. However, these new opportunities for women also shifted the power they once had in courtship to men; women’s lower economic position put men in control of dating (Bailey 1989; Coontz 2004). In addition, the shift to a
consumer and paid work based culture provided young adults new opportunities to spend money, such as at restaurants, dance halls, movies, and theaters. Different institutions were becoming more prominent in the lives of young men and women, such as school, college, and workplaces, which exposed them to a large pool of potential dating partners. As a result, the purpose of dating was primarily to have fun, not to find a marriage partner. However, couples would form after several dates if they were interested in having a more exclusive relationship (Bailey 1989; Whyte 1992).

A key feature of dating is that it moved courtship to the public sphere. Couples would go out to dances, restaurants, and other events without parental supervision (Bailey 1989; Whyte 1992). This was encouraged by newer inventions, such as cars and movies, which promoted and allowed young adults to adventure away from home on their own (Bailey 1989). Over time, dating, like courting and calling, became a highly institutionalized event, with gender specific norms and scripts for men and women to follow (Bailey 1989). A typical date involved the man asking the woman to go on the date. He would arrange the date, perhaps purchasing flowers, prior to picking her up. He would then take her out, paying for any expenses incurred, before taking her home at the end of the night. While men took on much of the visible responsibility for dates, women were by no means passive in dating culture. Many spent time, effort, and money on their appearances in order to be a good date. The removal of courtship from the watchful eye of the family increased physical contact between youth. Women were allowed, to some extent, to grant ‘liberties’—or sexual favors—to men they dated (Bailey 1989). However, women needed to manage their sexuality on dates, often being responsible to negotiate the fine line between being a prude and being overly sexual. It was her responsibility to keep the male’s behavior in check, not his.
Although dating culture was not primarily associated with finding partners for marriage, many did settle into relationships after a series of dates (Whyte 1992). Couples who had dated for a while and wanted to see each other exclusively would go steady. This step of courtship was usually marked by the male pinning his girlfriend or giving her his class ring to wear. Going steady involved the couple’s commitment to seeing each other exclusively for the time being (Whyte 1992). Although going steady did not imply that the couple had long term plans to be together, for some going steady was seen as a step towards engagement. For couples who wanted to explore the possibility of marriage in their future, going steady allowed them time to decide if they were compatible enough to become engaged and married. Engagement occurred when the couple wanted to up their level of commitment to each other and prepare for marriage.

This change in courtship accompanied a major shift in the way intimate and family relationships were viewed. Unlike earlier marriages, the ideal marriage now linked individuals together by choice, not duty or necessity. Young women and men would seek partners for marriage with whom they shared friendship and a romantic bond. In addition, their relationship was characterized as a companionship of equals, with both partners providing valuable contributions to the relationship, marriage, and family life (Seidman 1991). Love and intimacy were also seen as strong components of marital relationships. The partnership shared a spiritual love, or a love that was based in mutual desire and attraction to one another. The ideal couple were soul mates to each other, each providing for the other what was needed to maintain fulfillment of both the couple relationship and their spouse’s needs. This ideological shift also brought into development the companionate marriage, or one based in complementary gender roles and mutual love and affection. Early writers who
championed companionate marriage on ideological grounds, such as Lindsay and Evans (1929), noted that marriages that allowed couples to be happy with each other’s company and engage in sexuality should allow for legal changes, such as no fault divorce and legalized birth control. Since young couples viewed their intimate relationships and marriages differently than older generations, laws need to be updated to allow couples the ability to leave marriages easily if they have not had children.

Here it is important to note that this period of courtship remained highly institutionalized and regulated; dating, engagement, and marriage were normalized and readily accepted as the correct path through which to form intimate unions. Appropriate sexuality was regulated to marriage and family; other arrangements, such as nonmarital sex and cohabitation, were seen as inappropriate. While companionate marriage brought with it the luxury of being able to pick a marriage partner with little parental influence, the roles associated with the couple’s marital union were highly idealized along gendered lines (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988). To be partners in marriage, couples were obligated to fulfill their duties to each other. The ideal image of family life was that it provided love and nurturance for its members, which were unavailable in the mean, uncaring workplace (Lasch 1995). Companionate marriage ideology encouraged couples to form relationships based on mutual personal satisfaction, trust, and in providing care and support to each other (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988). While this ideology rejected earlier models that placed men and women’s roles in the family as duties designated by gender (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988), gender maintained its position in structuring the different ways that men and women provided care for each other in the family.
Changes in courtship and marriage also had an effect on the way couples “did” engagement. Engagement appears to have become more symbolic during this period, as a signifier of the couple’s commitment and love instead of being mostly a period of preparations for married life (Otnes and Pleck 2003; Wallace 2004). Couples who became engaged during the early 20th century already had relationships based in love and companionship, unlike earlier generations who expected to come to learn to love their spouse (Seidman 1991). Increased sexual activity among engaged couples became more tolerated, both because of loosening sexual norms and the acceptance of sexual relationships between couples who will soon be married (Bailey 1989). Another force that changed engagement was the budding wedding industry. Weddings were becoming more glamorous and ritualized during the early 20th century because of consumer culture and cultural depictions of weddings (Wallace 2004). For a future bride, this added to her list of things to do during her engagement; in addition to preparing for her future role as wife, she was also encouraged to prepare and plan her wedding as a highly symbolic day of her life (Wallace 2004).

After reviewing the early history of courtship, it is clear that normative courting and dating were highly institutionalized methods of finding partners. While the meanings of what a good partner was and how partners were found changed, this shift to a more companion-centered goal for finding marriage partners still maintained a routine and institutionalized pattern; rules for finding a partner for marriage were, for the most part, clearly defined.

**Courtship and Marriage Today**

Unlike courtship during the dating and courting periods, when the processes were more institutionalized and routine, the contemporary courtship and marriage literature has been influenced by an ideological shift in the practice of intimacy to a less regulated model
that champions individual choice and happiness in romantic relationships over the needs of the dyad. First, in order to frame an understanding of the contemporary courtship and marriage literature, it is critical to examine the changes that have occurred in the ideologies that shape how men and women experience their intimate relationships. Afterwards, I will discuss the contemporary courtship and marriage literature in two stages. First, I will overview the more theoretical work on the changes in intimacy that developed during the post-dating period and the deinstitutionalization of marriage. After this brief contextualization, I will review the contemporary courtship literature in two parts. First, I will review the courtship literature that discusses how people find partners today. This review includes information on some of the innovations in finding partners: ‘hooking up’ and personal ads. The second set of courtship literature examines how couples transition into unions that are more formal by providing an overview of the cohabitation and marriage literature. Couples today have more options when forming commitments and each of these options work in different ways to symbolize the meaning the relationship has for the couple. For example, couples who are getting more serious can choose to cohabit, become engaged, or marry; the norms of the past do not exist as strongly today.

Modernization of intimacy and the deinstitutionalization of marriage

During the late 20th century in America, several changes happened in the culture that influenced the way people find partners today. Modernization is noted as reinforcing and legitimating individualism, which makes intimate relationships an important component of both people’s lives and identities (Bulcroft et al 2000). In terms of intimate relationships, the ideology transitioned from finding fulfillment in a complementary relationship to one where one’s relationships helped to define one as a person (Giddens 1992). Individualism has
dramatically changed the way familiar and intimate relationships are understood; individuals today are viewed as being able to take care of themselves without the aid of a partner or family. Since this intimacy model legitimates the end of unhappy unions, only relationships based in mutual love and attraction are seen as being legitimate (Bawin-Legros 2004). As a result, this new intimacy promises much in terms of personal growth, freedom, and sexual liberation and removes marriage as being a defining force of modern relationships (Beck-Gernsheim 1998).

This change in intimacy and love has played a role in the ways that people find partners and form commitments today. In combination with feminism and women’s movement into paid labor, the change in intimacy has led to a shift away from the ‘traditional’ family and its divided gender roles. The highly institutionalized companionate marriage started a process of deinstitutionalization, or a “weakening of the social norms that define people’s behavior in social institutions such as marriage” (Cherlin 2004: 848). These changes coincided with and were shaped by a major transition in intimacy to a more individualized model. Under this argument, marriage lost much of its influence on the ways individuals’ couple and this deinstitutionalization of marriage has led to both increased household diversity and a less clear understanding of kin networks (Beck-Gernsheim 1998; Cherlin 2004). However, a key aspect that these theories neglect is that, while the deviation from ‘traditional’ marriage and family forms does not carry the same social sanctions it once did, marriage remains the hegemonic framework of the most legitimate way to form long-term intimate relationships (Gross 2005). That is, while the actual act of legal marriage may be playing a lessening role in the intimate relationships of many Americans, the ideology and model of marriage—indeed, even the “promise” of what marriage means for a couple—
appears to remain strong in popular culture (i.e., Cherlin 2004; Edin et al 2004; Ingraham 1999).

Despite much theoretical attention to the deinstitutionalization of marriage and the rise in individualism, current patterns of courtship remain largely under-examined (e.g., Bailey 1989; England and Thomas 2007). There is a lack of institutionalized norms concerning finding partners and dating after the sexual revolution (Bailey 1989; England and Thomas 2007; Ferguson 2007). Various actions that might, in the past, have suggested interest in pursuing a relationship, such as giving out a phone number or inviting someone out for drinks, no longer have the same meanings they once did; even engaging in sexual activities with an individual does not imply interest in forming a relationship (Bailey 1989; England and Thomas 2007). The limited literature available on courtship today suggests two themes: a centering on nonprocreative sexual activity (e.g., casual sex, ‘hooking up’ (Bailey 1989; England and Thomas 2007)) and what might be viewed as a streamlining of the process of finding a partner (e.g., speed dating, online dating databases). Current ideologies of love help to explain this phenomenon; while love is conceptualized as being “spontaneous and unpredictable,” the couple is still expected to “work at the relationship” (Bulcroft et al 2000: 77). As a result, people may ‘court’ in ways that maximize knowledge of partner compatibility and reject partnerships early on that do not look like they will ‘work’ for them. As Illouz (1997) notes, “romance [today] has little place for values of self-control, effort, and compromise, which, according to advice literature and conventional wisdom, are necessary for a successful relationship as well” (p. 88).

These issues of how to “do” intimacy today have led to increased variety and acceptance of various forms of doing intimacy. One of the consequences in this shift is that
our understandings and practices of intimacy have led to a seemingly complex time line for how couples can experience their relationships. No longer is it dating, then marriage, but a couple can start their relationship by hooking up or “dating” (whatever this means today) before they transition into a formal and/or informal, committed or uncommitted cohabitation, engagement, and marriage. Here, I will review the contemporary courtship and marriage literature while maintaining an open discussion of the complexities involved in how individuals and couples experience intimacy today.

*Early courtship: Finding partners in a post-dating culture*

Contemporary courtship practices have received little attention in the literature. While there is some evidence that people still go on “dates” as a way of finding a partner (England and Thomas 2007; Glenn 2001), there have been no real demographic attempts to create a representative understanding of the various ways people could find partners, such as through friends and family, at work, school, or church, and through the use of modern technologies, such as online chat rooms and personal ads. Most of the available literature focuses on newer trends in courtship, including ‘hooking up’ and personals advertising, which appear to be most popular among younger generations and college students (Bogle 2008; England and Thomas 2007; Glenn 2001; Paul, Mcmanus, and Hayes 2000). Many authors researching post-dating culture note that changing gender expectations, shifts in power in gender and family relationships, increased freedom for men and women, and more mixed sex platonic relationships have reduced the perceived ‘differences’ between men and woman and, as a result, have affected the ways individuals form relationships (e.g., Bailey 1989; Ferguson 2007; England and Thomas 2007). Bailey (1989) argues that the sexual revolution undermined traditional dating practices because it challenged power relations between men
and women and allowed for a freer expression of sexuality between partners, regardless of the status of their relationship. In this section, I will first provide an understanding of what ‘dating’ is to young adults today. I will then overview the limited courtship literature by reviewing the information on some of the emerging courtship trends: hooking up and personals advertising. I then I will highlight how the ambiguity inherent in post-dating culture shapes the ways young adults form relationships.

Dating

The available literature on post-dating culture tends to conclude that dating means many things today, but that it rarely means what it did during dating culture. For many, if a couple is “dating” today that means that they have already established themselves in a committed, monogamous relationship that often includes sex (England and Thomas 2007; Glenn 2001). Those who use new technologies (e.g., internet dating) to find mates also appear to hold off on referring to themselves as dating someone until they have built a solid friendship and then relationship with someone (Lawson and Leck 2006). In the rare cases a young adult might view an event as a date in the traditional sense, the scripts appear to be highly gendered and contested; indeed, some women who were invited to ‘go out’ with a man would pay for themselves so as not to give him the wrong idea about her feelings about him (Glenn 2001).

Hooking up

Newer research on post-dating culture conducted among college students suggests that, for many, “hooking up” is a new trend in how some youth experience sex and relationships. However, it is unclear if this is truly a new behavior or simply the greater recognition, labeling, and perhaps institutionalization of nonmarital sexuality patterns among
younger generations today. Hooking up is defined as when two people have some sort of sexual contact with each other outside of a dating relationship (Bogle 2008; England and Thomas 2007; Glenn 2001; Paul et al 2000). Sexual contact can range from kissing and “making out” up to and including sexual intercourse. Using a term—‘hooking up’—that means a very wide range of sexual activities provides youth, especially women, a way to imply something sexual occurred but without having to admit to what they did, which many noted as helping them avoid a bad reputation (Bogle 2008; Glenn 2001). Current research on hooking up notes that it is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon among college students, with various studies of college students noting between approximately 40 to 80 percent of participants self-reporting that they had hooked up at least once while in college (England and Thomas 2007; Glenn 2001; Paul et al 2000). In addition, 91 percent of student respondents in a nationally representative sample said that hooking up occurred on their college campuses (Glenn 2001).

Many students who report hooking up meet their partners at parties, frat events, or around their dormitory (Bogle 2008; England and Thomas 2007; Glenn 2001). Alcohol is often involved when two individuals hook up. England and Thomas (2007) found that many students had been drinking but not enough that their judgment was significantly impaired. However, students who are intoxicated are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse during a hook up compared to students who have been drinking but who are not intoxicated (Paul et al 2000). Men report more hook ups that involve intercourse than women (Paul et al 2000) and have more orgasms during hook ups (England and Thomas 2007). While only the study by Glenn (2001) is nationally representative, hooking up appears to take place in similar ways across campuses studied.
For some, hooking up might lead to some sort of intimate relationship. However, this was not a general trend: rates ranged from 12 percent to about one third of those who hook up reporting that a relationship resulted from the experience (Paul et al. 2000; England and Thomas 2007). England and Thomas (2007) note that women are more likely than men to report being interested in or using hook ups as a way to form an intimate relationship. One aspect of courtship today that appears more structured is “the talk”, which is when one person, usually the female, will ask the male what the nature of their relationship is, i.e., if they are just hooking up or if they are going to be in a more serious relationship (England and Thomas 2007; Glenn 2001). As a result, much of the power in forming relationships appears to be placed into the hands of young men (Glenn 2001). Many young adults report that the beginnings of a relationship, including ‘the talk,’ can be awkward and uncomfortable because they do not want to be rejected or, for some, to have the ambiguous nature of the relationship to change (England and Thomas 2007; Glenn 2001).

**Personal ads**

Personal advertisements, or when people put out a profile that describes themselves and what they are looking for in a relationship, are not a brand new way to find potential mates; however, the advent of new technologies, such as the internet, cell phones and text messaging, have influenced how personal ads are used in post-dating culture (Ferguson 2007; DeMasi 2007). For many, personal advertisements are a popular, accepted, and vital aspect of courtship today (DeMasi 2007). In addition, finding dates using online personals offers individuals something that they may be unable to find in other scenes, such as school or bars: intent and structure. The use of personal ads streamlines finding a partner, since you can look for people who possess qualities that you desire in a partner (DeMasi 2007). Personals also
allow people to ‘meet’ more people in less time in a setting where those you meet are looking for relationships, unlike bars or other scenes where it is often unclear what other people’s intentions are (Lawson and Leck 2006).

Efforts by online dating sites to legitimate online personals have been successful; 18 million people had visited online personals sites in June of 2006, up from 14.8 million from the previous October (Sullivan 2006). The large audiences and membership rates at these sites not only legitimate online dating as a way of finding a partner, but also markets the idea that finding love online is possible and easy (DeMasi 2007). Many sites professionalize themselves by offering quizzes, relationship “experts,” and advice to potential subscribers to help guide them through the matchmaking process and help them find potential partners that match up with them on interests, desired demographic traits, and personality characteristics (DeMasi 2007). They often note their successes in helping people find love by highlighting couples who had met through the site and married; interestingly, this appears to happen at a promising rate for those looking for love: match.com loses about 150 of its 600,000 members a month due to members finding a serious partner using their service (Sullivan 2006).

Few studies have been conducted on how personals based dating relationships manifest themselves in heterosexual couples. Earlier studies suggest that more men than women to respond to print personal advertisements (Goode 1998), suggesting that women may have a better hand in obtaining many potential partners to choose from. Lawson and Leck (2006) found, in their study of online daters, that most of their respondents wanted to find a partner for a serious relationship. After finding a potential partner, many reported taking several months to get to know their match better both online and on the phone; many waited until getting to know the person well ‘online’ before meeting them in person. Because
the internet can provide a disguise for dishonest individuals, many online daters knew that the relationships they built online were unstable and had a high likelihood of falling apart once they met their partner in person (Lawson and Leck 2006). However, for couples who meet online and find that they are interested in pursuing an intimate relationship in person, these relationships tend to progress in ways similar to couples who first meet in person; they build trust with their partner and spend time together to learn more about each other (Lawson and Leck 2006). As a result, finding partners through personals appears to provide a solid option to individuals who are unhappy or unsuccessful in seeking partners through other avenues. It also appears to be one of the more structured ways of finding a partner; while not always the case, many might feel it safe to assume that others on the personals site are indeed seeking a relationship.

The effects of a postdating culture on younger generations today has created a dating situation where couples are unsure as to the rules and guidelines to follow when seeking a mate and deciding how serious their relationship should be (England and Thomas 2007; Glenn 2001). The sexual revolution changed the rules of dating by challenging gendered scripts of courtship (Bailey 1989); however, this revolution brought with it a mixed understand of relationships and sex among youth today. Under half of female students in a nationally representative survey agreed that their college had “clearly understood informal rules about relationships” (Glenn 2001: 33). Indeed, the independent nature of intimate relationships today, modeled by both shifts to individualized marriage (Cherlin 2004) and an individualized understanding of intimate relationships (Beck-Gernsheim 1998; Bulcroft 2000; Giddens 1992) does not facilitate the creation of a common understanding of courtship today. Indeed, Glenn (2001) found that most of the women in his sample agreed that they
“should not judge anyone’s sexual conduct except [their] own” (p. 6). It appears that we are in the midst of a post-dating culture that, for the time being, seems unlikely to develop any solid rules regarding early partnering practices.

Among younger generations today, this post-dating culture appears to support the way college students view themselves and others. While over 80 percent of college women report that marriage is an important goal for them, they are often unsure about the norms associated with being a young adult and someone looking to form relationships (Glenn 2001). For many, their relationships tend to be under committed (e.g., ‘hooking up’) or overcommitted (“attached at the hip”); both of these situations create problems in the long-term success of these women finding partners (Glenn 2001). Women in under committed relationships are unsure of how to create and maintain longer-term unions (Glenn 2001). Women in committed relationships also face problems; many young college couples are unsure as to the future of their relationships once they start thinking about the end of college.

As they transition into the next stage of adulthood, many find that marriage and breaking up are their only options; as a result, many of these couples terminate their relationship because they are not ready to marry (Glenn 2001).

Transitions into more formal unions

Changes in the meanings of intimate relationships and marriage in people’s lives have influenced the way relationships progress into more formal unions. First, individuals and couples have many options in the ways they can couple that do not necessarily involve marriage as an immediate or long-term goal. For example, couples can choose to cohabit together at any stage of their relationship, regardless of whether or not marriage is an immediate, possible, or unlikely goal for their union (Brines and Joyner 1999; Sassler and
Miller n.d.). Second, the relationships people are seeking today are based in partnership and self-fulfillment instead of social roles or obligation to one’s partner. Social pressure to remain in an unhappy union has decreased, since it is expected—and allowed—that one should leave a relationship if they are unhappy with it and desire to end it. As a result, it appears there may be a tendency for many today to build their commitment level prior to deciding to get married; it is much easier to end a dating or cohabiting relationship than a marriage.

There is a general lack of literature on how relationships progress (Sassler 2004). Here, a bulk of research in family sociology and other related areas focus on marriage as the start—and divorce at the end—of the couple relationship. However, examining how individuals become couples and the negotiations that take place to transition into more private and exclusive arrangements is limited (Sassler 2004, Ross 1995). In terms of understanding the process of engagement and becoming married, the cohabitation literature has produced a wealth of research that focuses on the role of cohabitation in regards to marriage and its effects on the couple relationship.

**Nonmarital cohabitation**

One of the better developed literatures examining how relationships progress is found in the nonmarital cohabitation literature; it appears that cohabitation is an important part of marriage process for many couples (e.g., Sassler and Miller n.d.). However, cohabitation does not fit easily into dominant frameworks of marital status since it is a stage that contains characteristics of both more-casual courtship and marriage (Clarkberg 1999). As a result, cohabitation has generally been conceptualized primarily as a phase within courtship or the marital process instead of a legitimate substitute for marriage (Kiernan 2002; Smock 2000).
During a period where marriage is still maintained as an important, highly symbolic institution, public opinion of cohabitation is that it is most appropriate as a precursor to marriage. Over half of men and women in one study agreed that cohabitation is an important step for a couple who is planning on marrying because it would allow them time to see if they were compatible for marriage (Bumpass, Sweet, Cherlin 1991).

This trend in both theory and public opinion is supported in empirical research. Today, over half of marriages start as a cohabiting union in both the United States and in most European nations (Kiernan 2002; Smock 2000). European nations that are similar to the United States in terms of public opinion of cohabitation as an appropriate phase of the courtship process have similar marriage rates whereas nations that allow cohabitation to exist as its own legitimate union have much lower marriage rates (Kiernan 2002). However, in the United States, cohabitation remains as a short-term institution for most. Approximately half of cohabiting unions will end within the first year, with many of these unions ending because of a transition into marriage (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006; Thomson and Colella 1992). In addition, 60 percent of cohabiting couples do not have children in the household, which suggests that many are singles who are living together prior to forming their first unions or that they transition into marriage prior to having children (Bumpass et al 1991; Nock 1995). Couples who cohabit longer generally will marry or separate within the first few years; after five years, only ten percent of couples will remain in a cohabiting relationship (Lichter et al 2006; Bumpass et al 1991). One trend these studies note is that the shorter the amount of time a couple cohabits, the higher the likelihood of it ending in marriage. This fact suggests that cohabitation may play a significant—but overlooked—role in the engagement and marriage process.
The number of couples today who choose premarital cohabitation has increased dramatically in the past forty years. In the mid 1960s though the mid 1970s, approximately 11 percent of never married couples premaritally cohabited (Bumpass et al 1991). During the 1980s, this rate increased dramatically to approximately 44 percent of couples for first marriages (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). During the 1990s, the premarital cohabitation rate for first marriages reached approximately fifty percent and has remained consistent since (Bumpass et al 1991). With this transition coinciding with a decline in marriage rates, the trend today appears to be one where many couples feel that less formal socio-familiar arrangements are more desirable and acceptable. However, many of these couples do continue the progression of their relationship into marriage.

For many young couples, there is some hesitation to marry right away because they feel they are ‘too young’ or that they would like to reach certain life goals prior to marrying, which makes cohabiting a popular choice since it allows a serious continuation of the relationship but without the meanings of marriage attached to it (Kiernan 2002; Sassler 2004). Cohabitation appears to be part of the marriage process for many young couples. Watson and DeMeo (1987) found that cohabiting couples discussed marriage sooner than non-cohabiting couples and that the gap between seriously thinking about marriage and getting married was shorter for cohabiting couples. However, their study provides a very limited understanding of the role of cohabitation and marriage in the lives of young couples. While a majority (approximately 80 percent) of cohabiters report that they want to get married at least to someone, newer research suggests that cohabitation can be an approach to marriage in two different ways. For some, cohabitation is a definite part of the marriage process. Over half of these couples had talked about becoming engaged and fifty percent
have definite plans to marry each other (Bumpass et al. 1991; Sassler 2004). Many of the individuals in this group, particularly women, wanted a commitment to the relationship prior to cohabiting with their partner. So here, it appears that those who premaritally cohabit move in together with definite plans to progress the relationship to marriage. As a result, cohabitation is a definite part of the engagement process, since marriage is the beginning—and ending—reason for living together.

The second group of cohabiters were more likely to feel that cohabitation was the next step in their relationship but that cohabitation did not necessarily mean that marriage was the next step after cohabitation. While these couples tend to have very positive views of marriage (Surra and Hughes 1997), marriage was not the immediate or necessarily the ultimate goal for the relationship. Discussions of marriage often developed only after a period of living together, even though many of these couples reported that they felt their partner was “the one” for them (Sassler 2004). Here, it is important to note that the living arrangements of these couples and the timing of thinking about marriage is more related to the natural progression of the relationship and not that cohabitation is being used as a trial to see if the couple is fit for or ready for marriage (Sassler 2004). Discussions of marriage developed when it was appropriate for the timing of the relationship but a lack of discussion about marriage did not imply a lesser commitment to the relationship compared to those who viewed cohabitation as part of the marriage process.

Cohabitation and relationship quality

In understanding the differences in relationship quality between those who cohabit, premaritally cohabit, or marry, many researchers have examined measures such as cohesion, commitment levels, and the likelihood of the relationship ending. In some studies, those who
cohabit experience less cohesion in their relationships and have lower quality relationships compared to married couples (Brines and Joyner 1999; Brown and Booth 1996). In addition, they report lower levels of commitment to their relationships when compared to married couples (Nock 1995; Thomson and Colella 1992). However, for some, cohabitation is used instead of marriage because the couple does not feel that they are committed enough to the relationship to warrant marriage. As noted earlier, cohabiting unions have very high-resolution rates, because of both marriage and the partnership ending. Lichter et al (2006) found that those who cohabit are slightly more likely to end the relationship than to transition into marriage. In addition, those who cohabit for over a year prior to marriage report that they think that their risk of divorce is higher compared to couples who cohabited less than a year (Thomson and Colella 1992).

For relationships with high levels of attachment and emotional support, Ross (1995) found no difference between cohabiting and married couples and that both groups experienced an increased sense of wellbeing compared to couples with lower levels of attachment and support. The relationship between union status and wellbeing may be related to the couples’ intention to marry. Couples who were premaritally cohabiting were found not to be significantly different from married couples. This difference is present in about 76 percent of cohabiting couples and suggests that those who have plans on marrying and limit the amount of time cohabiting will experience “better” relationship quality. Those who cohabit for longer periods are generally “less happy” compared to married couples (Brown and Booth 1996). However, this difference may be largely based in the lack of formalization of the union, which may be a result of socioeconomic matters, considering that many couples wish to be financially ready prior to marriage (Clarkberg 1999; Edin et al 2004; Sassler and
Schoen 1999). Cohabitating unions also tend to be more egalitarian (Brines and Joyner 1999), which can cause ambiguity in the roles for each partner and lead to distress. In addition, long term cohabitors have less institutional support for their unions, since marriage, at least in the United States, is still seen as the ideal union (Kiernan 2002).

One of the reasons that there appears to be a disconnect between the literature on the well-being of married couples versus cohabiting couples is that measuring relationships by their legal status ignores that level of integration and commitment in the relationship (Ross 1995). Some authors note that cohabiting unions generally have lower levels of commitment (Nock 1995; Thomson and Colella 1992). However, this approach ignores how different couples view cohabitation as a part of their relationship. Surra and Hughes (1997) note that a major difference between different types of cohabiting couples is in how they view their relationships, which may relate to the level of commitment they feel towards one another. Couples with event driven relationships, where couples talk about and view their relationship as a series of events, tend to have more conflict and reluctance on the part of its members to seek a more permanent arrangement. On the other hand, relationship driven couples, who refer to their relationships as getting stronger over time but without association to events, have relationships that are more satisfying. While both of these types of couples spend the same amount of time cohabiting, those who are relationship driven are more likely to end their cohabitation in marriage.

Marriage

Unfortunately, the cohabitation literature provides the bulk of the limited knowledge we have about how couples move into marriage or other more permanent unions. Research on marriage as an institution has been developing within the past few years and notes its
symbolic importance; marriage does not have the same influence in shaping people’s lives today than it did a mere 40 years ago (Cherlin 2004). Today, marriage is seen as the capstone or ultimate goal of one’s adult years. Cherlin (2004) notes that marriage is increasingly moving from a marker of conformity to one of prestige. The delay in marriage today does not appear to be the result of individuals avoiding commitment, not being ready for marriage, or being unable to find a partner (e.g., Edin et al 2004; Sassler and Miller n.d.). Instead, marriage has moved from being a marker of the beginning of adulthood (Seidman 2004) to an institution one undertakes after settling into adult life and relationships. Cherlin (2004) notes that different life course events, such as sexuality, cohabitation, and childbearing, are now generally accepted outside of marriage, which demonstrates that marriage does not have the same institutional pull it once did in defining people’s adult lives and activities.

The ideologies surrounding married life contain within them many markers of prestige today, such as steady jobs, home ownership, savings, etc. Marriage, in turn, becomes the highlight of a pre-settled adult condition, one where the actual struggles of early adult life are missing since they have already been passed. Since couples have settled into their lives and relationships, the relationship can focus more on the needs of each of its members instead of duties and responsibilities towards making ends meet. Research on lower income families, who are often thought to have ‘given up’ on marriage, reveals that this idealized view of marriage is the reason these couples do not marry (Edin et al 2004). It is not that they do not value marriage; they hold the same high standards and expectations of marriage that middle class couples do. However, their financial situation often makes it harder for them to actualize their goals.
This framework is supported by demographic trends, which suggest that younger generations are not giving up on marriage, but that they are reconceptualizing marriage as a part of their lives and identities. General Social Survey data found that Generation Y is more optimistic about marriage, with 80.5 percent of 18-24 year olds reporting that they would get married if they found the right person compared to 69% of those who are 25 to 34 years old. Stapinski (1999) notes that many of the children in this younger cohort were unhappy with the way they witnessed their parents’ marriages growing up, especially the superficiality of the relationships and the high rate of divorce that created the impression that marriage was not an important or meaningful institution. She notes that these youth report wanting more stability and tradition in their family lives. While this group does not necessarily want to replicate an ‘Ozzie and Harriet’ family model, they do want to place their marriages and families above other institutions in their lives. While these young women desire to work and have careers, they also want to avoid doing so at the risk of not being able to fulfill their desire to be committed wives and mothers.

However, we still find today that marriage is the ultimate goal of many individuals and couples. This combination of individualized love, changes in intimacy, and family formation has not led to a retreat from marriage. Instead, marriage has become highly individualized and symbolic; it remains a goal for a majority of Americans despite the availability of other coupling arrangements (Cherlin 2004). While no longer a marker of adulthood or a reference for appropriate roles to take, marriage has maintained—and as some argue, increased—its value as a highly desirable and symbolic institution (Cherlin 2004). In addition, as highlighted by contemporary debates concerning the rights of same sexed couples to marry in the U.S., it is clear that marriage retains much of its macro level
institutional pull, as it legally validates some unions over others and is a primary location for the allocation of material benefits, such as tax rights, power of attorney, and inheritance.

**Demographic characteristics and transitions into cohabiting and marital unions**

In addition to understanding the meanings cohabitation and marriage have for couples today, it is important to examine how different demographic characteristics, such as gender and class, affect the kinds of longer-term unions individuals both desire and are able to form. Gender ideologies and economics have a major influence on the form a couple’s relationship takes. Men who have more traditional gender ideologies have more positive views of marriage and are more likely to marry (Sassler and Goldscheider 2004; Sassler and Schoen 1999). At the same time, some men view cohabitation as an institution similar to marriage in regard to their responsibility and role towards a partner and prefer it to being single (Sassler and Goldscheider 2004). For women, their economic situation plays a heavier role in their assessment of the form their unions take. Marriage is often preferable because it is seen as improving their economic situation and emotional aspects of their relationships. This is especially true for black women, who feel more than white women that their lives would be better if they were married (Sassler and Schoen 1999). From this, women who view marriage as a better alternative to being single are more likely to transition into marriage (Sassler and Schoen 1999). However, women who have higher earnings tend to favor cohabitation over marriage as a coupling option (Clarkberg 1999). This may be related to their desire for a relationship with weaker gender role expectations since they bring significant economic power to the relationship.

Economics also play a major role in whether or not a couple continues to cohabit or transition into marriage. For some, their economic situation may interact with their age and
school/work history, which creates a desire to delay marriage until they have accomplished more goals in life, such as finishing school or finding stable employment (Sassler 2004). As a result, those who are economically unstable but who do not want to delay building more permanent relationships may cohabit until their economic situation improves to the point where they feel they can get married (Clarkberg 1999; Edin et al 2004; Sassler and Schoen 1999). In addition, the weakening of the relationship between men’s economic status and marriage suggests that many couples are working together to build a financially secure relationship instead of depending on a male breadwinner model (Sassler and Goldscheider 2004).

For couples who are more economically comfortable, the rate of transition into marriage increases. Cohabiting women who are economically stable marry sooner than those who have economic difficulties (Lichter et al 2006). In addition, those with higher incomes are more likely to think about transitioning to marriage when compared to those with lower incomes (Bumpass et al 1991). For those, especially women, who live in or near poverty, cohabitation is often an unchosen substitute for marriage and this group has one of the lowest rates of transitioning into marriage (Lichter et al 2006). The economic situation many of these women face causes many to view cohabitation as an economic trial to marriage to see how the couple’s financial situation will work out (Clarkberg 1999). While many poor couples view marriage as an important institution, they often hold such high expectations of it that they are never able to become financially stable enough to transition into marriage (Edin et al 2004). As a result, many form families outside of marriage and remain in a semi-permanent phase of engagement.
Finding partners and settling into longer-term unions today has become increasingly personalized and deinstitutionalized. The norms that once guided people through the process of finding a partner have been unsettled by major changes in how individuals can choose to experience their relationship with another, from how they meet partners to the ways in which they choose to live out the duration of their unions. The process of forming more formal unions, either through marriage or cohabitation, have been studied to some extent (i.e., Sassler and Miller n.d.) but these studies often exclude much analysis for how and why couples choose to make transitions in their relationships. This is highly problematic, in that relationship processes are generally not random events and often have some meaning to individuals, especially when the transition is made purposely. For couples choosing marriage, engagement is often one of the first institutionalized steps prior to a wedding in which the couple is able to show that they have a commitment to one another; here, it is important to understand engagement as a part of both the coupling process and the marriage process.
CHAPTER 3: ENGAGEMENT LITERATURE

Shifting normative courtship patterns in America over the past two centuries highlight both the consequences and rewards of change within couple relationships. Most couples today likely welcome the freedom that has developed in their ability to pick a partner and to build a relationship defined less by gender than by what they desire in the relationship. However, this choice and freedom remains constrained against new ideologies of how gender, sexuality, and relationships shape intimate relationships. The last chapter demonstrated changes that have occurred in courtship and ended with what I am estimating to be the more or less normative patterns for how younger generations today find partners. This chapter provides a much different story; while the courtship styles today have become more deinstitutionalized, the process of becoming married present in both popular culture and scholarly literature suggests that, while individualization is occurring ideologically, many of the ‘traditions’ associated with marriage, such as weddings and proposals, have maintained or even increased in normative structure.

In this chapter, I will review the literature related to marital engagement in an attempt to better understand how it is recognized within contemporary relationship processes. First, I will present a working definition of engagement that will be used as a starting point for this dissertation. Afterwards, the following section will include a review of the popular and scholarly sources on marital engagement and the literature on weddings and marriage proposals.

Overview of Engagement Today

Defining engagement is important for the purposes of this dissertation. As demonstrated in the literature, while many people have an idea of what engagement is, there
are many shapes and forms it can take. For example, is a couple who has discussed marriage and who plan on marrying engaged? Or do couples start thinking of themselves as being engaged after an official proposal? For the purposes of this proposal, I am initially defining engagement as the period of time between when the couple officially announces their intent to marry and the wedding, which is socially recognized as a different part of the couple’s courtship by both the couple and others. Other studies note that couples see the “official” engagement as starting with a formal marriage proposal (Schweingruber et al 2004), not when the couple talks about and decides that it is time to consider marriage. Sassler and Miller (n.d.) also notes the importance women place on ‘waiting to be asked’ by their partner for their hand in marriage; discussions and agreement about the possibility of marriage in the future, they found, was not enough for women to consider themselves engaged. These authors indicate that many couples see a difference between discussion about marriage and an official announcement (often accompanied by a proposal story and ring), which leads me to define engagement in this more restricted sense. However, because these studies were not examining engagement as a social process but, instead, were focused on other couple events (i.e., the proposal, transitions to more formal unions), it is hard to know how well this definition fits into the definitions of engagement that couples today use to understand their intimate relationships. As a result, I provide this definition as a way of framing the engagement literature but understand that it is likely the definition that emerges from this dissertation will be more nuanced and complex.

While there has been a substantial increase in scholarly publications focusing on weddings in recent years, very little of the wedding literature has focused on the engagement period. Most of the sparsely existing “engagement” literature focuses mostly on heterosexism
and ritual (Oswald 2000; Ingraham 1999), bachelorette parties and bridal showers (Montemurro 2002; 2003; 2005), and marriage proposals (Schweingruber et al. 2004; Vannini 2004). The lack of research on engagement is interesting, since—generally speaking—becoming engaged and finding a marriage partner are important steps in the marriage process, since engagements often last approximately 14 months (Otnes and Pleck 2003; Carmody 1992\(^1\) (cited in Strong, DeVault, and Cohen 2008)). Sassler and Miller (n.d.) note the importance of ‘waiting to be asked’ for cohabiting women, even though they have often discussed marriage and have long term plans to marry their partner. Absent from these sources is an examination of the role of engagement as part of the coupling or marriage process. In essence, it appears to be a taken-for-granted and sociologically unimportant step in the couple relationship. However, it might be rare to find an engaged couple who thinks their engagement is unimportant and largely insignificant in meaning.

One of the consequences of having a limited literature on engagement is that much of what we know about engagement comes from our own experiences and popular sources, which likely create weddings and engagement as much more middle class and extravagant than the average person may experience. This bias is explored by Ingraham (1999), who notes that wedding magazines often construct the “white wedding” as an event filled with—often covert—classist, sexist, and racist undertones. In addition, sources such as wedding magazines cater to middle class couples—those who are most likely to purchase and read bridal magazines (Ingraham 1999). Much of what we may learn from popular sources is likely highly idealized versions of what the average U.S. couple may experience when it

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\(^1\) Carmody (1992) is cited as source of the statement that engagements last between 12 and 16 months. However, Strong et al. (2008) fail to list the full citation for Carmody (1992) in their index and an online search of major journals and Google provided no more information on this source.
comes to their own wedding. However, they do provide a sense of what is seen as normative in terms of how couples should ‘do’ their engagements and weddings.

Popular sources

Much of the information about the nature of engagement today, in terms of how couples might experience engagement or what it means as a part of the coupling process, is limited to what can be pieced together from popular sources. Bridal magazines and websites, on their own, are not a representative and, many times, not even a realistic source of information on engagement and wedding planning (e.g., Ingraham 1999). Simply browsing through bridal magazines today provides the reader with a “helpful” wedding budget sheet to chart their expenses, set around $20,000, whereas marketing estimates suggest that the average U.S. couple spent $27,000 on their wedding in 2006 (costofwedding.com). While there are many questions that arise in the validity of these numbers, including how representative they are of the U.S. marrying population, the influence of bridal magazines and websites should not be overlooked, since it appears that many brides consult them in planning their weddings. An online study based on a convenience sample of 928 women planning their weddings found that most of the brides-to-be in the sample consulted family and friends (90 percent) and bridal magazines and websites (67 and 77 percent, respectively) for wedding planning ideas (Bridal Association of America). This suggests that, perhaps for many brides, the images of romance, engagement, and weddings that they find in these sources are not too far from what they envision for their own relationship and wedding—and marketers are likely to want to sell, in addition to wedding items, the idea that spending thousands of dollars on a wedding is not only necessary to ‘do’ it right, but also normal.
While popular sources do present many problems methodologically, they do provide a sense—for both couples and researchers—of norms concerning what couples should do once they are engaged. Popular advice sources also serve as a gauge from which to measure cultural ideologies (Seidman 1991). For example, I have found that most magazines provide budgets, wedding planning timelines (usually set at 1 year before the wedding), and etiquette regarding the wedding. *Bridal Guide* breaks down their table of contents as (in order) *Fashion, Beauty and Health, Your Home, Wedding Planning, Your Honeymoon,* and *News and Features*. Many magazines also provide some articles on relationship skills, with titles such as “Will you be the Perfect Wife” (*Bridal Guide* March/April 1998). However, the number of articles on relationship building or couple advice appears limited compared to information on gowns, etiquette, and registering for gifts. From my observations gathered in reading many of these magazines, it appears that they are designed to promote and reproduce a traditional ideology of what a wedding entails, from the events planned (ceremony, reception, honeymoon) to the items needed to make the wedding a “wedding”: a white dress, flowers, diamond rings, cake, etc. Rarely are deviations from this ideological scheme shown (Ingraham 1999).

The secondary nature of the engagement period as a time to finish building the couple relationship is highlighted in an advice column in *Bridal Guide* (July/August 2004). In responding to a question about the appropriateness of a long engagement, the response focused on the benefits of a long engagement, such as being able to book popular wedding sites and vendors, being able to gather savings to pay for the wedding, and then briefly mentions that “a longer engagement allows the two of you to really concentrate on building your relationship—something no couple should take lightly” (p. 51, emphasis added). Here,
while noted as something “no couple should take lightly,” relationship building is secondary to wedding planning during the engagement process. Examples like these have two key implications. First, they suggest the importance of taking the time to plan the perfect wedding for the couple, as displayed by the prominence of information on planning and executing weddings. Second, it may also imply that the engagement period comes after a time when the couple knows that they are compatible and ready for public and legal commitment, which may be the reason that information on relationships is secondary to wedding planning.

With popular sources, such as websites, magazines, and store displays, it is important to acknowledge that a bulk of these materials are designed to construct engagements and weddings as consisting of normative (or, in their words, “classic” or “traditional”) features. However, at the heart, it is likely that these sources are more interested in promoting their own interests in selling products than displaying a sociologically accurate account of engagements and weddings. For example, wedding magazines do not exist solely to help provide information about weddings (Wallace 2004) but to also sell products (Ingraham 1999). By setting budgets high and selling high ticket items, the expenses occurred by the couple are rationalized and normalized, i.e., spending $1,000 on a wedding dress becomes a “bargain” when looking at magazines selling gowns with a much higher price tag.

Scholarly sources

Popular sources of information on engagement and weddings are suggestive in creating a framework through which to start understanding these events. In recent years, the scholarly literature has started to do more in-depth studies of some of the things engaged couples experience. The next sections will examine research on weddings and marriage proposals to highlight what is known about the engagement process. Here, it is important to
note that no literature was found specifically about engagement apart from weddings or various rituals. While scholarly sources are often more rigorous in their methodologies than popular sources, many, especially the historical literature, remain problematic because they are based on convenience samples, available documentation, or market research instead of more representative data. While this is a limitation, these data can provide a sense of normative trends in engagements and weddings and help to develop areas and themes to explore in this dissertation.

Weddings

The sociological literature on weddings provides some insight into engagement, but not in the same way as the popular literature. For many engaged couples today, the engagement period appears to be the main period in which weddings are planned. Using the General Social Survey, Stapinski (1999) found that the desire to maintain many of traditional elements of the wedding is apparent in recent generations’ desires to return to the courtship and marital ways of their grandparents. For example, she notes that the “percentage of people age 18-24 year olds who say it is always wrong to have sex before marriage” has increased from around 12 percent in 1994 to about 24 percent in 1998 (66). In addition, young women today who marry report maintaining many traditionally gendered aspects in their weddings, such as tossing their garters and having their fathers walk them down the aisle. While there is evidence that Western weddings are becoming more individualized and secular, the ways in which the average wedding is done has, over time, become more elaborate and decorative (Ingraham 1999; Kalmijn 1994; Wallace 2004). In addition, much of the wedding planning today is placed on the couple and not just the female partner and her female friends and family. Some authors suggest that the process of becoming married is shared more today
between partners (Stapinski 1999). Wallace (2004) notes that couples today have shifted much of the responsibility for planning and paying for their weddings to themselves, whereas in the past a woman and her mother used to be responsible for a bulk of the wedding details. Stapinski (1999) claims that this move also contributes to increased participation of men in planning and making decisions about the wedding, although other work on weddings (e.g., Ingham 1999; Otnes and Pleck 2003) does not note this trend.

This apparent move to couples being encouraged to plan their own, lavish wedding, one can argue, is one of the reasons that engagements have become longer and focused on wedding planning instead of preparing for married life. As Otnes and Pleck (2003) note, “the paramount function of the engagement is now to allow enough time for the wedding and honeymoon to be meticulously planned so the couple may revel in romance, magic, memories, and perfection” (61). Indeed, in her examination of Bride’s magazine, Wallace (2004) found that the average timeline for planning a wedding increased from about 3 months in the late 1960s to approximately a year in the early 1970s, where it has remained since. She notes that the length of an average engagement also doubled during this period, which suggests that couples felt a need to invest more time in planning an acceptable wedding (Wallace 2004). One influence leading this trend that continues today appears to be a move towards planning more personalized weddings, such as writing one’s own vows or having destination weddings (Stapinski 1999; Wallace 2004). Wallace (2004) observes that part of this change is due to weddings becoming larger; larger weddings mean more invitees, which mean that the average person attends far more weddings today than when weddings were smaller and focused on the immediate family. This, she argues, has created a need for contemporary weddings to recreate and outdo others in terms of style, lavishness, and costs;
couples want to have the wedding that is viewed as the best in comparison to the other weddings people have attended (Wallace 2004).

The wedding industry, as a result, plays a major role in developing ways to personalize different aspects of the wedding. Boden’s (2003) research on the wedding industry suggests that the industry knows that most weddings will follow a very traditional and institutionalized layout in terms of the way the ceremony processes: the ceremony, reception, gifting, and honeymoon. As a result, she argues, there is nothing unique or individual about the way that most wedding ceremonies and receptions are done. What makes weddings unique and individual are the consumer touches that couples can purchase to make their wedding stand out: for example, exotic flowers and custom napkins can make a wedding, although done in an institutionalized way, look personalized and individual. Even many of the ‘hippie’ weddings during the 1960s and 1970s described by Wallace (2004), while aiming to reject traditional values, still used the traditional wedding framework to organize their weddings. Here, dresses, locations, paper the invitations are printed on, etc. change, but the traditional organization remain the same.

Marriage proposals

Very little scholarly literature has focused on what is traditionally seen as the ‘official’ start of a couple’s engagement—the proposal (Schweingruber et al 2004; Vannini 2004). The proposal is generally seen as an important ritual for the couple to perform as they start the transition to marriage. While many couples discuss marriage and often have a general idea as to whether or not it is a transition they plan to make prior to the proposal (Otnes and Pleck 2003; Sassler and Miller n.d.; Schweingruber et al 2004; Vannini 2004), the “real” proposal depends on and is based in ritual (Schweingruber et al 2004; Vannini 2004).
Simply discussing plans to marry and knowing marriage will happen is not seen for most as the start of the official engagement (Sassler and Miller n.d.; Schweingruber et al 2004; Vannini 2004). As one woman noted, “nobody would take us too seriously if we started planning a wedding and there hadn’t been some official engagement process. [We needed] a story and a ring…” (Schweingruber et al 2004: 147). The importance of the proposal in the marriage process highlights the highly ritualized and institutionalized status that proposals hold.

While interviews by Schweingruber et al (2004) do not provide a representative sample, it is the only study found to date that asks couples how they perform becoming engaged. When examining the performance aspect of the twenty proposals in their sample, they found five themes, three of which were performed by each couple: the man asked the women, he presented a ring, and the proposal was a ‘surprise.’ These elements were required for the ‘official’ proposal by the couples in the study. For example, one woman reported that she had ‘jokingly’ attempted to propose to her boyfriend:

I actually, as a joke, the week before, on our one year anniversary, I put in the card, I’m like, ‘I love you so much. Will you marry me?’ And he just looked at me and he’s, like [with intonation of amused scolding], “Oh, Julie.” (P.148)

From this, we see that the woman sees herself as the proposer as “a joke” and that legitimate proposals were ones where the man proposed to the woman. As Schweingruber et al (2004) note, “the couple did not consider themselves engaged until he asked her to marry him” (p. 148). The other aspects, asking for the father’s permission and proposing on bended knee, were found in over half of couples (12 and 17, respectively).

Schweingruber et al (2004) and Vannini (2004) both highlight these ritualistic aspects of the proposal as a need for the couple to construct a ‘story’ of their proposal; many
desire and sense a need for a romantic or unique proposal. Here, regardless of whether the proposal is being made publicly or privately, it needs to be performed as a special event, even if the couple had already decided that they wanted to marry one another (Schweingruber et al 2004). Schweingruber et al (2004) found that couples noted that the proposal was an important step not only for themselves but also for others to know about, since it marked the special status (“engaged”) the couple now had and represented their intent to become married.

Narratives of wedding proposals reviewed by Vannini (2004) found that the “specialness” of the proposal was accomplished in one of two ways: the climax and the shock. Climax proposals involve a series of romantic gestures that hint at and lead to the proposition. Vannini (2004) offers the following example from “The World’s Greatest Marriage Proposals”:

The night Rob proposed was absolutely perfect. We had a romantic dinner at a favorite restaurant, Mom Chaffee’s. We had been planning dinner it [sic] so it didn’t seem out of the ordinary. I was diverted to the Reading Sheraton to seemingly pick up a friend of Rob’s, who was in town (he wasn’t really). We went up to “his” room, which was in the tower penthouse suite in the front of the hotel. The room had a breathtaking view overlooking the city. When we entered the room it was like walking into a magical fairy tale. The room was lit by candlelight and covered in rose petals. There were roses, champagne, wine, chocolate covered strawberries, and a beautiful view of the city lights. Our song, Valentine by Martina McBride, was playing softly in the background. Rob then asked me to dance. He guided me to the window, and then asked me, on bended knee, to spend my life with him and for my hand in marriage. I said Yes! We danced, kissed, laughed, and cried. We visited my parents, his parents, called family and then visited with some special friends. It was truly a magical night. (P. 176)

Proposals like this are seen as the most “appropriate” in terms of performing the proposal: it is thought out (e.g., he created a story to lure her to the hotel suite) and the necessary parts are negotiated beforehand (e.g., the room is arranged and decorated with candles, music,
champagne, and chocolates) to allow for the proposal to (hopefully) go off without a hitch. By having the necessary elements taken care of beforehand, the proposal is able to live up to its expectation of perfection (Schweingruber et al. 2004; Vannini 2004). In addition, by performing the proposal using the normative script, couples felt that the proposal was successful and would provide proof to others who were skeptical about the ‘realness’ of the engagement (Schweingruber et al. 2004).

The shock proposal, on the other hand, sets the proposal up in a way so that it comes off as a surprise to the recipient. While it seems that a major component of a “real” proposal is the surprise element, the shock proposal can be risky, often making the proposal come off as clumsy or under-planned (Vannini 2004). Regardless, while shock proposals may not contain the stereotyped ‘scripts’ of a proposal, they often resemble the climax style of proposing and can be done as long as they make the proposal a special, meaningful event. Vannini (2004) offers an example of a shock proposal, from “Story Behind the Rock: Proposals”:

I took my soon to be fiancée on my boat to go fishing. We found a secluded spot in the Raritan Bay in NJ to begin our fishing trip. I proceeded to rig her fishing pole. I was a little nervous because I had the ring in the tackle box and she kept coming over by me. I told her to go to the front of the boat and begin fishing while I rig my pole. So with my shaking hands, I put the ring on my fishhook and walked up behind her. I said, “Kendra, I don’t want to fish anymore.” She replied, “We just started!” and I said, “But I already caught the BEST fish in the sea!” She turned around and the ring was dangling in front of her face. (P. 177)

In this example, the elements that might allude to an upcoming proposal that are seen in the climax proposals, such as a romantic setting or foods, are excluded so that the one being proposed to is unaware that the proposal is going to take place until it does. A common element in both proposal styles is the “surprise” element that is often noted as a “required”
aspect of the proposal (Callaway n.d.) that allows the proposal to be a special performance. Here, whether or not the proposer elaborately sets a romantic mood or simply pops the question, the expectation of the proposal is that they come as a surprise to the recipient before they start (or, in the case of shock proposals, happen).

A key difference between these kinds of proposals appears to be the integration of “romanticized commodities” into the performance (Vannini 2004:177). The performative nature of marriage proposals are often accompanied with consumer items to add to the feeling of romance, such as flowers, chocolates, fancy dinners, limousines, and other goods that are not typically consumed on a daily basis (Illouz 1997). Diamond engagement rings, which are received by 75 percent of first time brides (Ingraham 1999), highlight the romantic-consumer nature of and performative elements of the engagement; the diamond ring works to complete the picture of the proposal, since he offers her a ring and, as a sign of acceptance, she wears the ring. Indeed, the couples in Schweingruber et al (2004) all noted that ‘official’ proposals needed to include a ring and, without a ring, the couple did not have a legitimate story to tell. Schweingruber et al (2004) provide an excellent example of the importance some women place on receiving “the ring”:

He said, “…will you marry me?” And I said, “Yes.” And then he pulled out this ring box, and in it was a ring made out of pine needles, and I started to cry because I was expecting my real ring. And so I started to cry and he’s like, “I promise I’ll give you the real ring as soon as I can” and all this stuff. And so I was trying to be really nice about it, but in my head I was going, “Oh my gosh, I want my diamond.” (P. 150) [Italics mine]

While this turned out to be a twist in the proposal (within minutes he pulled out her real ring), it highlights the pervasiveness of the proposal as script. She expected her diamond ring and actually cried, not from joy, but from disappointment: the proposal
did not present itself the way she had envisioned and expected it to. While she was presented with a ring with the proposal, it did not qualify as an official engagement ring. Many of the couples interviewed by Schweingruber et al (2004) noted that diamond engagement rings were necessary since it symbolized to others that the man was capable of supporting a family, since he was able to afford an expensive ring. One respondent, whose engagement ring was a band of alternating diamonds and rubies, claimed that others would ask to see her engagement ring since they did not believe that the ring she was wearing was her real engagement ring.

As a result, the proposal is ultimately a combination of consumption and performance—the making of the perfect story. Both the ritualized and consumer nature of many proposals (or, at least, the “ideal proposal”) makes many wedding proposals today into a standard event: the couple talks about marriage and agrees they will marry at some point and then she waits for him to “pop the question”—surprise her with a romantic and special—although not very unique—proposal. Couples are asked and expected to tell their engagement story; by having an appropriate and romantic proposal, the couple fulfills their duty to provide a story as to how the engagement started to eager listeners.

From this review, it is clear that information on engagement is lacking significantly on many levels. In the simplest ways, basic information on engagement and weddings, such as how long the average couple is engaged, is still imprecise; no representative data appear to have been ever collected on what the average engagement length is. The experiences of engaged couples are understudied, especially when it comes to aspects of the relationship that the couple experiences together (i.e., the proposal, announcing the engagement) compared to individual experiences (i.e., single sex parties). In addition, much of the information that we
appear to know is not based on sociological evidence but instead comes from marketing data, which likely contain motives to sell weddings, or what I can only classify as what some “see” as being the case from their own observations.

**The Current Study**

From the literature, it is clear that courtship has changed in many ways over the past two centuries. Once institutionalized and based on heteronormative roles and familial goals, courtship rituals shared common meanings and, while intentions likely varied, different actions had clear meanings to signify one’s intentions or desire. However, changes in post-war American courtship challenged many of these norms, especially those based in gender, and the result is a contemporary courtship culture where individual choice and freedom in coupling is championed. While contemporary ideologies support and celebrate this change, there were consequences for how people find partners and form longer-term unions. Most aspects of courtship are now open to individual interpretation and have lost collective meaning. For example, marriage once provided couples legitimacy to cohabit. Today, couples cohabit for a variety of reasons at various stages of their relationships (e.g., Sassler 2004); it is no longer reserved for the married or those who desire or have children together.

This shift in meaning has led to many changes in the ways individuals experience relationships and family life but little is known about how couples move into and experience different kinds of unions. In addition, it is unclear what kinds of meanings some rituals and events have for those who participate in them. In terms of marital engagement, this is significant because no research has examined exactly how people transition into engagement or what engagement means. While marriage remains a privileged institution, we know very little about how couples negotiate their transitions into it. Engagement provides a key time in
a couple’s relationship to attempt to understand many of the issues highlighted in this literature review. How and when do couples feel it is time to marry? How do they incorporate tradition into how they do engagements, especially since engagement appears to have maintained many of the symbolic meanings it has had historically? This dissertation seeks to explore contemporary engagement practices, develop a better understanding of late courtship relationship processes, and to provide groundwork in understanding how couples experience marital engagement. The next chapter will highlight the methodological approach I will take to explore these issues.
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

The first part of this dissertation highlighted normative historical and contemporary courtship patterns. I argued that very little attention has been given to examining the engagement period as a specific phase of courtship or, more broadly, the processes through which individuals “become” couples (Sassler 2004). In addition, changes in the role of marriage in the lives of contemporary Americans and shifts in gender norms raise questions concerning the role of engagement as a part of the marriage process and what, if any, patterns exist in this transition. As I outlined in the literature review, I suspect that what appears to be an adherence to traditional engagement and marriage in the literature and mass media works to obscure and set up covert gendered inequalities that appear to exist in heteronormative couple relationships (i.e., Hochschild 1989). This is in addition to more hidden functions engagement may serve, such as maintaining the normative status of heterosexuality through normalizing marriage and dyadic relationships.

This dissertation uses qualitative interviews to understand how engagement fits into contemporary courtship. Qualitative methodologies are exceptionally good at providing depth and understanding to research topics (Lofland and Lofland 1984; Weiss 1994), and are ideal for grounded theoretical approaches (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I chose to do in-depth, semi-structured interviews separately with both members of the couple in order to develop a broader picture of engagement but also so that I could learn the ways in which engagements are gendered within couple relationships (Hertz 1995). In-depth interviewing is ideal for exploratory research, since this approach ‘discovers’ what participants know about the topic instead of asking them to pick from predetermined answers (Lofland and Lofland 1984). My
methodological approach is similar to other researchers studying relationship processes and engagement rituals, such as Sassler and Miller (n.d.) and Schweingruber et al (2004).

The lack of theory on courtship and the use of grounded theory in this dissertation allowed me to explore engagement as a practice that is ‘intersected’ with the traits each participant possesses. My use of grounded theory was influenced by existing theories and helped me build a theoretical understanding of the events in question using research data in combination with existing theories and frameworks (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) note that grounded approaches are often influenced and helped by the use of “anecdotal comparisons” since our experiences can help shape the frameworks we use to understand our research topics and develop initial categories of analysis. In my experiences with my engaged friends and living in a very pro-marriage culture, I was able to start my research with a basic understanding of the key themes I needed to integrate into my work, such as the modernization of intimate relationships, the deinstitutionalization of marriage, gender, and normative heterosexuality. These theories and concepts influenced my understanding of and approach to thinking about courtship and engagement. Additionally, these frameworks were important in my efforts to make sense of the courtship and engagement stories that were shared with me during my interviews.

Sample

I used interview data from 21 men and 23 women, representing 28 couples. In addition to the couples who completed interviews, I had ten individuals complete interviews whose partner was unable to participate. Sample composition was an important consideration for many reasons, since simply recruiting engaged couples would lead to great diversity in the demographic variation of participants. In developing my sampling approach, it appeared
that some couples may consider themselves engaged when planning to become married but not see themselves as “officially” engaged, while others may consider themselves engaged only after a formal marriage proposal. In addition, the frequency of marriage after divorce today provides many individuals with more than one occasion in their lives to be engaged (Cherlin 1992). As a result, seeking couples who are simply planning marriage or who are engaged may yield a sample that contains a variety of relationship types and marriage histories, which could lead to problems with data analysis.

To address these issues, participants were screened using four key criteria: (1) they are a heterosexual couple, (2) they are both entering their first marriage, (3) the couple considers themselves to be engaged for marriage, and (4) the couple does not have children. I am interested in heterosexual couples because much of the history of courtship and marriage is based on heterosexual unions. In addition, this will allow me to understand the reasons couples have for enacting their engagements in what I see as gender traditional ways, since there is less pressure today for couples to conform to more traditional marriage models (Cherlin 2004). The histories of same sex relationships and identities have changed considerably over the past century and are different from heterosexual relationships in many important ways; for example, same sex couples do not have gender as a default difference on which to structure their relationships and family lives (Carrington 1999). However, the question about commitment in same-sex relationships is an important one and one that I plan to address in the future.

I am interested in couples who consider themselves engaged rather than, for example, couples who fit what I understand to be the current cultural definition of engagement, which includes a marriage proposal. The lack of literature on engagement and the exploratory
nature of this dissertation was best served by providing couples more freedom in determining whether they qualify for the study. By doing this, I hoped that I would be able to develop a more complete idea of what “engagement” means today and how couples use it within their relationship practices. Other studies, such as Schweingruber et al (2004) and Sassler and Miller (n.d) found that marriage proposals are often seen as the start of engagement. However, these studies were not specifically looking at what was considered normative in terms of couples understanding engagement. While I suspected this may still be the case, I wanted to provide an opportunity for couples who considered themselves engaged but who had not had a formal proposal to participate because this would help clarify norms concerning when couples see themselves as engaged versus planning on becoming engaged.

I initially intended to sample both members of the relationship; however, I was only able to complete interviews with both members of 17 of the 28 partnerships. I sought couples because I was interested in how gender was situated within the couples’ engagements. Other work, such as Walzer (1995), used interviews with both partners to understand how events were experienced by couples. Since engagement are something couples, not individuals, accomplish, I believed it was most fitting to interview both members in order to gain an understanding of their relationship story.

From the methodological discussion in Schweingruber et al (2004), it appeared that it might be easier to attract women to do a study on engagement than men. By sampling couples, I believed it would be much easier to get men to participate in the research since it was something their partner is interested in doing. Here, I am not implying that I felt men would feel coerced to participate but that they would instead see the interview as something done as a couple; since weddings and engagements are often constructed as “her day”, men
on their own may be reluctant to participate in a study that they see as concerning feminine issues. In addition, I was interested in how men and women viewed the same engagement; I was able to find similarities and differences in how couples discussed their engagement, such as how they accounted for events such as the proposal or how their relationship changed over time. It would have been impossible to understand these issues if I did not have information from both members of the couple. I also believed that there might be some concern about the kinds of men who would independently volunteer to participate in the project if I was interviewing only individuals. Would men who volunteered be like men who did not volunteer? I could envision reluctance from some men to participate because engagement and relationships are considered feminine. However, I believed that men would be much more likely to participate if their partner was also being interviewed because they may see it as a couple activity instead of an individual one.

There are methodological issues with interviewing couples, such as figuring out “the truth” when presented with two accounts of the same event (Hertz 1995). However, this simply highlights the story-telling element found in in-depth interviewing and, I would argue, allowed for gender within particular couples to become more salient when examining my data for analysis (Hertz 1995). In addition, Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that examining multiple “slices of data” helps to better develop grounded theory (p. 65). My goal was not to discover the ultimate truth—indeed, truth is highly subjective—but to develop an understanding of how each member experienced engagement and then use these conclusions to inform how I developed patterns across couples. I found this was beneficial to my research, since it highlighted the differences in how men and women think about and experience their marital engagements (i.e., Sassler and Miller n.d.).
Recruitment strategies

This dissertation used convenience and snowball sampling to locate couples interested in sharing the story of their relationship and their perceptions regarding engagement. Couples were recruited from upstate New York and the Seattle-Tacoma Metro region of Washington State. I used multiple sampling methods in efforts to obtain couples with different engagement backgrounds; for example, if I had simply recruited through one venue I would not have allowed couples outside that venue an opportunity to learn about the study and possibly participate. Initial sampling involved three methods: word of mouth, flyers, and newspaper advertisements. In addition, I asked participants if they knew any couples who would be interested in the study and asked that they pass my contact information on to them (Weiss 1994). However, I did not get any participants this way.

First, I recruited by word of mouth and flyers (Appendix 1) located on college campuses and public spaces. These flyers helped to locate participants who are not immersed in wedding culture, such as those who did not use registries or bridal shops while planning their weddings. In addition, these locations helped me capture couples who are closer to their marriage date who might be finished with their bridal shopping.

Additionally, I purchased advertising space in two local papers that invited engaged couples to contact me if they are interested in the study (Appendix 2). The newspaper advertisement included information about the study, what participation entailed, that the research was associated with the University at Albany, and my contact information.

I hoped that these recruitment techniques would be able to capture a sample that included differences in terms of race/ethnicity and class. I prescreened respondents during initial contacts to ensure that they fit the sample population I sought. Using just one sampling
method could lead to problems in finding a balance of class backgrounds; however, I found that my sample was bias towards participants with more education despite heavy recruitment in lower income neighborhoods.

Confidentiality and protection of human subjects

Participants were informed of their rights and told how their information would be stored and used. Before starting each set of interviews, I presented participants with a consent form (Appendix 3). The consent form provided a brief overview of the project, explained that their interview with me was confidential and would not be shared with their partner, provided information on the benefits and risks of participation, and stated that I would use their interviews to complete a dissertation and related publications. In addition, the consent form explicitly asked permission to voice audio record and transcribe their interview.

In completing this dissertation, I took several measures to protect the confidentiality of my study materials. Each participant’s confidentiality was ensured in two ways. First, I used a digital audio recorder to record my interviews. This created a digital sound recording of the interview instead of a tape. This allowed me to transfer each interview to a computer file that could be password protected. In order to protect confidentiality in typed transcriptions and written work, I used pseudonyms for each participant. I edited the transcriptions containing specific locations or other information that might be considered traceable, such as the names of work places. All non-electronic files with identifiable information, such as consent forms and raw notes, were stored in a locked cabinet.

Risks to participants

All research has the potential to put participants at risk. While I did not anticipate any highly sensitive topics to come from my interview guide, there was always the possibility
that talking with participants about their engagement or upcoming marriage may have caused participants to rethink what they were doing. However, this issue did not appear to present itself during the interviews. Participants were, for the most part, enthusiastic in their discussion of their relationship. An additional issue I was concerned with was the ability of participants and their partners to be able to figure out which pseudonym was used for their names in the findings. I planned to remove names from quotes that could be considered sensitive; however, this was not an issue that presented itself as the findings came together.

Benefits of participation and compensation

I suspect that couples who agreed to participate benefited from the experience. Given the excitement many of the couples had regarding their engagements and weddings, I felt that those who participated in this study found the experience enjoyable. They seemed to enjoy sharing their personal story with me and talking to me about different aspects of their engagement.

Each couple was compensated $25, which was distributed as $10 for the first interview and $15 for the second. I received a grant to cover costs associated with providing compensation.

Interview Guide

I constructed the interview guide (Appendix 4) to work with the “story telling” approach I took with my interviews. It lists the key themes that I discussed and provided prompts to other issues that might be important. I used a story telling approach because it allowed for answers that were more detailed, richer descriptions, and created opportunities for better participation from participants (Weiss 1994). In addition, this approach avoided...
pushing respondents into answering questions in an overly simplistic or formatted fashion, which had the potential to encourage them to leave out important details (Weiss 1994).

I conducted a few pretest interviews both to practice interviewing techniques and to also make sure that the interview guide was clear, balanced, and flowed logically (Weiss 1994). In addition, these initial interviews were helpful in clarifying issues that I am interested in examining but that were not being addressed under the questions listed in the interview guide; the trial interviews allowed the interview guide to be modified and updated so that the interviews went as smoothly as possible (Weiss 1994). As a result, during the pretesting phase I modified the interview guide as needed so that these goals were accomplished.

Interviews focused on the storytelling nature personal experiences can take; because I was interested in exploring the meanings of engagement, I wanted the discussion open so that respondents felt comfortable talking about anything they believed was relevant. This approach was valuable because it allowed participants to share the experiences they felt were relevant to their relationship story. Since there was little previous literature on this topic, these open questions were valuable in uncovering key themes and experiences that shaped participants’ engagements (Weiss 1994).

Using this understanding of how I wanted my interviews to be structured, I started by telling respondents that I was interested in their relationship and engagement story and that I would be asking broad questions. I hoped that by highlighting to respondents that I was looking for their stories that they would both feel open to telling me what they thought but also that this would encourage richer answers (Weiss 1994). As a result, the interviews
consisted of a guided story telling where the participant did most of the talking and I asked questions to follow up on or get more details about ideas and subjects they presented.

The interview guide was divided into three main themes: relationship history, current relationship, and ideas about engagement and marriage. First, I asked participants about previous relationships that they had that they considered “serious.” Here, I was interested in finding out how many partners participants had before becoming engaged, the lengths and nature of these relationships (i.e., just dated, high school sweethearts, cohabited), and why the relationships ended.

The next section, on their current relationship, consisted of the bulk of the interview and covered the history of the relationship, from first impressions and dates up through their engagement and what they saw in their future. In addition to characteristics of the relationship, I was interested in understanding of how the relationship progressed in terms of the couple’s commitment to each other. Here, I asked about how and when the couple started to talk about marriage: who brought the subject up? What facilitated thoughts of marriage? (How) did cohabitation play a role in marriage talk? I also asked for details about when the couple decided they were engaged: was it after talking about engagement? The formal proposal?

The proposal is another area I was interested in hearing about from both partners, since the literature suggests that proposals are important points in which couples start to see themselves as formally engaged. I asked if they had a proposal and, if so, what happened and what level of participation they had in accomplishing it (i.e., nagging partner to propose, planning how it would be accomplished). I also asked how others were involved in their
proposal: whom did they talk to before and afterward the proposal? What were people’s reactions to the news?

The final portion of this section focused on how the participant perceived their relationship once they were engaged: did they feel different about their partner? Did how they spend their free time change? Here, I also asked about how their relationship with others shaped their engagement. I was interested in discussing engaged life to see if and/or how relationship rules changed after engagement.

The third part of the interview examined engagement and marital norms in a larger sense. First, I asked participants what they saw as being typical for couples in terms of engagement: when should couples become engaged? Should they live together? How long should an engagement last? Can someone break an engagement? If not, why? If yes, what events would be legitimate for ending the engagement? I was also interested in marriage ideologies. Here, I asked what marriage meant to them, if they saw marriage as being associated with any particular life events (i.e., is marriage the time to have children?), and how marriage is similar to or different from other arrangements, such as living together. In addition, I asked participants to reflect on how they believed their marriage would be different from the marriages of their parents’ generation.

Demographic information was placed at the end of the interview. Weiss (1994) notes that placing these questions at the start of the interview can “set the wrong tone” for the interview and may encourage respondents to give shorter, more condensed answers (p. 51). In addition, asking for demographic information, which may be considered personal by some respondents, ensured that respondents would be less likely to see anything wrong with
answering the questions and encouraged greater cooperation in revealing more sensitive demographic information (Weiss 1994).

When I conducted the interviews, I was not worried about strict adherence to the interview guide but instead used it to make sure that the topics I was interested in asking about were covered (Weiss 1994). Weiss (1994) noted that this approach can be valuable if the interviewer makes sure that the discussion stays within the realm of what the study is about; transgressions could provide new ideas and approaches to understanding the research question. Throughout the interviews, I was able to make notes of themes and ideas that respondents presented that I then examined in more depth after the interview. These notes were helpful during data analysis since I used them during coding to help identify key themes (Lofland and Lofland 1984).

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis in NVivo. During analysis, I examined the characteristics of the couples’ relationships (e.g., length of courtship, cohabitation status, how couple discussed and negotiated engagement timing) and the understandings participants reported of their relationship progression. Couples were grouped with other couples who had similar relationship goals, histories, and stories. From these groupings, I reexamined the major themes within each group and adjusted both the groupings and couples’ placements in groups to develop categories that best matched the relationship and engagement stories participants shared with me.

I conducted initial analysis of the interviews as they were conducted to find developing patterns. This approach allowed for adjustment to be made to the interview schedule so that the relevant themes and topics developed in early interviews could be
explored in more detail in later interviews (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The notes that I took during each interview provided a basis from which I started to think about the key themes that emerged from the data. These themes were coded onto completed interviews as they developed, which included reviewing older interview transcriptions to see if the themes that started to appear were overlooked during the initial examination.

Advantages and limitations

Using grounded theory to understand late term courtship and engagement is a strong advantage of this project. The less formal dating culture has been noted as changing gender relations in significant ways. Many of these changes focus attention on the increase in freedoms women experience (i.e., Bailey 1989; Ferguson 2007). This dissertation used an open theoretical framework that considered different influences that may be important in understanding how late term courtship is experienced by couples today. The storytelling nature in which I conducted my interviews provided respondents the opportunity to express what aspects of their relationships they saw as being noteworthy. This approach allowed the differences and similarities in both men and women’s experiences to become known. This resulted in the data revealing patterns in the ways some relationships today transition to marriage that would have been missed if I had used a more rigid survey and interview schedule.

The incorporation of couple data is another advantage this project offers. While it appears common for researchers interested in couple relationships to use couple data, some of the issues I am interested in, especially gender and negotiating relationship progressions, have not been examined in great detail as a couple phenomenon (i.e., Hendrick and Hendrick 1992; Sassler and Miller n.d.; Schweingruber et al 2004). Because relationships involve
couples, not individuals, my approach provided insight into the similarities and differences in how participants experienced their courtships and intimate relationships.

While there were many benefits to using grounded theory, this methodological design presented some issues. One of the largest is in generalization of the findings of this research to the general population. While the nonrandom selection of participants does not allow for me to claim that my findings represent all couples engagement experiences, it does provide a basis on which themes and theory building can legitimately be grounded (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The larger purpose of this dissertation was to start thinking about building theoretical perspectives on how couples understand their courtships and how this fits into other research in the area that examines contemporary courtship patterns. In addition, the patterns that emerged displayed “similarities of dynamics and constraints” that individuals experienced as they negotiated their relationships (Weiss 1994). For example, while couples in my sample have not experienced engagement in the same ways as couples might in California, there are many issues that all couples likely have to negotiate. In addition, there were no significant differences in the engagement stories that I gathered from participants in New York compared to the ones I collected in Washington State. It is likely that these issues, while not generalizable from my study, are relevant to the experiences of other couples as well, even though they may play out in different ways (Weiss 1994).

Implications of the Study Design

This research fills a large gap in the contemporary courtship literature because very little work has been done on how couples transition into marriage (Sassler 2004). By asking participants for relationship histories, I am able to provide some insight into not only contemporary engagement, but also how participants in my study met their partners and the
events that they experienced as they started to think about marriage. In addition, this work provides a deeper understanding of how gender and sexuality are embedded within couple relationships during a period when egalitarianism appears to be a norm in relationships. Finally, I was interested in understanding how couples accomplish gender and heterosexuality by through the enactment of their engagements. Most theoretical understandings of intimate relationships are based on accounts from individuals (Hendrick and Hendrick 1992). Because intimate relationships are accomplished by couples, not individuals, I wanted to explore how the couples in my study were linked to their partners in ways that signify to others their couple status.
CHAPTER 5: RELATIONSHIP TRANSITIONS INTO MARITAL ENGAGEMENT

While it is clear that the norms associated with how couples understand commitment, partnering, marriage, and engagement have changed in the post-war period (e.g., Bogle 2008, Brown 2005; Cherlin 2004; Coontz 2004; England and Thomas 2007; Giddens 1992; Paul, McManus and Hayes 2000; Schweingruber et al 2004), little research has specifically focused on marital engagement and how couples experience the stages of courtship that lead to marriage. The interviews conducted for this study suggest that, while many changes in the post-war era have allowed couples more freedom in how they conduct their relationships, there still seems to be some flux in norms regarding the appropriate stages though which individuals form partnerships and progress towards more committed unions. In a culture that champions tradition but also understands and accepts new ways of experiencing couple life (e.g., cohabitation, serial monogamy), one of the challenges is in building an understanding of this change: why do some couples stick with tradition while others follow more relaxed “rules” about how to practice their relationships? How has “tradition” been renegotiated in a post-dating culture? What can these stories tell us about the role of engagement in the marriage process? What troubles do couples face in negotiating a relationship when they do not have a common understanding of how committed the other is to the longevity of their relationship?

In my findings chapters, I will discuss how couples practice and view relationship transitions as they are connected to their larger ideologies of marriage, commitment, and relationship progression. These findings contribute to the relationship-processes literature by highlighting some of the unique challenges partners face in negotiating the transition from “dating” to married though the use of an engagement period. As such, it is important to
understand how engagement works to facilitate the transition to marriage and how it impacts the couples’ understandings of not only themselves and their relationship, but also how other perceive their relationship and the reactions they receive from others.

The stories of these couples’ engagements will be told across two chapters of the dissertation. This chapter will discuss the various ways couples experience and negotiate their courtships and the transitions prior to becoming engaged. To do this, I have classified couples into one of three groups, which help to provide an understanding of how they experience their engagements: Neotraditional, Promisemaker, and Nestbuilder. The following chapter, Planning, Enacting, and Experiencing Engagement, will examine the couples’ relationships from the proposal to the wedding, focusing on how each group enacts and understands their engagements and how engagement changes both the couple relationship and their relationship with others. Finally, the last findings chapter will examine how couples understand engagement and marriage at an ideological level, in order to build an understanding of what couples see as normative engagement practices today. Together, these chapters will help to provide some insight and understanding into how marital engagements and their practices are evolving in contemporary U.S. society.

**Understanding Engagement as a Continuum of Changing Norms**

My findings suggest that marital engagement, along with relationship progression and how couples understand commitment and marriage, is in a state of transition between traditional ideologies (i.e., gender difference, engagement as a commitment to marry, marriage as a marker of adulthood, companionate marriages) and more post-modern ideologies (i.e., gender equality, engagement and marriage as symbolic in commitment, the pure relationship, individualized marriage (Cherlin 2004; Giddens 1992). As I will argue in
this chapter, the transitional state of marriage and, consequently, engagement, creates a great deal of diversity in how marital engagements are understood, practiced, and enacted; the distinctions between groups is far from clear cut. This suggests that the changes in how partnering was normatively practiced in the latter half of 20th century in the U.S., such as delayed first marriage, increased tolerance for childrearing outside of marriage, increased nonmarital cohabitation, the visibility of same-sex relationships, and patterns of marriage-divorce-remarriage, have become increasingly accepted as common and, in some cases, normative.

However, these changes in partnering practices have resulted in a greater tolerance for what I will tentatively call the new normative relationships. Rather than being replaced with a new, singular normative pattern concerning how to “do” contemporary, marriage-oriented relationships, it appears there are several paths that couples can take towards engagement that are viewed as socially acceptable and that have a common, normative definition attached to them. Couples have many options in terms of how they practice their pre-engagement relationships (e.g., cohabit or not) and the ways that couples do engagement relies on a gendered framework that remains normative across all groups and is disconnected from other factors concerning how the couple’s relationship progresses. As a consequence, couples’ engagement practices are borrowed from traditional scripts concerning how to “do” engagement while couples also reshape their understanding of this script to align with their own personal experiences, visions, and understandings of how engagement and their relationship should be practiced.

From my interviews, I have classified respondents as fitting roughly into one of three categories of engagement understandings and practices: Neotraditional, Promisemaker, and
Nestbuilder. These categorizations take into consideration previous work on relationship processes, the meanings couples attach to engagement, and their experiences with others once in engaged to attempt to understand the different paths engagement-oriented couples navigate prior to their engagements. Table 1 provides a quick overview of each of these classifications. These findings suggest that the major areas of difference across couples are in relationship style (Surra and Hughes 1997), religiosity, gender ideologies, courtship length, and views of marriage.

Table 1: Overview of Engagement Types by Defining Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Neotraditional</th>
<th>Promisemaker</th>
<th>Nestbuilder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length of Courtship</td>
<td>Shorter courtships, with engagement within 1 to 2 years</td>
<td>Medium courtships, with engagement around 3 years</td>
<td>Longest Courtships, generally with 4 or more years before engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitation</td>
<td>Most plan to live together after they are married</td>
<td>Most move in together around the time of engagement</td>
<td>Most live together before engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>Most religious</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Least religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wedding Plans</td>
<td>More likely to desire and plan a “traditional” wedding</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>More likely to desire/plan a nontraditional wedding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposal Style</td>
<td>More planned proposals</td>
<td>Mixed, with more unplanned or spontaneous proposals</td>
<td>Less planned proposals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Attitudes</td>
<td>More gender traditional but see each other as partners</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Most gender egalitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Engagement in Relationship Process</td>
<td>Engagement as part of ritual of planning married life</td>
<td>Engagement as symbol of commitment to relationship</td>
<td>Engagement as “the next step” in the relationship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Several characteristic differentiate and define these groups. One of the key differences involves how couples enact their relationships, which was measured by both courtship length and the role the couples see engagement having in their partnership. Neotraditional couples, for example, view marriage as highly desirable and their engagements come within a year or two of the start of their courtships. Both Promisemakers and Nestbuilders have longer courtships that appear to be shaped largely by the difference in meanings these groups attach to engagement. For Promisemakers, engagement occurs about three years into the courtship and is often enacted as a way of symbolizing commitment to the relationship. Alternatively, Nestbuilders’ engagements generally occurred after four years of courtship and took place because couples felt that marriage was the next step for their partnership. Often, these couples formed commitments outside of engagement/marriage and the desire for marriage was shaped because they were interested in starting a family or because of pressure from their families to “commit” to each other.

In addition to these defining differences, couples also differed in cohabitation patterns, religiosity, attitudes towards gender, and wedding/proposal styles. Across these categories Neotraditional couples had the most conservative and/or traditional values and actions, including being the least likely to cohabit, the most religious, and the most likely to adhere to traditional proposal scripts and wedding styles. Nestbuilder couples were more liberal in their relationships. They were the most likely to cohabit before marriage, to alter or play with traditional wedding and engagement scripts and styles, not practice any religion, and to express concern for gender equality in how they practiced their relationships. Promisemaker couples often fell between these two extremes. For these couples, the lack of
mutual normative structure they shared in how they understood their relationship progression likely helped to support the mix of characteristics found in this group.

Nestbuilder couples have engagements that are heavily shaped by the consequences of a post-dating culture: longer courtships, more likely to cohabit, more gender egalitarian in their views of how relationships are done. They are the least likely to identify with and/or practice a religion and to have religion play a role in their relationship and marriage practices (e.g., they generally do not desire a church wedding). These couples view engagement as a “natural” step towards marriage in the progression of their relationship and, for the most part, become engaged because it is “time” to move the relationship forward. A key aspect of these couples is that, despite having a more post-dating courtship, these couples are comfortable with each other and on the same page about the progression of their relationship.

Opposite of the Nestbuilder are the Neotraditionals, who are more reflective of what I understand to be more “traditional” engagement and marriage practices: shorter courtships, less likely to cohabit before marriage, more likely to actively practice/identify with a religious faith, more gender traditional in views of marriage/engagement rituals and practices. For these couples, engagement and marriage are normative aspects of how they want their adult lives to play out: marriage is the ideal foundation for adult life and the events that come with it, such as starting a family and purchasing a home. Like the Nestbuilder couples, these couples also tend to have relationship viewpoints that are harmonious with one another.

The third group is Promisemakers. Unlike Nestbuilders and Neotraditionals, who see engagement as a step in their relationship when the timing is right, Promisemaker couples view their engagements as a symbol of commitment to the longevity and future of the
relationship. These couples tend to have long courtships, with relationship events, generally cohabitation and the engagement, timed near each other. Commitment processes tend to be mixed, but favor event-driven understandings of progression (Surra and Hughes 1997). The characteristics of these couples, compared to the other groups, are not as clear cut; gender ideologies and religiosity are more mixed across couples. They are consistent in having more traditional white weddings, which appears to be reflective of their understanding of engagement and marriage as a commitment to the relationship.

A key issue, as I will discuss later, is that Promisemaker couples often have different understandings of the level of commitment each has to the relationship. This is the main trait that separates them from Nestbuilder and Neotraditional couples, who have similar understandings of commitment in the relationship. This lack of understanding manifests itself in a need for commitment to the relationship from one or both partners in one of two ways. For some couples, he is satisfied with the pace and commitment level of the relationship (much like Nestbuilder couples); however, she is worried about what she perceives as his lack of commitment to her and the relationship, since the relationship is not “moving forward” as she expects. For other couples, a life course event, such as the end of school or a potential move, forces the couple to decide the future of the relationship: do we commit to each other and do it together? Or do we separate? Couples here choose to stay together and use engagement—or the promise of future engagement—as an orienting strategy for building mutual understanding about the level of commitment they have to the relationship. In this sense, it appears that these couples blend different traits found in the Nestbuilder and Neotraditional groups: they tend to have more post-modern progressions yet retain more traditional understandings of how engagement and marriage fit into their relationships.
Within each grouping are distinct understandings of how these couples view the roles of engagement in their lives (placed along the bottom of the chart) that highlight issues of transition and variation within each group based on key issues concerning meanings of engagement, commitment to the relationship, and gender ideologies. As I will argue in this dissertation, the practices associated with how couples view and understand their engagements are varied and range from traditional to more symbolic. However, while the ways couples form partnerships and “do” their engagements vary considerably, the ritualized scripts for how they become engaged remain, for most couples, highly institutionalized and follow gendered understandings of how proposals are done: he is the one to “officially” propose and start the engagement, the proposal is “special” to the couple, he gives her a ring, etc. These understanding compliment and build on the previous engagement literature (i.e., Schweingruber et al 2004; Vannini 2004); however, my focus on engagement styles instead of proposal styles suggests that proposal rituals are perhaps more deeply embedded in the meanings of engagement in American Culture, since they do not appear dependent on one relationship style or another. The issue of engagement styles and the engagement proposal will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

While these categories provide a quick overview of the major themes of this dissertation, it is important to point out that these categories are hardly mutually exclusive in their ability to adequately reflect contemporary engagement practices as experienced by couples in this study. I have found that the lack of norms concerning how couples “do” their relationships has translated into how couples enact their engagements; while most couples borrow from “traditions” of how engagement is “done” (e.g., he proposes marriage with a ring, they tell their families they are engaged after his proposal, etc.), the changing nature of
partnering has lead couples to reinterpret these traditions to make them both work for their relationship and to help themselves and others make sense of the status of their relationship as engaged or not engaged. For example, all couples in this study had talked about marriage and/or engagement for their relationship prior to the proposal happening, which appears different than my understanding, based on the literature, of what a “traditional” proposal is (he asks for her hand and then they build their relationship for marriage).

Given this brief overview of the framework used to understand marital engagements in this dissertation, I will now discuss each group in detail. First, I will explain the Neotraditional side of the continuum. Afterwards, the Nestbuilder side will be explained. Finally, I will overview the Promisemaker group. During these explanations, I will focus on relationship progression, marital engagement and the role of gender in determining understandings of and transitions into engagement. Afterwards, I will focus on each group again, this time specifically examining the role of gender in couples’ constructions of their engagement practices, using the stories from both members of the relationship to reconstruct an understanding of how gender shaped their engagement practices.

**The Traditional Side: Neotraditional**

In general, Neotraditional couples represent the more traditional side of the partnering continuum in that they were focused on finding a marriage partner from early in their courtships. This appears consistent with norms about dating, as described by Bailey (1989). Some respondents even went so far as to inform potential mates that marriage was their goal and, if they were not interested in that possibility, then they should find someone who wanted to date casually. This group is marked by a strong preference for marriage as the goal of a relationship. Discussions are based on the assumption that they are dating with an
expectation that they will eventually become married are common in my interviews with these couples. As such, most of these couples tend to have shorter courtships (approximately 1 to 2 years) and event driven relationships (Surra and Hughes 1997). In cases when the timing is less constricted, this is usually due to other events (i.e., school) or money getting in the way. However, even when the couple is faced with barriers to getting married, they still tend to get engaged earlier in the relationship (around one to two years) and, if needed, have a longer engagement to allow them to work around whatever problems they are having with logistics. As a result, these couples are committed to each other from early on and the dating period is more to ensure compatibility prior to legal marriage; for these couples, engagement is simply a formality in the marriage process.

The desire for marriage is clear in my interview with Kevin. In response to a question about when his partner, Theresa, and he started talking about marriage, he replied:

We were both very clear from the get go that we were dating not just to date but because we wanted to meet someone, settle down and get married. And so I, you know, I think that I made that pretty clear[on] the first couple of dates that, maybe not even the second or third date I kind of talked about what we were, you know, looking for. That was, my ultimate goal was to meet somebody, get married, and start a family.

The desire to marry and to not “waste time” dating several potential partners was common with these couples. Many had experienced previous long term relationships that never materialized into marriage and they wanted to make sure that their intentions and plans were clear from the start—that marriage was something they wanted and that, if the other was not looking for a serious relationship, then they shouldn’t continue dating each other. While discussions as pointed as Kevin and Theresa’s were less common, the desire to marry
was still discussed, just in more subtle ways, early in the relationship. These generally involved discussions such as the one described by Katrina.

Erica: When did you guys start talking about marriage?

Katrina: I think we mentioned marriage a lot at first in a some-day-that’s-something-I’d-like-to-do kind of way. Like when you are feeling people out, when you first start seeing them to see what their goals are…

This “feeling out” of one’s partner’s intentions early on was common for the Neotraditionals; however, it doesn’t seem that early marriage talk was normative across any other subgroup in the study. Generally, discussions of marriage, if they happen, occur much later in the courtship process for most of the couples in this study.

One of the functions of this early talk may be related to individuals having a desire to marry and, as mentioned with Kevin’s interview above, not “waste time” dating a potential mate who is not open to the same goals that one has. The non-normative aspect of early talks about marriage is discussed by Anika, who noted that “[talking about getting married] was awkward in the beginning because it’s just a serious thing and you didn’t want to scare the other person.” By talking about the discussion as something that is “awkward” and might “scare” a potential partner if not brought up carefully, Anika highlights some challenges in negotiating long term commitment early in the relationship. First, it suggests that early discussions about marriage are not normally anticipated by individuals and that concrete questions asked early about the possibility of marriage for the couple are awkward to bring up and may lead to unfavorable outcomes for the relationship. However, for the couples here, the conversation led to positive outcomes by confirming that they had the same goals and desires for the future of the relationship.
A second type of Neotraditional couple emerged from the data. For these couples, engagement is used as a way of signifying their commitment and intent to marry; however, unlike other Neotraditional couples, they are different in that their expectations for what it means to “do” both their engagements and weddings provides a barrier to their doing them—that is, they do not have the money or stability needed to settle down. Like other Neotraditionals, these couples talk about marriage timing and what they would like to accomplish as a couple. The couples consider themselves engaged because they have talked about marriage and plan to do it (both the proposal and wedding) when the time is right, but at this point the “right time” for them isn’t very clear due to work, school, or financial constraints. A result of this insecurity is also highlighted in that these couples are the only ones in the study that do not have a rough estimate of their expected wedding date—the wedding will be negotiated when things fall into place for them.

These couples appear very concerned about the meanings attached to traditional white weddings, as discussed by Ingraham (1999); they want a big, white wedding and they want their marriage proposal to be a memorable moment. What is interesting is that they feel the proposal is needed even though others know they are engaged and that the “fancy proposal” will not prove anything to anyone. Instead of a display for others, the proposal is understood as something they can give to or do for their partner. They want to have big, white weddings that they acknowledge will cost a lot of money (One respondent, George, notes that “real weddings” cost about $30k.) This desire for a “real” wedding is similar to some of the issues Edin et al (2004) discuss in their study of low-income couples: that there is no point in getting married if one is not in a place to “do” marriage right, which includes have a nice
wedding and financial security. George discusses his desire to have a “real” wedding. He tells of his experience going to his brother’s “tacky” wedding. About this wedding, he notes:

It was tacky. It’s tasteless… I believe a wedding is supposed to be, like, with a church and everything--you know what I mean. He had it [his marriage] in the courthouse and then a reception [that] wasn’t really a reception. It was in his friend’s backyard. It was hot [outside]. He had a pig roast. It was nothing like, it was like I don’t even know how to explain it. I really don’t. [I’ll] put it this way: there was no tuxedos or no suits involved. So you can just imagine.

Here, it is clear from his description and dislike of his brother’s wedding that George expects certain criteria for what he would consider to be a “real” wedding: in a church, with tuxedos or suits, a reception that is not in a backyard, etc. His distaste of the “informal” wedding was also made clear:

George: You only get married once in your life. You're supposed to go all out on your wedding. You're not supposed to just go to the courthouse and sign a paper in front of a judge.

The desire for a big wedding is also noted by Sanjay, who has a similar engagement story to that of George and Kelly. He is engaged to Rachel, his high school sweetheart. Over the years, they have faced many decisions together and they became engaged while in college. However, unlike the Promisemaker group, they did not get engaged to solidify their relationship; they were already committed to each other. They plan to end their engagement with a lavish wedding when they are settled into careers and financially stable. Sanjay notes that “when I’m a lawyer, she’s a [journalist]…that’s when we really want to get married, to have a wedding to remember, quoting her.”

Instead of being in a long-term boyfriend/girlfriend relationship, which was noted by other couples in the study as too ambiguous in terms of its level of “commitment,” the long engagement is a way to negotiate the relationship as though they were married, with a
wedding ceremony and marriage coming when the time is right. When George and Kelly decided they were engaged, he gave her a ring (without a formal proposal—it was a simple wedding-style band) and she responded by getting him a ring. He notes “she was like, ‘here, I want you to wear this.’ And I’m like for what? ‘Why? You're taken. You're my husband.’ So I said, “Yeah, okay. Good.’” In a way, the barriers these couples face to having a wedding and being married do not stop them from developing marriage-like understandings of their relationships while they wait for the day their white wedding is possible.

For Neotraditional couples, there is a definite commitment to the relationship; couples are in relationships that are mutually agreed on as being marital in nature; the engagement and wedding are more a part of the ritual of becoming a couple than a marker of commitment to the relationship or something that they are “supposed” to do. However, within this ideological framework two kinds of couples emerge: those with the financial resources to plan and carry out their wedding and couples who dream of their weddings while they wait for their financial situations to improve. The maintenance of this more traditional view of weddings and marriage, as it is embodied though more traditional relationship practices, suggests that, despite evidence that marriage is becoming deinstitutionalized (i.e., Cherlin 2004), the marriage script is still used by some couples who champion marriage as a preferred way of experiencing their relationships and adult life. For Neotraditional couples, engagement is a signifier of intent to marry that is practiced as a part of the marriage ritual. In addition, it appears that for some of these couples engagement also serves the function of demonstrating the seriousness of the relationship and an alignment with more traditional normative frameworks while they negotiate the barriers that are keeping them from marrying.
Post-Dating Paths to Marriage: Nestbuilders

Nestbuilder couples demonstrate the premarital tendencies reflected in the lack of structure and norms found in a post-dating culture. The relationships are largely relationship-driven (Surra and Hughes 1997), which results in courtships that last for four or more years prior to engagement. These couples are less religious and more gender egalitarian than other couples in this study and tend to have more relaxed expectations for their relationship. Commitment to the relationship is never questioned once they understand themselves as exclusive; they allow the relationship to develop at its own rate and allow each of the steps they take as a couple, such as moving in together, to be negotiated when the timing feels right to them versus moving forward because they think it is expected or normative. As a result, engagement and marriage tend to come later than expected by their friends and family; while the couple might be committed to their relationship with the same intensity that an engagement normatively implies, the importance of being engaged is more linked to it being a celebration of the relationship rather than a symbol of commitment or meaning larger than the couple. These couples see the personal—and often social—value attached to someday becoming married, but the value of marriage does not play a significant role in their understanding of commitment in their relationships. Since these couples have engagements that are timed with the flow of the relationship, the transition to engagement tends to be smooth and somewhat expected.

The early courtship patterns are highly reflective of a post-dating culture. Many of these couples met either during college or post college through a variety of places: online singles websites, as friends of friends, and coworkers. Many relationships started as formal dates or by “hanging out” and/or hooking up (Bogle 2008). After seeing each other
informally for a while, couples discussed their relationship and agreed to have an exclusive, monogamous relationship. Alternatively, several couples report that they just “fell” into being a couple. In her relationship with Carl, Sonya notes:

I don’t think there was really an exact talk. There was more just, umm, it was just more of a feeling, an understanding. We didn’t really have, okay, we’re exclusive, okay, it was just an understanding and a given between us so we didn’t really talk about it.

Similarly, Chris noted that the status of his relationship with Lisa was only first discussed when he was not sure how to introduce her at a family function.

Chris: We were sitting in my car and we’re about to walk into my aunt’s house and I said, how do I introduce you? And she says “I’m your girlfriend, silly.” … then we never really talked about it. Sort of like happened like that.

The lack of normative structure in defining the start of the couple relationship is in sync with what would be expected of relationships for couples courting in a post-dating period and relying on dating scripts they may have used while in college to negotiate intimacy and relationships (Bogle 2008). Many of my interviews with Nestbuilder partners also revealed that many had approximate dates that they used for their anniversary; the “true date” was unclear, since there generally was not a clear “start” to when they became a couple. Instead, couple used markers such as a first kiss, intimate moment, or formal date for an anniversary. One couple even had picked a day at random around the time they felt they became a couple to celebrate as their anniversary.

For most Nestbuilder couples, the next step in their relationship was cohabitation. Unlike Neotraditional and Promisemaker couples, who either waited for marriage and/or engagement to live together or else viewed cohabitation as a part of the marriage process, Nestbuilder couples generally viewed cohabitation as the next step in the relationship; it was
generally not associated directly with marriage but rather, if mentioned, was seen as a step towards marriage. However, it is important to clarify that cohabitation was not viewed as a part of the marriage process for a majority of Nestbuilder couples; it was a part of the process of the couple building their relationship. Marriage was not something couples were talking about when they moved in together; they might view it as something that may happen in the undefined future, but it was not an issue that cohabitation was built on.

For many Nestbuilder couples, the decision to move in together was shaped by the desire to “take the next step” with the relationship. In addition, many of these couples viewed cohabitation as an appropriate way to express the deepening commitment they had with their partner. Tamara comments about moving in with Ryan that “We’re older, we’re more mature, we’re not in college anymore. We have jobs, we’re ready to do it so we just did it.” For Tamara, moving in together was something that they were ready to do together. For Lisa and Chris, moving in together was also the next step. In reflecting on her reaction to Chris asking her to move in, Lisa notes:

We’ve moved to the next step: living together. Maybe sometime soon would be the actual proposal and marriage. But I perceived that [moving in together] definitely as the next step in our relationship.

Interestingly, for many of these couples being “ready” to live together was something that couldn’t easily be measured. Instead, it appears to be more of a feeling or common understanding the couple has for where they are with their relationship. The decision to move in together does not appear to be random but rather shaped around relationship progression timing (i.e., “are we ready to take the next step?”) and not convenience or desire for a “trial marriage” (e.g., Sassler 2004). However, as seen with Lisa’s quote, cohabitation and
thoughts—not plans—of marriage were not uncommon. Since these couples are relationship driven, marriage is a later step that will come when they are ready for it.

The transition to cohabiting was generally smooth for couples. However, it was one of the more significant relationship transitions for couples in this group. The commitment to living together often brought some conflict to the relationship as couples negotiated how to live together. My interviews with Joe and Rose highlight this dynamic. They met in college and started living together over their summer breaks from school. Joe notes “it was a pretty easy [first] summer except for learning how to manage the household together.” Both Rose and Joe discuss in their interviews the struggles they had coming into living together with different expectations about how the house would be kept: one was tidy, one was messy. While their different expectations caused some conflict in the beginning, they were able to negotiate how housework would be done in the partnership. Once this was figured out they found that living together was very satisfying and rewarding experience and helped them learn more about themselves as a couple.

The next step for Nestbuilder couples is what I term *talk about marriage*. Talk about marriage falls into one of two categories: vague talk about marriage as a future goal (within or independent of the relationship, i.e., “Someday I want to be married and have kids”) or specific talk about marriage within the couple (i.e., “When we get married, we can then buy a house). All couples in the study engaged in some level of marriage talk. For Nestbuilder couples, the way they talk about marriage was interesting because they often engaged in a lot of vague marriage talk and then transition to specific marriage talk as the relationship reaches a point where they feel that marriage is the logical next step for them. This is different from
Neotraditional and Promisemaker couples since their marriage talk is almost always within a context of specific marriage talk.

The relationship-driven nature (Surra and Hughes 1997) of the couples in this group is likely a large part of their participation in vague marriage talk; early on—especially when marriage is not a viable option for the couple—specific marriage talk may be seen as inappropriate or unneeded. As a result, projections of future wishes and desires as vague marriage talk allows couples to learn better what each member wants while, at the same time, not exerting pressure on the natural progression of the relationship to move faster than it should. Erin provides a good example of marriage talk in retelling a conversation she had with her partner, Jay:

After [our friends] were married, I remember talking about just a couple different aspects of the wedding with [Jay]… [I suggested to him that] we could do a cupcake tree and we can save money [on wedding costs] but we hadn’t even gotten engaged!

Here, Erin and Jay were at a point where they were starting to transition between vague marriage talk [things Erin liked about the wedding they attended] and specific [having a cupcake tree at their eventual wedding]. The key point here is that they are not engaged at this time, but they are in the process of negotiating engagement timing; although they are not engaged, they are in a relationship that is projected to continue to marriage. As a result, when couples were ready to move forward with becoming engaged, it was often a very natural step for them to take. When Ryan and Tamara were talking about marriage, he had asked her to go engagement ring shopping with him:

Erica: So when he came and was like, you know, I want to get you a ring, let’s go look, where you expecting that or was it more like, oh?

Tamara: *It felt natural.* I was not shocked but, I don't know. It felt like that was just the next step to do. [Italics mine]
Nestbuilder couples often talk about their relationship as a series of gradual steps that they take together that mark increased commitment or symbolic commitment to the relationship. I use the term symbolic commitment to refer to late-stage relationship events that the couple does, particularly engagement and marriage, because they appear to have more symbolic value than practical value in measuring commitment to the relationship (e.g., Cherlin 2004). Since these couples progress and build commitment over their time together, by the time they reach engagement they are generally already committed to marriage. The engagement and wedding, at this point, are more symbolic of their relationship. I will talk more about understandings of engagement in the next chapter, but the issue of commitment and relationship timing is key in understanding how Nestbuilder couples time and negotiate their relationship progressions.

While many of the Nestbuilder couples discussed their dreams for marriage by talking about marriage, some, like Sean and Victoria, noted having more of a common understanding that the relationship was going somewhere. Sean proposed to Victoria prior to the couple having any specific talk about marriage. Victoria comments about their engagement are telling of how relationship driven couples often experience change in their relationship:

I knew that he was much more ready for [marriage] than I was but I really thought that we would talk about it first. It’s just my style is much more of, we would talk about it, ease our way into it, maybe look at rings sometime or something like that and there was absolutely none of that. And I mean, we were ready for it, obviously, I said yes. I asked a few questions though first. We had been on family vacations, we’re part of each other’s family, we’re there, we just hadn’t talked about it and that’s why it was such a huge surprise to me. Several people in my family and friends said “Oh I knew this was coming!” or “I was waiting for this to happen!” or “I knew that’s what it was!” and I was like, “I did not!” [Laughs]

Carl and Sonya had a similar experience with their transition to engagement:
Sonya: I would say it probably started off as just kind of scattered talk… he talked about it once in a while, and it wasn’t, we didn’t really talk, we’re for sure going to get married, I think it was more just another understanding, that that is how our relationship was going.

The common understanding these couples have can likely be attributed to the progression of the relationship and the commitment that these couples usually form with each other that is not linked to a promise of engagement or marriage—that is, these couples do not need a public symbol to constitute enforceable trust in the relationship (Cherlin 2004). At the same time, engagement and marriage appear to remain strong symbols of commitment to a relationship, especially for Neotraditional and Promisemaker couples and most of the family and friends that couples in this study mentioned.

Since many Nestbuilder couples had longer courtships than couples in the other groups, they were often greeted with expressions of “it’s about time!” from friends and family when they do become officially engaged. Couples in this group faced the most pressure from outside their relationship to get married, especially after a couple years and/or if/when they move in together. For many participants, like Erin, this pressure caused more upset and drama in the relationship than it did good. She had talked with her mom about her relationship with Jay and her mother was continuously “convinced” that he was going to propose at several points. This was frustrating to Erin:

My mom’s like, maybe he’ll do it [propose to her] at Christmas and I was pretty much like, mom, maybe you should shut up [both laugh] because you’re making me a basket case!

However, the excitement her mom had about the proposal and her “proposal watches” that kept failing to end with a proposal worried Erin about whether her and Jay were on the same page in the relationship. She notes:
I would want somebody that I’m with, if I’m ready then and that’s fine, but I don’t want to be engaged to somebody, to be married the rest of our lives, and be thinking in the back of my head, did they only propose to me because they felt they had to or else they would lose me? Or did they propose to me because they love me and were genuinely at peace with getting married and they wanted to get married? You know, you want to be 100 percent sure that they are there with you too.

Here, Erin notes a desire common among the women “waiting to be asked” by their partners in this group: they wanted to be engaged but only if he was ready for engagement. To them, a “forced” engagement was worse than no engagement because it comes at an inappropriate time in the relationship for their partner. Since commitment to the relationship is not an issue for Nestbuilder couples, it is important that engagement occurs when the couple is ready for it, not when one member or others think the couple should be ready for engagement. As Erin notes, the proposal and engagement needs to come when both members are ready to become married; as such, a one sided proposal would be undesirable and inappropriate (i.e., wondering “if they felt they had to or else”).

For Nestbuilder couples, post-dating and traditional values are reflected in how the relationship progresses towards engagement and marriage. Nestbuilder couples have long relationship histories, which appears to allow them to negotiate and develop their relationship as a couple with minimal interference from outside norms and values shaping how they “do” partnering. What is interesting about these couples is that, despite forming commitments to each other outside of marriage, that engagement and marriage remain normative to their understandings of where the relationship is going. In this sense, these couples use engagement for its symbolic and/or celebratory nature instead of the enforceable trust characteristic, as found with Promisemakers. At the same time, their use and understanding of engagement is different from Neotraditional in that it appears they seek marriage not for
its normative value as a way to live an adult life, but because it remains still the normative “next step” for what couples should do to enact the final stages of their commitment/relationship practices. Indeed, it appears that marriage still holds highly symbolic value (Cherlin 2004). A key question that stems from this group would be: are these couples on the path to being post-marriage? This is an important question, considering two couples in this group viewed marriage as a celebration of the relationship and had even spent time discussing and debating if they wanted to legally marry.

**Coming Together as One: Promisemakers**

The final grouping of engagement practices I call Promisemakers. These couples reflect values and patterns similar to the other two groups but the issue of commitment to the relationship appears to be the driving force that shapes their relationship progression and transition into engagement. Like Nestbuilder couples, many of these couples met in college and they tend to date for three or more years before becoming engaged. One difference between this group and the others is that engagement and cohabitation tend to happen in close proximity to one another; they both get engaged and move in together or they move in together and then get engaged.

The relationship progression of the couples in this group is more casual in the beginning, with the topic of marriage generally not coming up until the couple is established as exclusive. Different stages of the relationship are highly marked with changes to the relationship. Moving in together and/or getting engaged brings comments about feeling “more secure” in the relationship, knowing they are a team and allows for moving in together (for some couples), and the sharing of finances. In this sense, these couples tend to be more event-driven than the other groups (Surra and Hughes 1997). However, unlike Neotraditional
and Nestbuilder couples, these feelings of increasing commitment along the way do not provide the same level of clarity as engagement does in terms of how they understand their relationship. Instead, engagement (and, later, marriage) are used as tools to signify to one another their true commitment to the relationship. This process works two ways, depending on the couple’s situation: for some, particularly women, becoming engaged is a way of “knowing for sure” that their partner is serious about their relationship, similar to Cherlin’s (2004) concept of enforceable trust. The second group also views engagement as a commitment to the relationship, but it is usually lack of clarity about their individual futures that develop, usually relating to work or schooling, which brings about a proposal. In these cases, the proposal signifies a commitment to the relationship and allows couples to plan their future as a couple rather than individuals.

For those who use engagement as a measure of enforceable trust, the promise of engagement for women is viewed as her partner’s commitment their relationship. Engagement means that they would be married and have a future together. Without engagement, many women in this group seemed unsure about whether their partner was serious about their future. The story of Megan and Brett’s relationship is an excellent example of this type of couple because she talked at length about her discomfort of not being engaged as a sign that he was not really committed to the relationship. However, as I will discuss later, one of the key differences among couples who use engagement as a symbol of commitment to the relationship is that gender is crucial in understanding engagement timing. In addition, it highlights some of the issues couples in this group face in negotiating marriage in a culture where the norms are less clear and who are not relying on the natural progression
of the relationship or traditional ideologies to shape engagement timing. About the prospect of becoming engaged, Megan notes:

We’d always been talking about it [getting married]. All along we’ve been talking about, “well, if we get married.” It was always this if. This big if. “If we get married.” “If we have children we’d do this.” “If we do that…” […] I remember, first, he gave me a budget for the ring—or we discussed a budget. It wasn’t him telling me. It was “what budget are we talking about?” “What do we feel comfortable with?” “Ok, so it’s ok to go look at rings and go see what you like.” Ok. And then it was, “well maybe I’ll go see what it was that you liked. And then maybe I’ll go talk to them about how I would go about buying it if I wanted to.” It was like this, oh my god. “Now I’ll go talk to them about what I need.” Like--oh my god--would you just go get the thing already.

Megan’s conversation here is interesting, given the larger context of their discussions and his interview. Her frustrations here were with his lack of commitment or “taunting” (as she viewed it) of the process—that he would talk about them getting engaged but not do what she saw as necessary for him to prepare to propose (e.g., purchase a ring). This made her doubt his commitment to the relationship since his deliberation over the ring purchase was interpreted by her as hesitation with preparing for the proposal. Brett’s understanding of engagement was that it would lead—quickly—to marriage and “married life”—a wedding, house, having children—and part of his hesitation stemmed from not feeling ready for what engagement meant to him, rather than lack of commitment to his relationship with Megan. In addition, his self-negotiation of marriage was also shaped by how he viewed their relationship—that it was something for them to work though together, not something that one of them had power in negotiating.

Brett: It [the relationship] started to become more cohesive decision making and stuff and it just kind of became, “Alright, so I guess we’re working together pretty good as a team. Let’s figure out what’s the next, let’s do the next thing.” (Erica: What was the next thing?) The next thing was really proposing, because she had made it clear to me early on that she wasn’t going to move in without a proposal.
In seeing his view of the process compared to her quote above, his asking her about a ring budget and wanting to look for rings with her was because he understood the relationship—and its progression—as a team effort, not something that he was “responsible” for doing, while it appears that she felt her intentions were clear (she wanted to be engaged) and that he simply needed to make that happen. For her, his need to talk about the process with her wasn’t interpreted as his viewing the transition to being engaged as a couple process, but rather as his inability to do “his part” as the man. This lack of doing on his behalf is read, by her, as an inability to really commit to her instead of his view of the proposal being something he does with her.

The different views of commitment and the meaning/timing of engagement came together when Megan found out his concern was not about commitment, but that marriage had a set of expectations attached that he was not ready for. However, it appears that even with this understanding, her concern about his level of commitment remained strong; she continued to view engagement as a way for him to show his commitment to her, rather than her understanding that engagement would happen when the couple was ready to marry. She held him that they could have a long engagement and that she did not intend to marry and quickly afterwards buy a home and start a family. She notes that “I kept telling him that I didn't want to pressure him into it. But it wasn’t like… because I wanted to do it when it was ready for him. If he didn't do it when it was right then what was the point?” Again, here it is clear that engagement had a strong meaning in terms of their relationship. If they were to get engaged but he was not “ready” (i.e., committed to it) then it was pointless to get engaged, especially since Megan viewed the engagement as a way for them to demonstrate
commitment to the relationship. The engagement and commitment would be meaningless and
no different from what she was experiencing with him prior to his engagement.

Prior to their engagement, Megan’s lease was coming up and they had talked about
living together. However, Megan did not want to move in with Brett if he was not committed
to moving forward with the relationship which, to her, was signified by engagement. Megan
gave Brett an ultimatum: she made it clear to him that she would not move in with him unless
she had “a ring on her finger.” He did propose and they moved in together a month
afterwards. Many of the couples in this subgroup started to live together once they were
engaged. Will, who had been with Donna for several years on and off, noted the importance
of engagement and cohabitation to the process of forming a solid commitment to each other.

My whole thing is, if we get engaged and get married, like I’m not going to be living
here and you’ll be living there. We’re going to get a house together, we’re going to
have enough money to do this, we’re going to have enough money to have children,
all of these things. It’s going to be all prepared, like I’m not going to go in there
blindsided.

For Will and Donna, the instability of the early years of their relationship, marked with
breakups, a short period of cohabitation, and periods of having a long distance relationship
would end when they were married. There would no longer be any reasons why they could
justify living apart for periods or being unsure of the direction of the relationship.

Engagement provided a solid commitment to being together and to figuring out a way to
make that happen.

The second way that engagement is used as a commitment to the relationship comes
from couples who are facing challenges, such as separations for periods of times, as a way of
signifying their intent and commitment to staying together. Many of these couples were
separated by schooling or work opportunities. By discussing plans for engagement and
married life, they made clear to each other that they were not going to “try” a long-distance relationship. Instead, they were a committed couple with engagement in their future who were facing a period of separation.

Several couples faced separation once they finished their undergraduate educations and looked for jobs or graduate study programs. Samantha talked about the problem of “going backwards” in her relationship with Alex. Having met in college and living together with friends their senior year (Alex was concerned getting their own place would be “moving too fast”), they talked about what would happen when school was finished. She had been accepted to a graduate program in the Capital Region while he wanted to stay and work Downstate. Samantha told me, “I was all upset. I’m like ‘I’m gonna leave, this is gonna get all weird if we’re going backwards in our relationship!’” Her understanding of the situation provides two insights into partnering. The first is that couples should “move forward” in their relationship. Similar to other couples in this group, engagement was a way to mark the seriousness of the relationship and their intent to stay together by demonstrating that the couple intended, via engagement, to marry. She sees their separation after having essentially lived together for two years as moving them backwards, not forwards. Second, there is an implication that moving forward in the relationship means doing things that are seen as showing further commitment, such as moving somewhere together, living together, and/or making decisions about what would be best for the future of the relationship together. They did a long distance relationship that involved “a lot of phone calls.” While his graduate studies were unclear (he did not get into a program he was hoping to start), Samantha notes that the effect of being separated on the relationship was causing problems for them, since it
was not clear what they were doing, both in their own lives and in their relationship.

Samantha notes:

The way he puts it that we needed to solidify our relationship. I was leaving, do we want to take the next step and, if so, now would be the best time. So he proposed to me about a year ago in October and it was my first semester of [graduate] school. And he was still [in downstate New York].

Eric and Sarah faced a similar situation. Eric had been accepted to a graduate program in a different state and Sarah was concerned about the future of their relationship.

Eric notes:

She wasn’t with me going away, being so far away…she probably wasn’t really sure whether we’d stay together over that and it was probably reassuring to hear that that [becoming engaged and getting married] was my plans for the future.

For these couples, the promise of engagement provided comfort by confirming that the relationship was not going to be in an ambiguous space; instead, by discussing marriage as their future, couples were able to develop a more coherent understanding of themselves as a couple; they were no longer just a dating couple, but would eventually be husband and wife. Engagement provided a clear direction and goal for the relationship that other options, such as having a long distance relationship or simply waiting and seeing what would happen, could not offer. In addition, it appears that engagement allowed them to start thinking of themselves as a couple with a future and facilitated long-term goal planning, such as where they will settle down once their separations are over and what married life might be like.

Joann notes this larger issue of commitment and coming together as a couple in her interview about her relationship with David. Separated for a year because of school, they were reunited when he moved to the Capital Region to be with her. She notes:
[David] was ready to make that real commitment that I had been looking for all year long, I think…. If we’re going to do this, if we’re going to be committed to this area I think it makes sense to have the commitment to each other. You know, he was ready to make that step and I think a part of it was logical timing.

Like many Neotraditional couples, many of the Promisemaker couples have aspects of their relationship progressions, such as engagement timing, influenced by other life course events outside of the relationship. Joann and David’s engagement is timed around other events in their lives, such as his move to the Capital Region. In addition, the engagement is employed as a way of solidifying and symbolizing their future together; their separation is finished, they are now together, and by getting engaged, issues in the future can be assessed and handled in terms of what is best for them as a couple instead of individuals. This discourse is common in Promisemaker couples, since the engagement becomes a strong symbol of the couple’s commitment to each other and their relationships. It brings a clear and mutual understanding that the relationship will continue to move forward and that they have the same understanding about where the relationship is headed.

Gender and Relationship Progression

In addition to examining the overall understanding of how relationships progress within couples, it is important to understand these transitions in terms of gender in the relationship. Gender is a key area of difference in how couples construct their family and relationship experiences (e.g., Coltrane and Adams 2008; Gerson 2010; Martin and Mahoney 1998), and the process of thinking about engagement timing and how engagement is accomplished is done in gendered ways across the three groups in this study. To conclude this chapter, I want to focus more on how gender shapes relationship progression with special attention paid to gendered understandings of engagement negotiation in the relationship. The
gendered courtship patterns between the groups are interesting because it continues to demonstrate how men and women experience and understand relationships in gendered ways. This will be a shorter overview in preparation of more detailed discussion of gendered relationship negotiations within the engagement experience that will be discussed in the next chapter, Planning, Enacting, and Experiencing Engagement.

For the final section of this chapter, I will use two couples from each engagement style grouping to highlight the construction of gendered ideologies inside each relationship and how gender shapes how the progression to engagement is shaped and understood by the couple. In addition to highlighting gender difference in relationship progression, this section will also highlight the value of collecting couple data and then weaving it together to understand the complicated and rich experiences men and women have in shaping their own understandings of their intimate relationships.

*Neotraditional: Gendering traditional romance*

For Neotraditional couples, gender is expressed in very traditional ways when it comes to how transitions in the relationship occur. This is particularly true of how couples negotiate the doing of the marriage proposal once they have reached the point in the relationship where they are ready to become engaged. These couples talked about wanting to do engagement in a traditional way: the proposal is to be a surprise to her and he works hard to make it that; the proposal is planned to be romantic and couples understand the ‘romantic proposal’ to be a part of presenting themselves as a couple intending on marriage. As a part of this traditional scripting of the relationship, men tended to underestimate their partner’s influence in decisions made about different aspects of their engagement planning in order to maintain a “traditional story” to their engagement practices. Here, I will tell the stories of
Kevin and Theresa and Tom and Anika to highlight how traditional understandings of gender in relationship processes play out.

For Neotraditional women, a major theme concerning engagement timing was that they did not want to know when it was going to be, what he was planning, or what the ring would look like. In this way, they spoke of generally wanting him to have control over planning the proposal and the elements that went into making it surprise for them. Many Neotraditional men and women commented to this:

Anika: We decided to get married, but whenever that [the proposal] happened that was going to be up to him. *Whenever he wanted to ask,* whatever. But we knew that it was definitely in our cards that we were gonna get married. (Erica: *It was up to him to ask?*) Yes. [Italics mine]

Tom: She [Anika] just wanted, basically, me to surprise her (Erica: She told you that?) Yeah, basically she wanted me to do it when it felt right to me, not just say, hey honey, when do you want me to propose to you? And have her give me a date… *she wanted traditional, just have me go out and pick it [the ring] out myself and when it felt right to me, then pop the question to her.* [Italics mine]

Theresa: I’m thrilled at how it [the proposal] worked out. I really am thrilled that I didn’t pick it [the ring] out and I didn’t know when it was coming. …. I think *it just loses a little bit of that romance* and that him, like, to me, it’s supposed to be that a guy professes his love to you, asks you to marry… [Italics mine]

For Neotraditional women, the timing of engagement was often set after the couple had either formally or informally agreed that they were ready to become engaged for marriage. Here, gender difference in proposal planning is reflective of more traditional ideologies of how proposals should happen but with a modern element: that the couple, not the man, is active in approving the time range in which the proposal is possible. This element of understanding is captured in Kevin and Theresa’s interviews. In response to questions about how they negotiated the timing of their engagement, they comment:
Kevin: No, I think it was more of a, I think just enough talk about it, enough talk about it that we knew that we were serious about it. I think it set the stage for it.

(Errica: Okay.) We didn’t like sit down and say, okay, we’re going to get married. In fact, she didn’t, wasn’t in on any of the ring at all. I knew what she liked, I knew the style of ring she liked and I went out and found it myself or I did the best I could to find what she liked based on what she had told me, what she had shown me. So I mean I’d seen rings, I guess, a guy’s radar is like, okay I guess I got to get serious there.

Theresa: So it was more just kind of general, we never really sat down and had a real formal talk about it. It was just, starting in September, something would come up and he would say things. He would say a lot actually, umm, “[If] I ask you, you better say yes!” He’s like, “I’d be crushed if you would say no.” and I’d be like, “of course I would say yes!” So he would throw it in in a joking manner.

Here, it is clear that Kevin and Theresa shared a common understanding about their relationship together, even though they never “sat down and had a real formal talk about it” (Theresa). Couples in this group generally noted things such as teasing each other about the proposal/wedding or talking about their future as ways of knowing that the other one was ready for engagement. While this is reminiscent of Nestbuilder couples, a main difference between them and Neotraditional couples is that Neotraditional couples generally have an informal agreement early in the relationship that, if things go well for them as a couple, that marriage will be the outcome of their courtship, whereas Nestbuilder couples slowly progressed to the point where marriage felt like the next logical step for them. In this sense, marriage talk provides men with clear evidence that they are both ready to take the next step in the relationship and, as a result, removes a lot of the risk from his proposal. This informal marriage talk also provides Neotraditional men a safety net for when he does plan his traditional proposal: they are able to incorporate traditional elements of romance into the proposal (his asking is a “surprise,” the ring is something he purchased as a special gift for
her) while knowing that the relationship has progressed to a point where engagement feels like the appropriate next step for the couple.

An interesting point worth noting this how strongly the image or ideology of traditional gender difference is held by Neotraditional men in comparison to Neotraditional women. In my interviews, men would often discuss the decision making processes around the transition to engagement and the planning of the proposal as something that he took the lead on: from his story, her participation was minimal. However, in listening to women’s stories of the engagement planning, it is clear that Neotraditional women have more influence in the decision making process than both men and women in the relationship will generally recognize or acknowledge. A great example of this exchange is in Anika and Tom’s discussion of ring selection.

Erica: I have one more question about the ring. You said you wanted him to pick it out. Had you given him ideas or hints about the kind of jewelry you wanted?

Anika: I told him that I didn’t want it to be modern, I wanted it to be an antique looking ring. And that was about it. (Erica: I don’t know anything about jewelry! [Both laugh] [What do you mean by] antique looking?) He said that he was very lost [when it came to picking out her engagement ring] and I said, why don’t you go with [my best friend] and he said, that’s a very good idea! (Erica: Yeah, so she [Anika’s best friend] went with [him ring shopping]?) Exactly.

Anika: (Erica: How do you like your ring?) Oh, I love it. It was perfect. (Erica: Perfect?) I mean, it meant more to me that he picked it out, that he actually put thought into it and went to different places and looked at different things and that’s what meant the most to me. [Italics mine]

Tom: (Erica: Did Anika help you with ring shopping?) Nope. No, [Anika] left that up to me. So… (Erica: [She gave you] nothing?) She didn’t have anything in mind [for what she wanted in a ring].

What is very interesting to note in this exchange this how Anika’s understands her ring as something that Tom picked out especially for her when, in actually, he had gone ring shopping with her friend who had a good idea of the kind of ring that Anika would like. Tom
maintained this story in his interview (that she wanted him to “just … go out and pick it [the
ring] out [him] self”). Kevin and Theresa’s stories of how the ring was selected also followed
this Neotraditional script:

Kevin: [Theresa] wasn’t in on any of the ring at all. I knew what she liked, I knew the
style of ring she liked and I went out and found it myself or I did the best I could to
find what she liked based on what she had told me, what she had shown me. So I
mean I’d seen rings, I guess, a guy’s radar is like, okay I guess I got to get serious
there.

Theresa: [Kevin] would ask me, “What do you think of this? What do you think of
that?” We’d be shopping. We wouldn’t be in looking for rings. … But like, you’d see
my sister-in-law’s ring and he’s like, ‘what do you think of her ring?’ And I’m like,
oh, I don’t, her ring [because it is very ornate]…I would rather just have a simple
square stone. And then he knew that I would rather have a single square stone. Like
little stuff like that. … I think we were at Macy's or somewhere and we were looking
at watches and the watches were next to the rings and he’s like, ‘oh that rings not bad’
and I’m like, ‘no, I don’t really like it.’

Theresa and Kevin both told me of how he “tested the waters” by purchasing her jewelry for
other occasions prior to the proposal that similar in design to the ring he was thinking of
getting her. Theresa recounts:

Then he bought me earrings for my birthday and he said that that was his “trial run.”
… he was like, I knew if you loved the earrings then you’d love a ring like that and if
you hated the earrings the I wouldn’t get you something like that. He bought me a
couple other pieces of jewelry, that same kind of thing, like well if she likes it I’m on
the right path. (Erica: But you didn’t know that when he gave you those gifts?) No, I
found out after he gave me the ring.

For Kevin and Theresa, his involvement in picking the ring out on his own was shaped by an
understanding that she didn’t go with him to pick it out. While both acknowledge that she
was involved in providing input and ideas into what kind of engagement ring she wanted,
they both also downplay this fact to follow the couple story that he pulled together an idea of
what she wanted in a ring and then tested his ideas by purchasing her jewelry items that
would confirm if his idea was correct—a much more romantic story to tell than the one
where they did have some informal discussions about her desires for an engagement ring. Since the ring appears to be one of the most central elements in the proposal (Schweingruber et al 2004) and the tradition and ritual of engagement is important for Neotraditional engagements, then this re-creation of the ring selection story to fit a more traditionally gendered tone works to maintain the couple’s understanding of the proposal as a formal event that is done using highly traditional, gendered scripts.

For Neotraditional couples, the ring appears to be a central symbol in the engagement and it is very important that the story that becomes negotiated out of their relationship is one where he picked it out for her, on his own or with him figuring out any “hints” she might give him. This story works to maintain traditional ideologies of romance that then remain attached to the proposal: to the outsider, it looks like he proposes when he feels it is time, that he surprises her with a “surprise proposal,” and presents her with a ring that he purchased for her on his own. However, closer examination reveals that she does have a lot of power in the timing of the relationship: they have a mutual understanding that they will marry (even if it is not explicit), she provides hints or guidance for him regarding what she wants in a ring, and then “waits” once they are in agreement about engagement for him to pop the question. This aspect—the timing of the actually proposal—is one of the only areas she does not have nor want any input on. She leaves it to him to plan how he will propose to her; she views his planning of the proposal as something that he is doing as a token of his love for her. The result of this negotiation is a perfect proposal that is mutually understood to be more gender-traditional that it really is.
Nestbuilder: Gender and progression timing

While Neotraditional couples generally develop a mutual understanding of the relationship as being marriage oriented from early in the relationship, Nestbuilder couples are more likely to allow for the relationship to develop and unfold over time, similar to Surra and Hughes (1997) relationship-driven relationship. Gender equality in the relationship remains a common discourse among Nestbuilder couples; while most do not question the “need” to get married, their decision to transition into marriage is shaped as much by the normative nature of marriage in relationship progression as much as it is often shaped by pressures and expectations beyond the relationship that dictate that marriage is where a relationship must eventually “go.” As a result, the transition into engagement often comes after a time when the couple already feels they are committed to a long term, marriage-like relationship. Instead of “are we going to commit to each other?” the question for Nestbuilder couples is “when should we make the commitment to marry?” However, although this question seems simple enough—the commitment is there—gender differences develop for Nestbuilder couples looking at making a commitment to become engaged. Often, while there is no question of the commitment the couple has to each other and their relationship, women are more likely to be ready to commit to marriage and tend to wait for their partners to be ready to make that commitment. As a result, Nestbuilder couples have a very interesting negotiation taking place concerning when the couple is ready for engagement. To highlight this issue of being committed to the relationship and needing to negotiate engagement timing, I will highlight interviews from Marie and Jared and Chris and Lisa.
For these couples, their dating relationships developed into mutually understood long-term relationships during the first one to two years of dating, a trend common among Nestbuilder couples. Lisa comments:

By that point [i.e., two years into the relationship] we were pretty much staying every night with each other. We were, by that point, pretty much a functional unit, cooking dinner together, grocery shopping together, doing laundry together. We were still, we still had different apartments. But pretty much I never went to my apartment… It wasn’t really a question of, ‘oh what are you doing tonight?’ It was, ‘what are we doing tonight?’ And at that point we were kind of a cohesive unit.

Lisa’s comment is highly reflective of a relationship driven relationship (Surra and Hughes 1997). As her and Chris dated, they became more and more connected and the time they spent together shifted from a more “dating” lifestyle (i.e., seeing each other for dates/activities) to spending their time together in a way that was more reflective of a long term cohabiting.married couple (i.e., doing every day, routine activities together). For Nestbuilder couples, this shift in the relationship (along with cohabitation) generally was seen as the starting grounds for couples seeing themselves as being together for the long term. At this point in the relationship, it appears that Nestbuilder couples have the same understanding of where they are in terms of relationship progression: they are an increasingly committed couple. For example, Jared and Marie both commented about how they felt committed to the relationship about one year into their courtship:

Jared: Everything kind of fell into place with her…. It was probably a year, year and a half into the relationship, I would say [that he knew he wanted to be with her for the long term]. Probably a little bit earlier…it’s been a fast two years!
Marie: I’d say it was pretty well cemented that, yeah, we’re going to do this [i.e., be together for the long term]. Especially, about a year in would probably be the, that’s when things really started to be like, okay, I think we’re really in this. Things look stable and so, yeah, yup.
In understanding Nestbuilder relationship progression, Jared and Marie were one of the couples to progress more rapidly towards this understanding of commitment in their relationship. Nestbuilder couples’ discussions of commitment to the relationship and even discussions of engagement, a future family, and marriage were not indicators that the couple had firmly committed to engagement; instead, it appears that these couples engage in daydreaming or futuristic talk about their potential future as a way of, at first, feeling each other out for future plans and then, later, as a way to bond within the relationship. This practice is a major difference in how Nestbuilders experience relationship progression in comparison to the other couples in the study, who are more likely to develop more concrete plans or discuss their future in terms of long term planning. It appears that, for Nestbuilders, commitment to the couple relationship and commitment to marriage are two different issues.

This transition to being committed to the partnership does not appear to have any obvious gender differences; across Nestbuilder couples in this study it does not appear that there are clear patterns concerning one partner or the other having a pull in moving the relationship to being viewed as long term. However, a gender pattern in being prepared for marriage does emerge when the couples start to talk in the interviews about their discussions of becoming engaged and planning marriage. For example, one year into their relationship, Marie and Jared started talking about marriage. Marie noted in her interview that Jared had mentioned his desire to settle down and have a family in the future. When she brought up the idea of marriage, she noted that he did not “freak out” like her last boyfriend had. While Marie’s understanding of marriage talk suggests that they were on the same page, Jared’s interview suggests that he was committed to the relationship but was not yet ready to plan for engagement:
Jared: They [talks about marriage] were okay. Umm… she wasn’t like, she wasn’t overbearing with it, she wasn’t like “when are you going to marry me?” “When are you going to marry me?” … it wasn’t that bad, but she would start telling me details, hint at it, ‘oh, I’d like to have a fall wedding, the leaves are so pretty.’ She started hinting at it, which was nice. …

Erica: Were you on the same page as her?

Jared: No, definitely not.

Erica: What were you thinking?

Jared: I was thinking, give it a little more time, don’t rush into marriage.

Here, it appears that Jared and Marie were together in terms of where they saw their relationship going even though they were not together in terms of where they were comfortable having the relationship be at the given moment. Her gentle reminders that she was reading/interested in engagement (fall wedding, hinting) were “nice” to Jared and likely functioned to reinforce in his mind that they were desiring the same long term plans for the relationship. However, marriage was not something to “rush” into and he was able to take his time to prepare for engagement, knowing that Marie was ready when he was for engagement.

Similarly, Chris knew that Lisa was ready for marriage and he talks candidly about moving the relationship forward:

Chris: It was to say like, ‘I’m happy with our relationship as it stands. I’m not comfortable with letting go [i.e., breaking up] but I’m not comfortable with moving forward.’

Erica: What did you mean by move forward? What was move forward?

Chris: I think that’s a good question. I’m trying to look back because it was definitely something that I think it really meant like getting married. I think that’s really what it meant because that would have been the next step really for us.

This theme of “waiting” until he was ready for engagement was a strong theme among Nestbuilder men. Women, on the other hand, note being ready for engagement much earlier
than men, usually by a few months. These feelings are made known to their partner and then she waits for her partner to be prepared for marriage and to propose to her. With Chris and Lisa, their discussions about marriage left him with a clear understanding of where Lisa wanted the relationship to go:

Chris: The conversations that we had loosely about marriage I knew that she was down [for getting married]. I didn't have to guess about that. She had made it clear to me that she wasn’t going to wait forever and that she was really committed to me.

Generally, Nestbuilder women would let their partner know, either directly or through vague marriage talk, that they were thinking about marriage and were ready for engagement. Interestingly, this waiting period is not stressful for the woman; she does not see his lack of preparation as a lack of desire to be with her. Even for Lisa, who “wasn’t going to wait forever,” did not have a timeframe picked out by which Chris had to be ready for marriage or she would leave him. Instead, she sees that he is simply not ready to be married yet and makes it very clear to him that marriage is something she strongly desires. Since, for most Nestbuilder couples, this period of time lasted less than six months, the mismatch the couple was facing regarding where they felt in their commitment to the relationship was not a major issue since he would tell her that he would soon be ready and that, for the time being, he needed a little more time. When asked if she had thought about proposing marriage to Chris, Lisa reflects this attitude in her answer:

Lisa: I thought about it [proposing to Chris] for a quick second there [and] I’m like, you know what? He’s not ready to propose to me then I shouldn’t be proposing to him because he wouldn’t be ready. It wouldn't be, it wouldn't be fair because then I would be asking him and putting him in a really bad position—to say no. You don’t want them to say no. You want both parties to be ready. [Italics mine]

Here, it appears that Chris’ lack of readiness for engagement was not something Lisa was worried about for the short term; in their interviews, it was clear that during this period they
were negotiating marriage and that she was clear with him that marriage and a family was what she wanted. However, their use of engagement was not like Promisemaker since they were committed to each other without engagement; the issue appeared to be settling down to have a family versus being committed to a relationship with her.

For women, waiting was often punctuated with hints and clues that lead them to see that their partner was preparing mentally and materially for engagement. Often these preparations would lead women to start preparing themselves for thinking about themselves as engaged:

Marie: Since [engagement] had been so blatantly discussed … He had started [a] conversation at that point with his mom [about getting a family ring] … He and his mom raided the [family heirloom ring] box … that really showed [me] that he was taking initiative. It wasn’t just me sitting there, okay, what about us? … It was really him taking that step to explore that. That would be what really, I think, sunk it in for me [that he was ready to get engaged].

Marie:  I knew it was coming. I didn’t know when. So, and I knew there was defiantly that prospect there so to a certain extent, I started to regard him as mine, and I didn’t use the term fiancée yet obviously but, umm, I regarded him in a way very similar to someone who would be my fiancée.

Alternatively, the other model Nestbuilder men would use is that he would not tell her he was ready to move forward so that he could surprise her with a proposal. Here, men would state that they knew she was ready and that she thought they were not ready; by not informing her that he was ready, these Nestbuilder men felt like they were able to truly surprise her with the proposal.

Lisa: When he proposed to me I thought he still needed about six months. He had told me, oh, maybe two weeks prior to proposing that he was not ready with the relationship [moving forward to engagement].

Another trend among Nestbuilder couples was found in their understandings of engagement and commitment to marriage. Nestbuilder couples often talked about “feeling
engaged” or regarding themselves as though they were engaged in some way prior to the actual marriage proposal. When asked when he started to think of himself as engaged, Jared notes “Umm … probably I would say about three or four months before I actually asked her. I knew she was the one for me.” With this realization that they are ready for engagement, many Nestbuilder men will start to understand their relationship as “engaged” in an unofficial way once they had decided for themselves that they wanted to get engaged; there appears to be a definite shift in men’s understandings of the relationship once they commit to engagement and, once determined, men tend to view the future of the relationship as set; there is no hesitation or uneasiness in wanting engagement since they have committed to it.

Chris: It [is] just more comfortable… I don't have to be like sitting here feeling like I’m doing something wrong or worrying about ‘am I going to [ask her to marry me]?’ Am I not going to? Am I going to? Am I not going to?’ I used to have that sort of discussion almost daily with myself—a sort of internal battle. I don't have that anymore. I have other battles but not that one because I’ve made the commitment [to engagement/the relationship].

While Chris did talk of having to “battle” over committing, his revelation that he had held onto a picture of an engagement ring that Lisa liked—and then used it to help him pick out her engagement ring—suggests that deep down he knew, despite his anxieties, that one day he would likely become engaged to her. He notes that “she dropped a picture of a ring in my back pack probably three years ago that I carried around with me for like three years. So I knew the style of ring that she wanted.” This, despite his described anxieties during the interview, suggests that he recognized on some level that engagement was a real possibility for them at some point in the future, even if he was not ready yet to acknowledge it himself.

Alternatively, women did not discuss feeling anxiety or hesitation in feeling ready for engagement like men do. At the same time, women in this group rarely talked about feeling
engaged prior to their proposal; if they did, they would speak of feeling a commitment similar to engagement prior to the proposal but generally stayed away from using the term engaged. Nestbuilder women’s lack of anxiety over engagement timing and preparedness is likely connected to social norms concerning marriage, where popular understandings state that women desire marriage and family life and must find a man to be their husband; essentially, marriage for women is celebrated. On the other hand, men are not socialized to desire marriage (if anything, the championing of the “bachelor lifestyle” dictates the opposite—that marriage only brings unhappiness and the end of freedom). By not being socialized to conceptualize themselves in relation to marriage, it may be the case that men need a period to come to understand themselves in relation to marriage whereas women are socialized from childhood to know where marriage fits into her life.

For Nestbuilder couples, the negotiation and difference in readiness for marriage provides an interesting gendered practice in which to understand how these couples negotiate engagement timing. The steady nature of Nestbuilder relationships and their ability to see themselves as committed beyond social routes, like engagement, suggests that these couples are the closest to being post-marriage in their understandings of relationship commitment. However, as I will discuss in the next two chapters, the normative expectation of marriage as the correct way to actualize long term commitment among heterosexual couples in the United States remains a strong influence in both how couples visualize the future of their relationships and in how their relationship is understood among their family and friends.

Promisemaker: Gendered understandings of commitment

Unlike Neotraditional and Nestbuilder couples, who have relatively similar ideologies concerning how their transitions into engagement work, Promisemaker couples face a
different obstacle in negotiating engagement. For Promisemaker men and women, mismatched understandings of commitment and a need to mutually solidify their long-term relationship shapes their engagement experiences. In this section, I will be highlighting the interviews from Heather and Art and Joann and David to detail the gendered understandings of commitment women and men have of the role of engagement in their relationships.

For Promisemaker couples, engagement largely functions as a symbol of commitment to the relationship by both parties. However, in exploring gender differences in couples’ understandings of this process, my interviews suggest that engagements largely work as a way for men to demonstrate that they are committed to their partner; for Promisemaker women, it appears that other processes in the relationship that may be used to identify commitment, much like Nestbuilder couples experience, are not seen as secure enough to allow her to fully trust that he will remain committed to her for the long term. In this sense, the engagement and, ultimately, wedding and marriage, serve to provide a very concrete ritual on which the couple can build a mutual understanding of the status of their relationship.

The disjunction in how Promisemaker men and women view commitment is interesting, given pop cultural references that dictate that men are the ones who fear commitment and that it is up to a women to convince him to propose. Here, my findings suggest that the opposite is true: Promisemaker men have more relationship driven understandings of the partnership (Surra and Hughes 1997), in which they view time spent together as creating a stronger and stronger commitment that was, in many cases, marriage-like while women continued to see the relationship pre-engagement as a “boyfriend-girlfriend” relationship that lacked a defined long-term agenda. Art, who dated Heather for six and a half years before proposing, notes:
Art: As far as I was concerned, if it’s not broke, leave it alone. As far as I was concerned, the relationship worked just fine. We lived together, and especially once I moved in, my opinion, I don’t know, I’m still not convinced that marriage is an absolute necessity. …But I still think that, in general, if I didn’t, if there were no social pressure and my family didn’t care and she was cool with it I probably wouldn’t have bothered proposing because I moved in, that was the biggest physical change. That actually physically changed our lives and routines and who we are. Marriage is throwing a big party and wasting a lot of money. [Art laughs]

Alternately, David also discussed engagement timing and visions of what married life means:

David: She already has baby names picked out and I am nowhere near ready for that yet. [We talked about] just how nice it would be to be married and have a house, have a dog, and have a child. Be, you know, we obviously have been together for a long time and now lived together for a number of years now and so we knew what it was like to live together. But I think we still saw marriage as like the next step of being together. [Italics mine]

For Art, the time the couple had spent together, including the barriers they had faced over the years, solidified their relationship. His attitude is a bit more liberal than other Promisemaker men, like David, who viewed engagement as a “next step” in their commitment that simply made the relationship more special and/or provided a transition to a period in the relationship where homeownership and/or children would occur; it does not appear that these men found engagement to be something more significant in terms of their commitment to their partner.

While many commitment women also viewed changes in the relationship over time as leading to a deeper connection, they also held engagement as a significant part of the relationship process and would talk of how it provided more “commitment” and “security” to the relationship. When asked why she wanted to get married, Heather noted:

Because personally to me, being willing to marry someone or saying you’ll marry someone or making that commitment says that you’re, you like a person enough to be prepared to take on the commitment of being the only person you’re with for the rest of your life and thinking that that’s okay. And that’s the kind, for me, I need that kind of confirmation for me. Which would be the only reason that I would want to get married. I don’t want to be dating someone if I’m questioning whether or not they like me enough.
This understanding, similar to other commitment women’s interviews, is highly contrasted with the understanding that men had of engagement and commitment. Heather’s understanding of engagement/marriage makes clear that she understands his proposal and decision to marry as solidifying his commitment to be with her; his proposal signifies his commitment to having one partner and that he is comfortable with that decision.

From Promisemaker men’s interviews, it appears that engagement serves the function of showing his partner that he has a mutual understanding of the future of the relationship with her, even though he often is confident in his own understandings that they are a couple in a committed, long-term and often marriage-like relationship. The result of his understandings of commitment to the relationship and his need to clarify his understanding of this commitment to her in a way that she understands is an issue that men are lead to carry out by their partner; whether or not this leads to him feeling like he has to propose to her or simply leads to a desire to propose does not change his understanding of the relationship yet provides her with tangible proof that he is as committed to the longevity of the relationship as she is. In her interview, Heather commented that she would tell Art that he needed to decide if he wanted to marry her by the time she was thirty or she would find someone who wanted to marry her. I asked her to talk about this ultimatum:

Erica: Earlier you said you had talked about marriage but that it was on his plate (Heather: Yeah) to decide whether or not [marriage would happen]. You’d said he kinda had until you were 30. Let’s say he had decided that, you know, marriage isn’t what I want. I’m happy where we’re at. What would [you] have wanted to do with the relationship?

Heather: I don’t like to think about that [both laugh] [Erica: Okay, okay] cause [sighs]… that’s a really tough question for me to answer because I can tell you what I would have liked to have done but I can tell you that I probably wouldn’t have done that. I would like to say that if he made that decision I would probably say “okay I can accept that. I can accept that you love me but marriage just isn’t your thing” but I
know that’s not really the way I would feel about it internally. If it has actually happened I probably would have been really conflicted … I mean I *don’t feel like I have to be married* but if I’m dating someone they have to be willing to marry me. ... *It’s more about having that willingness from the person you’re dating, like making sure that they really like you*, not just are pretending to like you or are faking you out. You know? Or I don’t know, cheating on you behind your back somehow and, or keeping their options open. It’s any of that stuff. *It’s more that marriage for me, personally, why I want to be married, is for my own sanity, knowing that the person is committed to me.* [Italics mine]

From her account, it does not appear that anything short of marriage would provide her the proof she needed to know that Art was committed to being with her. Other Promisemaker women echoed similar statements, often concerning not wanting to be “strung along” by someone who might leave them or wanting to know he was committed to making tough decisions, like moving to take a job offer, with her in ways that would maintain their relationship.

Promisemaker women understand engagement as his commitment to her for the long term, often despite the fact that they will acknowledge the commitment they understood their relationship having prior to the engagement; it appears that once their relationship reached a point where she felt engagement and marriage were the ‘next steps’, that not moving forward with the relationship left her feeling that they were “stuck” in a less committed relationship than they should have been. Alternatively, Promisemaker women also feel that not having engagement and definite wedding plans leaves her with too many questions and uncertainties about the future of the relationship. As such, engagement brings with it a heightened understanding of his commitment and provides her with a level of security in knowing that he also feels the same way as her in terms of where he wants the future of the relationship to go.
The need for a relationship to “move forward” and not remain in a boyfriend-girlfriend status is an important step for many Promisemaker women, particularly those who have a strong desire to have physical proof of their partner’s commitment to them. Much of this desire to “move forward” with the relationship appears to stem from an understanding many Promisemaker women have that marriage is a natural, normal step for a couple to experience together that provides the final level of attachment between the partners. The tension created by having mismatched understandings of commitment is seen in Heather and Art’s interviews. For Heather, when Art delayed cohabitation and engagement, she felt that he was unsure about whether or not he really wanted to be with her, even though she knew that cohabitation/engagement were not decisions he made lightly and that he had no plans or desire to be with anyone other than her.

Heather: … I used to give him a lot of ultimatums. I used to tell him that if he hadn’t made up his mind by the time I was 30 I was gonna ditch him cause I didn’t want to be stuck with someone eternally who didn’t feel they loved me enough to marry me [laughs]. Umm…and I would sometimes say it in a joking manner but I think he knew I was semi-serious. I don’t know if I actually would have ditched him but he knew that [marriage] was something I was interested in…

Art: …Especially after the second or third year, especially, she was like alright, we’ve been together two years, three years, it’s been four years, you know, when are we going to move in? Are you ever going to move in with me? Are we gonna get married? You know, she started bringing that up. And I was like, hey, you know, at that point, up until about a year ago even I was like, marriage was not even a consideration, like if she hadn’t brought [marriage] up I never would have thought of it. It’s like, [our relationship] works, why change things? What’s the difference? If we get married, what would that change? It wouldn’t change anything. That was my point of view and she didn’t like that.

From their interviews, it is clear that Heather and Art have very different understandings of commitment to the relationship. He sees the relationship working great and doesn’t believe that marriage will change anything; his commitment to her is clear in how he talks about their
relationship and early views of marriage as an institution. Alternatively, she views marriage a symbol of his love and commitment to her and, in her eyes, engagement and marriage would provide a new level of understanding and depth to the relationship. The tension seen in their relationship comes from them having different perceptions of where they are with their commitment; he feels they are as committed as they can be (e.g., marriage wouldn’t change things) whereas she views them as not having that level of commitment because the final step—engagement and marriage—is missing. For Heather and Art, these differences in how they perceive their relationship create conflict that is ultimately resolved when Art decides to propose to Heather. As he notes:

Art: Why am I getting married? [Erica: Yeah] That’s a good question. [Laughs] Umm…. Well, I’m not sure if there is a short answer but the long answer I guess would begin with “because she wants to.” It’s something she wants to do and I’m not opposed to it anymore and my withholding that harms her, my not withholding it doesn’t harm me. Cost benefit analysis is kind of how I do things. [Art laughs] So for one, it’s not a big deal and I don’t mind getting married because I’m not planning on leaving her, we’re planning on staying together, we have plans to have kids and stuff so … And like I said, if she didn’t have that overwhelming urge to get married I probably wouldn’t have bothered… [Italics mine]

Like many Promisemaker men, Art decided to propose to Heather because it is something that she really wants. He notes that marriage “doesn’t harm me” but that he was not “planning on leaving her, we’re planning on staying together.” Other men like Art noted that they figured that they would propose later down the road, particularly once the couple was ready to start a family since many men viewed marriage as largely a status that would help make some transitions, such as buying a home and having children, easier to navigate both legally and socially. His partner’s desire to become engaged earlier than when he was planning, in terms of married life, is often met with slight hesitation, discussions about what
they are doing (i.e., what would getting married mean for them? Children? Security?), and then, seeing that engagement was the most viable option at the time, a proposal.

The function of engagement to provide women with a clear understanding of the future of the relationship and his level of commitment to her is also found in how it often worked to provide couples with clearance to start thinking about themselves as a cohesive unit instead of two individuals having a relationship together. For women, this function of engagement cannot be understated, especially since it appears that only engagement (versus discussions of engagement or even plans to have a future together) works to provide women solid proof that the partnership will be long-term and that mutual planning is appropriate.

The function of engagement to solidify couple decision making processes was central to Joann’s understandings of engagement in her relationship:

It made sense to move forward with where our relationship was since we knew that we were going to stay in this area. We knew that this was where we were going to build a life so it was sort of like, ‘now we can,’ [which was different from] when I was in graduate school [and] everything was still up in the air. There was a point when he was looking [into training and taking a job with the State] and then he had potential to be moved somewhere else in the state. I was going to be graduating and I didn’t know if I’d be able to find a job in this area or if I would have to move away so when we made the commitment to the area it sort of was like, ‘ok, now we can.’

Here, Joann notes that earlier in the relationship their future was “up in the air” since she was not sure where they would each end up finding employment, even though David had moved from another area of the state to live with her. Their decision to become engaged provided them with a commitment to be with each other, which then assisted them in deciding to stay in the area they were living pre-engagement. The co-timing of these decisions provided Joann with a clear understanding that their relationship now contained a new kind of
commitment to one another, especially around seeing them as a dyad instead of two individuals in a relationship together:

Joann: We’re at a point in our relationship where it makes sense to move forward and make that sort of ultimate commitment. … it would be easy to say ‘well we could just keep on going living this lifestyle, there’s no difference between living together and being married,’ that it’s just a piece of paper. But I don’t feel that it is. I think that, with marriage we’ll be making additional commitments, … basically all decisions will be made together, whereas right now if I decide I want to hop on a plane and go see my friend in [another state] for a weekend I would tell him and talk to him about it but I would basically make that decision myself. After we’re married I think that all of our choices about what we’re doing are going to be made as a couple. And I want that and I think that it’s a positive thing. I think we’re just in place to sort of combine our lives in any ways that we haven’t already…. But again, it’s having that ultimate commitment that maybe we haven’t reached yet when we are married. It’s really, if I were to say it in one sentence, about combining our lives officially and finally. [Italics mine]

From Joann’s understanding, engagement shows that the way they are committed to each other as a couple changes; instead of negotiating decisions as individuals, they would now make decisions as a couple. Individualism is removed from the relationship in favor of a couple-centric understanding of how decisions will be made. Contrasting Joann’s understanding of engagement with David’s, it becomes evident that they each have different understandings of what engagement and marriage will bring to their relationship. For David, relocating to where Joann was attending graduate school and moving in with her lead him to understand their relationship as one that would be committed for “the long haul”:

Erica: When did you consider yourself ‘engaged’?

David: I really considered us together, I mean after I moved in up here. That was a big step. I would certainly say that by the beginning of 2006 it was kinda like this is definitely ‘it’ for me, in a sense, definitely when we were living together. I remember being slightly hesitant at first to move in, but when I made that decision and I was up here, I was like, ‘yup, this is what I want. This is it.’, so to speak. …. I think that I might not have considered it ‘engaged’ by the word, maybe, but I definitely considered us a couple for the long, the long haul, so to speak… Committed, for sure. I mean we were obviously with each other for years before that. Definitely moving in
together, [it] was a big step to be living with somebody and I think that at that point I was really solidified in that thought. [Italics mine]

For David, the decision to move in with Joann provided him with an understanding that the relationship was going to be committed for the long term; their cohabitation was not out of convenience or that he did not know what he was doing, but stemmed from his desire to solidify their relationship by removing the physical distance between them. In addition, his move was coupled with not having gainful employment in the area; he moved to be with her and viewed this as a step that proved his commitment to her and their relationship for the long term. While he does not talk specifically about viewing couple-based decision making as a significant indicator of commitment like Joann does, it is clear that he views major decision making processes in the relationship, such as moving in together and deciding the timing is right for engagement, as mutually based decisions. This understanding appears consistent with the understanding of commitment that Joann sees as occurring with engagement. While planning marriage was not a part of their discussions at this point, from their interviews it appears that their transition to engagement was spurred by her desire for tangible proof of commitment and, as a result, his willingness to take that next step with her in the relationship.

For Promisemaker couples, the transition into engagement leads to a mutual understanding of where the couple is in terms of their commitments to the relationship. While Commitment men often feel committed to their partner for the long term, the ways that he might express this commitment (i.e., cohabitation, longevity of relationship, etc.) does not provide his partner with enough comfort in knowing that he is committed to her. Instead, she views engagement and marriage as clear symbols of his love and dedication to her.
Summary: Engagement Styles, Commitment, and Understandings of Marriage

This chapter provided an overview of the key findings from this study by providing an understanding of how couples understand and experience relationship progression to engagement. This provides early research into understandings of how couples experience and use engagement in contemporary American society and also provides further understandings of how relationship processes vary across couples. A key contribution this chapter makes is in integrating relationship processes literature with an understanding of how intimacy, family life, and courtship has changed at the turn of the 21st century. While many studies have examined relationship processes (e.g., Sassler 2004; Sassler and Miller n.d.; Surra and Hughes 1997) and ideologies influencing changing intimacies (e.g., Cherlin 2004; Giddens 1992), little research has merged these literatures together in a significant way. With this contribution in mind, I want to focus on a discussion of how these couple’s relationship and engagement practices contribute to a larger understanding of changing intimacies.

I believe these changes in intimacy can best be understood by revisiting the concept of a continuum of engagement experiences that I first mentioned near the start of the chapter. The concept of a continuum is well suited to help provide an understanding of how engagement practices and intimacies overlap and change across the three groups examined in this study. On one end, with the Neotraditional couples, we find a very traditional understanding of engagement practiced by the more socially conservative participants. This understanding, while definitely not outdated by any means, does rely on romantic understandings of courtship and marriage: marriage is a central component of how to enact adult life and finding a partner who shares this vision is important. For these couples, singlehood and casual dating does not appear to be desired: their goal is to find a marriage
partner and their experiences with courtship and intimacy in the relationship are shaped using this understanding. Commitment to marriage is built over their courtship and their engagement and wedding finalizes their arrangement. While these couples do not perform high levels of gender difference in their relationship practices on a day to day basis, they do believe in and practice very traditional understandings of engagement in doing their engagements and even wedding practices. Under this model, he is the one to plan and execute a proposal that is largely understood as a formal step within their relationship that should abide by highly differentiated gendered practices. These practices are carried out, I would argue, largely because it is how one “does” engagement; being traditionally minded, there is no need or even desire to recreate or deviate from the cultural standard.

Alternatively, the opposite experience is found with Nestbuilder couples. While these couples talk about engagement as a “next step” for their relationship after a prolonged courtship and cohabitation, one must wonder what the role that social pressures and the legal advantages attached to marriage in our society play in these couples choosing to get engaged, since these couples often discussed both of these issues during their interviews. The freedoms allowed in a post-dating culture to practice intimacy in a variety of ways obviously benefit these couples by allowing them to mutually build a relationship that progresses at a rate that is comfortable with them while not imposing social “rules” on them that may prevent them from progressing apart from becoming married (e.g., cohabitation). However, despite evidence and happiness in having a committed, long term, marriage-like nonmarital union, these couples still enact engagement.

The question that needs to be addressed is what function does engagement serve in how these couples experience their relationship? This will be addressed in Chapter 7, but I
argue that engagement on this end of the continuum is done largely as a result of compulsory social forces that dictate marriage as the correct, appropriate way in which to carry out long term relationships; marriage is the most championed partnered status that does not compare to any other status or situation one might experience. This is evident in the social pressure that many of these couples face (e.g., being constantly asked “when are you going to propose?”) but also in our public policy (e.g., funding for marriage promotion by the government).

Instead of choosing engagement because it is what one should do, these couples enact engagement because they choose to and they see engagement as providing a social context to their relationship: social recognition, legal protections, and status. In a society that values marriage in a way that the United States does today, it does not appear that Nestbuilder couples would have the power to be able to choose marriage or non-marriage as equally viable options for their relationship. As a result, the social pressure and expectation of engagement drives them to “take that step” even though it does not appear that it serves a function within their partnership other that, in some cases, allowing them a chance to have an intimate celebration of their partnership with their friends and family. The theme of feeling both pressure to marry coupled with being unable to clearly articulate specific reasons, apart from social/legal recognition of the relationship, seems like a key issue to examine further, since this social pressure is largely absent in other research examining relationship progression. Both of these groups provide evidence that the new normative relationship type is not a solo typology but that proper relationship practice is related to how couples understand commitment within their partnerships in addition to the expectations of their families and the culture of partnering they were socialized to believe.
While Neotraditional and Nestbuilder couples experience and value engagement in very different ways in terms of how it contributes to their partnership, they are still able to maintain mutual understandings of their relationship and, despite the different strategies in navigating towards engagement, both groups use some comprehension of commitment and relationships that has developed in the post-dating culture; they either engage a traditional standpoint or they enjoy the freedoms that the current intimacy culture allows couples to take. Between these two lie Promisemaker couples, who appear to have more difficulty in finding meaning and structure in the current dating culture; the lack of clear rules and norms that might assist them in negotiating commitment in their relationship is largely lost. As a result, they use engagement to signify commitment to their relationship because the normative value and meanings attached to marriage are largely unchanged (although we may not practice it as such): monogamy, commitment for the long term, settling down. With marriage seen as a sign of commitment to the relationship, engagement provides couples with a mutual way of knowing that they are in agreement about their relationship.

The lack of normative structure that Promisemaker couples find is interesting, since both Nestbuilder and Neotraditional groups have found ways to make their relationships “work” in a post-dating culture. These couples have very little concerns about their futures because they have the same ideologies about how they view their relationships. The mis-match that Promisemaker couples have appears to reinforce feelings of normlessness and uncertainty in the relationship; he views commitment as developing while she needs something more tangible in order to know where the relationship stands. For women, we again see the normative value of marriage working to shape interpretations of engagement and relationship progression; without it, she is uncertain of the future of the relationship.
While this understanding also involves knowledge of marriage as a social practice, the Promisemaker experience is different from Nestbuilder couples because engagement means commitment to them, whereas Nestbuilder couples do engagement because it is how one achieves social validity and continuity with their relationship progressions.
CHAPTER 6: PLANNING, ENACTING, AND EXPERIENCING ENGAGEMENT

In the previous chapter, I detailed the different ways that couples understood engagement and how it fits into the larger process of their commitment to each other. This chapter will expand on these different groups by focusing on how the process of becoming engaged—planning and enacting the proposal—is accomplished by the couples in each of these groups. In addition, this chapter will discuss the changes in the couples’ relationship—if any—that occur as a result in the change in status from “boyfriend-girlfriend” to “fiancé-fiancée.”

The ways couples experience their engagements in this study tie in well with previous literature that describes proposal planning and enactment as highly scripted and gendered (Schweingruber et al. 2004, Vannini 2004). However, I also found that while couples use proposal scripts and planning as noted in the literature, there is a more complex process involved in how couples construct, perform, and experience their engagements based on the understandings the couples have about the meaning of marriage, commitment, and engagement within their own relationship. In short, while many engagements appear similar on the outside, the differences in how couples understand and negotiate their relationships impacts engagement scripts and how they experienced life as an engaged couple.

This chapter will highlight the similarities and differences in how Neotraditionals, Promisemakers, and Nestbuilders enact their engagements and how their relationships are impacted by the change in status. In the first section, I will discuss how couples in each group negotiate, plan and enact their proposals, highlighting the gendered and relationship processes involved that allow the proposal to be valid within both the couples’ and society’s understandings of how proposals are to be accomplished. The second half of the chapter will
focus on how couples enact their engagements. This includes their reflections and reactions to their proposal, when they considered themselves to be engaged, reporting the engagements to others and the reactions they received. In addition, I will discuss how couples reported their relationship changing because of engagement and how they understood and enacted (or not) events associated with engagement, such as engagement parties, showers, and wedding planning.

**Creating the Perfect Proposal**

For all but three couples in the study, the proposal was a defining feature in how couples come to understand themselves as officially engaged. Across groups, the standard American proposal script (i.e., Schweingruber et al 2004; Vannini 2004) was used by couples to highlight the start of their engagements. However, while couples relied on this script, I found that each group described subtle variations to the planning and enactment of their proposal that helps to further define our understandings of the complexities of relationship transitions, including ones that are highly scripted. In this section, I will discuss how couples planned and enacted their proposals. For Neotraditional couples, gender difference and his planning a surprise proposal was a common theme. Promisemakers viewed their proposals as his promise to commit to her. Nestbuilder couples viewed their proposals as a fun way to celebrate the relationship that they had built together as they prepare for the next step of their relationship. Afterwards, I will highlight the commonalities and differences between groups that help build a better understanding of the process of becoming engaged.

**Neotraditional: Creating a surprise proposal**

Neotraditional couples negotiate their engagements together but rely on gendered scripts to enact their engagements. Their engagement planning is defined by three
characteristics. First, Neotraditional couples are the most likely to discuss timelines, such as how long they had been dating or how long they want to date before engagement. Second, during courtship and marriage negotiations the couples tend to focus on married life, shared goals, and what they want from their relationship instead of focusing on the timing of or enactment of the proposal. Finally, Neotraditional women are the most likely to step out of the proposal process and allow her partner to plan their engagement proposal, including desiring him to pick a ring for her and to take the lead in producing the engagement proposal.

For Neotraditionals, the focus of engagement planning was on determining the timing of the engagement within their relationship and focusing on their goals for the future of their relationship. Participants often discuss their relationship as consisting of mutually negotiated timeframes for the transitions they plan to take together. For many Neotraditionals, many discussed the how they planned to date for about a year before engagement to ensure that they were compatible for marriage. Aaron discusses how he and Katrina talked about the possibility of marriage early and his “one year” of dating requirement before engagement occurred:

As soon as school got over … we started actually talking about it… it was something we both really wanted to do. But I still held firm to that whole idea of a year. Plus, the money to buy rings wasn’t exactly there [Aaron laughs] … I didn’t really bring that up too much with her but I knew that if I was going to do it I’d have to start planning in advance how to, umm, finance and get a ring.

Theresa provides a little more detail on how she talked about engagement with her partner Kevin:

Theresa: [We started talking about engagement] around my birthday, so you’re looking at 8 or 9 months that we were together. We would talk about what we both wanted in a marriage and a family and it was just kind of the same thing.

Erica: Okay, what was it that you guys wanted?
Theresa: We both wanted kids, we both wanted careers, although now I say I’d rather be a stay at home mom but back then I was, like a year ago I was like I totally want a kid, a family and a career. And we talked about, we both really wanted it to be equal partners. We also both talked about wanting to not live together before marriage. And that’s not common in this day and age, not with the people I know. So we just sort of, our values and our ideas about marriage turned out to be the same.

For Neotraditional couples, pre-engagement conversations helped couples reconfirm the commitment to marriage that had been discussed earlier in the courtship and helped to prepare couples for the upcoming engagement. Kevin notes that these conversations helped make the transition from “dating” to “engaged” a reality: “we started to talk about it, it’s something that’s possible, it’s something we both would like to do.” The focus of these conversations tends to be much like Theresa’s quotation states: shared plans, shared values, and assertions that the couple is prepared to commit to marriage.

Once couples have a mutual understanding that engagement is desired, gender plays a key role in determining how the proposal is carried out. For Neotraditional couples, the woman desires that her partner takes control of the proposal and she passes control to him. Instead of mutually planning the proposal, as described by Schweingruber et al (2004), he will start to think about how he wants to propose to her and make the needed arrangements once their desire for engagement is mutually understood.

Tom: [Anika] didn’t want any, umm, she didn’t want any say [in how I proposed to her]. She didn’t want to know when it was going to be. She just wanted, basically, me to surprise her.

Erica: She told you that [she wanted to be surprised]?

Tom: Yeah, basically she wanted me to do it when it felt right to me, not just say, 'Hey honey, when do you want me to propose to you?' And have her give me a date… she wanted traditional, just have me go out and pick [the ring] out myself and when it felt right to me, then pop the question to her.

Like Tom, Aaron and Katrina had similar feelings about how the proposal should be planned:
Aaron: I knew I was going to do it and she knew I was going to do it and it wasn’t like I was popping a question that she didn’t know was coming. So we both were set that it was going to happen. And it was just kinda, basically, working out the logistics of it [i.e., asking her father, securing a ring, etc.]

Katrina’s interview supported what I learned from Aaron about their proposal plans:

Katrina: I knew that it was going to happen soon but I didn’t know it was going to happen that night.

Erica: Did you guys talk about how you wanted the proposal to be?

Katrina: No. I guess I didn’t care how it happened.

The woman’s desire to have him plan a special proposal for her after their negotiation of the reality of the proposal supports previous literature (Sassler and Miller n.d.; Schweingruber et al 2004) that shows that the true “surprise” proposal—that is one that she did not know was coming, is a rare event. For Neotraditional women, their role in the proposal appears to be, first, to support his decision to propose by confirming that she desires marriage and, second, to wait patiently for her surprise proposal. During the waiting period, she knows that he plans to propose and is simply waiting for the surprise to occur; women in this group did not “bug” or pressure their partner about the proposal since they desired the specialness that comes with it being “his” plan. Talks about engagement in this group were generally nonspecific, but there was an aspect of confirmation and teasing that was common among many couples.

Theresa explains how she and Kevin navigated their proposal planning:

We never really had a talk like ‘Yeah let’s get married’ until he proposed… It was just, starting in September, something would come up and he would say things. He would say a lot actually, umm, ‘[If] I ask you, you better say yes!’ He’s like, ‘I’d be crushed if you would say no’ and I’d be like, ‘Of course I would say yes!’ So he would throw it in in a joking manner… So he kind of figured out what he wanted to do around little hints of conversations that we would have here and here.
For Kevin, the talks he had with Theresa about their future desires (e.g., children, careers, lifestyle) helped confirm that they wanted the relationship to progress to marriage. For Theresa, her quote highlights the active role he took in their engagement: he proposed, he made comments about proposing to hint and/or gain support from her, he figured out what he wanted to do. As a result, her role is largely supportive—he is the one in charge of confirming the decision they made together though proposal planning and enactment.

The active/passive gender assignments taken on by Neotraditional couples in the engagement process are further highlighted in the couples’ enactments of their engagement proposals. Below are three proposal stories from Neotraditional couples. Each story highlights how Neotraditional men tend to plan romantic proposals that truly surprise their partners with their timing.

Aaron: We didn’t have anything to do for our anniversary…so I said, ‘alright, we’re going to go back to the bar we first made out at’. So we were going to go over there, we were going to have a nice easy night. We’ll go over there at 9 o’clock, there will be nobody in there, we’ll have either a glass of champagne or a Miller, cuz it’s the champagne of beers. And, so we went in there and I told…I had gotten my friends who were with us the year before that night to meet us there and there’s a back room so they didn’t know that—they didn’t know that they were there… I had [talked to her best friend who lived out of town] and she agreed to come back for the night. … I had gotten our drinks which is right near the phone booth [inside the bar], and I said, ‘Ok…just this time, we’ll kiss in the phone booth’ to make it, you know, sentimental. And so we went towards the phone booth and I went down on one knee and proposed to her and she [Erica: In the phone booth?] Yeah. She didn’t know what was happening. She kinda flipped out for a second. She thought I was joking because she couldn’t see—it was dark—and she couldn’t see that there was a ring in there. She thought I had gotten her an empty box. And then she started freaking out… we went into the other room and there were our friends.

In his proposal, Aaron used a romantic venue where the couple had first kissed as the scene of his proposal. Like Vannini’s (2004) shock proposal, Katrina did not anticipate his proposal in the phone booth and “flipped out” because she did not expect him to propose. Similarly,
when Kevin planned to propose to Theresa at the holiday light display, he incorporated his understanding that she wanted to have a holiday wedding in order to make his surprise proposal special. As Theresa recounts:

Theresa: It was freezing out, it was like the first really cold day in December and he wanted to go see the tree [displays downtown] and I wanted nothing to do with seeing this tree…I had had a long day at work and he kept bugging me to go, bugging me to go, common I wanna go. And I was like, do we have to go? And he just kept pushing me and I was like fine, if we’re going to go then we’re going to go let’s go see the lights in the park too because I’m not just driving to a tree, looking at it. I was like really bitchy! … And he was like, let’s go look at the [city holiday] tree and I looked at the tree for literally two seconds, I looked at it and I thought, oh, it’s pretty, and then I thought if I start walking to the car he’ll follow me and we can get back in the car…he actually had to take me by the hand and stop me from walking back to the car. And he said something like, ‘You want to get married around Christmas time, right?’ Cause I’d always said that I wanted a winter wedding. I guess he wasn’t expecting my answer because I said, ‘Well, no it doesn’t really have to be around Christmas’ and he just looked at me and I started walking back to the car and he grabbed my hand and turned me around and when I turned around he was on one knee, and he said that he loved me and that he always wanted to marry me and will I be his wife. And I didn’t say anything. I was like shocked because I didn’t know it was coming and, after, he actually had to repeat it and he was like, Theresa, will you marry me? And I said ‘Are you fucking joking?’ [Both laugh] Just like the world’s worst thing to say ever! And he said, no. And then he took the box out, he handed me the box and I opened up the ring and it was like slow motion in my head, I couldn’t believe I had said that. I opened up the box and I saw my ring and he was like Theresa! I was like, yes! Yes! I’m sorry, I will!! Like I, there was this long pause and I cursed and I swore and I actually put the ring on myself. I actually took it out of the box and I put it on my finger and then he stood up and he kissed me and we went back to the car and the first thing he did was call his mother and his mother said, well what did she say? And he said, well, she said, are you fucking joking?” I was like mortified, I was so embarrassed that that is what I said. And then from there we went out to dinner.

Theresa’s lack of “playing along” with Kevin’s planned proposal suggests that she was unaware that his desire to look at the trees was related to his proposal plans. Several Neotraditional women’s retellings of their engagement story noted how they felt bad for not realizing that his behaviors were linked to his desire to set his proposal plans into action. This contradicts in some ways Vannini’s (2004) climax proposal, in which romantic commodities
and other hints build up to the proposal, because Nestbuilder women who had climax-style proposals reported that they didn’t know he was trying to propose to account for their behavior, perhaps because the commodities attached to the proposal were specific to their relationship and not “romance” in general. Nate’s proposal to Tiffany shares this personalized use of commodities in order to make his proposal for her personal and special:

Tiffany: [We were hanging out at his house playing board games on Valentine’s Day and it was late and I was ready to go home.] I’m like, “ok I should go home plus it’s snowing. It’s going to take us forever to get home so let’s go.” And he’s like you didn't even watch this movie yet. And so I’m like I don't really feel like watching it and I’m tired and I’m just going to go to sleep if you put it in. .. He was like why don’t we put the movie in and if you don't like it we can take it out…. And I’m sitting on the couch and I’m thinking, I told you I didn't want to watch this movie. And then it starts playing and it’s not the movie but it’s the DVD that he made and it has like pictures of me and as soon as I saw the picture I was thinking, ‘oh my gosh that’s so sweet this is his Valentine’s day gift, I was so mean to him and he had a gift all along.’ So he’s like the DVD has pictures of me and him and pictures of us and I started like crying because I thought that making a slide show was so sweet and then it turns into a video and he’s like singing this Stevie Wonder song, ‘You are the Sunshine of my Life,’ it’s really cute, he’s in different places and he’s got different outfits on. And it’s really cute. I didn't even realize it was a proposal until the end when it says, I think it said, ‘you are the sunshine of my life. That’s why I ask you for your hand in marriage.’ Yeah that’s what it says. And then when I saw that I was like oh. Then I felt really bad. So yeah that was the proposal. And he gave me the ring. And he asked me to marry him and I’m like of course, yes yes yes.

For Neotraditional men, the goal of the proposal was to make it a special surprise; from their proposal stories, men did not necessarily spend a lot of money or over-plan their proposals. Instead, they included aspects sentimental to the couple (e.g., the bar they first kissed at, a holiday light displays) to construct a surprise proposal. The lack of traditionally romanticized commodities (Vannini 2004) found in Neotraditional proposals appeared to help men succeed in pulling off a surprise proposal; while Neotraditional women knew the proposal would be happening, the way men organized the proposal script for their enactment removed universally recognized hints that the proposal would be occurring. As such, the
proposal style most commonly used in the group falls between Vannini’s (2004) climax and shock proposals. Climax-like aspects to the proposals are evident in the care Neotraditional men put into make sure the proposal would be sentimental and romantic. However, it is clear that these aspects did not provide their partner with enough “hints” to what was to come and caught her off guard, creating a proposal of which the timing was a surprise. This is especially clear in the responses Katrina and Theresa gave when their partners officially proposed (e.g., swearing, thinking he was joking).

A second trend in the planning and enactment of Neotraditional proposals is in the negotiation of the engagement ring. Rings are common and important symbols of engagement across groups in this study and in the literature (i.e., Sassler and Miller n.d.; Schweingruber et al 2004; Vannini 2004). Within this group, couples often reported that ring selection was done, usually without help, by the man and that his selection of the perfect ring was symbolic of the love he had for her. In essence, Neotraditional couples frowned on having her overly involved in the ring selection process because it removed the romance from the ring; indeed, his proposal and the ring he presented her with were to be a special gift he gave to her as a romantic gesture. As such, Neotraditional women tended to talk about how much value they placed on having him pick out her ring.

Theresa: I didn’t want to know, I didn’t want to pick it out and be like ‘buy me that one! This is the one I want you to propose with!’ … I really am thrilled that I didn’t pick it out and I didn’t know when it was coming. … I think it just loses a little bit of that romance and that, to me, it’s supposed to be that a guy professes his love to you, asks you to marry, and that’s a symbol of what that guy feels for you and if I go and pick it out, like I feel like it takes some of that away and it doesn’t make it as romantic as it should be. [Italics mine]

Anika: Oh, I love it. [My ring] was perfect. (Erica: Perfect?) I mean, it meant more to me that he picked it out, that he actually put thought into it and went to different
places and looked at different things and that’s what meant the most to me. [Italics mine]

However, further investigation into ring selection suggests that the simplicity of “he picked it out” is much overstated. While men did select and purchase the ring, women had much more influence and say in this process than one would originally be lead to believe based on their statements about placing value on the fact that he picked a ring out for her. For many couples, there was a level of investigation by men into the rings their partner wanted and “hints” from women, either subtly or not, as to what kind of jewelry they wanted. Only one woman, Cora, appears to have received a ring that she did not provide hints or input on. For most couples, this secret “ring negotiation” occurred though discussions or examples of jewelry styles the women liked or did not like. Women would not “pick out” a specific ring that they wanted. Aaron talked about how Katrina helped him pick out her perfect ring by giving general descriptions of the materials she would like for a ring:

Aaron: I had started looking for rings. She had talked about what kind of …engagement ring she would like and she always says that I did a really nice job picking although she really helped by telling me exactly what she wanted, in layman’s terms.

Erica: So she would just be describing rings to you or would just be looking at rings at a store?

Aaron: We wouldn’t really go to a store and look. She just said she liked squares if was going to be diamonds—she likes square diamonds. She likes sapphires. So eventually, I got her one with a square diamond in the middle, two square sapphires on each side and a little diamonds set in the ring.

Kevin used a similar approach in uncovering Theresa’s jewelry preferences. In addition to family members about rings or ones that he pointed out while shopping to get ideas, Kevin used events like her birthday to purchase jewelry to see what she liked. He used her reactions to her gifts and the rings they talked about to develop an understanding of the kind of
engagement ring she wanted. My interviews with Kevin did not reveal the details about trying different jewelry styles out with Theresa. Instead, in my interview with her she reported that he told her after the engagement how he went about finding her the perfect ring:

Theresa: He bought me earrings for my birthday and he said that that was his trial run. They had the same little baguette on the side and he was like, I knew if you loved the earrings then you’d love a ring like that and if you hated the earrings then I wouldn’t get you something like that. He bought me a couple other pieces of jewelry, that same kind of thing, like well if she likes it I’m on the right path.

Erica: But you didn’t know that when he gave you those gifts?

Theresa: No, I found out after he gave me the [engagement] ring.

On the other hand, Kevin reports:

She wasn’t in on any of the ring at all. I knew what she liked, I knew the style of ring she liked and I went out and found it myself or I did the best I could to find what she liked based on what she had told me, what she had shown me. So I mean I’d seen rings, I guess, a guy’s radar is like, okay I guess I got to get serious there.

Both interviews discuss how they had talked about jewelry designs so that Kevin was able to have a sense of the engagement ring he would purchase for Theresa. However, these discussions are hardly transparent in their discussion of the ring selection process. Theresa provides more suggestion that she helped by providing opinions on different kinds of jewelry, both while out shopping and of that of family members, but frames her ring selection process as occurring though a “trial” featuring jewelry for other occasions. At the same time, Kevin notes that “she wasn’t in on any of the ring at all” while also admitting that he did “the best [he] could [with] what she had told me, what she had shown me.” While ring negotiation may appear to be a moot point in the larger production of the proposal, this kind of pattern was found only among Neotraditional couples; couples in other groups provided very clear statements concerning how the ring was selected (i.e., she provided advice and he
picked a ring for her or they went shopping together). The function of the Neotraditional ring selection stories seems to be to help couples maintain the original values they place in the ring while recognizing that she may have preferences for some styles of jewelry over others. By not being upfront about her involvement in ring selection and shaping the discourse around the romance and meaning of him selecting the ring, couples are able to maintain the romantic notions they hold sacred while ensuring that the ring selected will be treasured both because he picked it out for her and because she finds the style attractive.

*Promisemakers: Building a commitment to marriage*

Promisemaker couples’ discussions of engagement focus on solidifying a commitment to the longevity of their relationship. As discussed in the previous chapter, Promisemaker relationships use engagement as a way of solidifying their commitment to each other; for some couples, the commitment that develops with engagement is mutual and the engagement symbolizes a significant moment in their relationship. For other couples, the partners are not in agreement concerning engagement timing and feelings of commitment, generally with her “waiting” for his “commitment” via the proposal while he wants to feel “ready” to propose to her. In this section, I will flesh out the negotiation process Promisemakers take in transitioning into engagement. First, I will talk about how engagement is used to make a commitment to the partnership and the stresses many Promisemaker women experienced while “waiting” for him to prove, via the proposal, his commitment to her. I will then discuss their marriage proposals and ring selection processes.

As noted above, Promisemaker couples focus on the commitment that comes with the enacted proposal. For many couples, marriage discussions and proposal planning focuses on making a commitment to be together for the long term. As discussed in the previous chapter,
many couples faced periods of uncertainty in their relationship timing, due to employment or education, and engagement functioned to provide both members with a common understanding of their future together. Several Promisemakers noted this in their interviews:

Will: My whole thing is, if we get engaged and get married, like I’m not going to be living here and you’ll be living there. We’re going to get a house together, we’re going to have enough money to do this, we’re going to have enough money to have children, all of these things. It’s going to be all prepared, like I’m not going to go in there blindsided.

Samantha: The way he puts it that we needed to solidify our relationship. I was leaving, do we want to take the next step and, if so, now would be the best time. Joann: I would say probably last December…was when we started having serious conversations about, you know, when do we want to do this, I’m going to be graduating, do we want to do it right away, do we want to wait, that kind of thing.

Discussions and engagement planning fell mostly into these kinds of discussions; like Neotraditional couples, there was a lack of discussion about the specifics of how the proposal should be accomplished. Instead, couples focused on the issues impacting commitment in their relationship (i.e., school ending, an upcoming move) and used the changing status of their lives to instigate a commitment to stay together. The above couples’ negotiations focused mostly on planning to be together for the long term, which helped couples know that life-changing decisions one partner might make for the other, such as leaving a job to relocate to a new city to be with their partner, were made because there was a future to their commitment. Engagement provided the partnership with a promise that they were going to be together and allowed them to negotiate life events as a couple instead of as individuals. After these decisions were made, he was then left to propose to her.

A second complexity to Promisemakers’ engagement discussions focused on the other set of couples in this group; as mentioned in the previous chapter, several couples used engagement as a way of proving commitment to their partner. The difference between these
couples and the aforementioned ones is that these couples did not have a life course event occurring that pressed the issue of commitment. Instead, these couples had been dating awhile and became differentiated on their understanding of commitment within the relationship. Women in this group often felt stress over their partners’ lack of proposal; while they had talked about it and were in agreement that engagement was a plan for their future, these women stressed over what they assumed to be their male partner’s lack of commitment to them.

Nicole and Paul had been dating for a little over a year when they discussed engagement. He was in the military and facing deployment for several months and had told Nicole that he planned to propose when he returned. Paul became upset when Nicole pointed out rings that she liked as a way to help him when he was ready to purchase a ring and this led to a fight. As Nicole explains:

I was pretty taken aback [by his anger over my suggestion of some rings]. And I said, ‘Oh, I was just telling you about what kind of ring I wanted.’ And I said, ‘But, can I ask, why if you know you're going to ask me when you get back from your deployment, why can’t we get engaged before you go on the deployment because I’m the kind of person who likes to have something to plan [i.e., their wedding]. And that would be nice to do.’ And he said, ‘Because we’ll be together two years when I get back from the deployment.’ And I said, ‘I’m not one to say oh, we’ve been together three months, why aren’t we getting married?’ But, I said, ‘If you're going to ask me right when you get back from the deployment what possible difference does a year and a half to a little over two years even make?’ And so then we sort of, he said, ‘I feel pressured.’ And I said, ‘Fine’ and I dropped it.

For Nicole, the rationale behind Paul wanting to wait until he returned did not make sense to her in terms of the timeline of their commitment. She felt that if he planned to propose in six months, then he must be prepared and ready to propose to her now. Her justification of the proposal allowing her to “have something to do”—start planning their wedding—during his deployment added a second layer of rationale behind her wishes. However, while Paul was
comfortable with their commitment and with the prospect of engagement, he was not currently ready to propose to her. For him, her pointing out rings made him feel pressure to propose outside the timeframe he was comfortable with. Their argument resulted from mismatched understandings of the role and meaning of the proposal.

Another source of anxiety for Promisemaker women was the feeling that their courtship was being “dragged out” and that they would need to force ultimatums in order to get their partner to propose to them. This process was very stressful, especially for the women who viewed the proposal as a symbol of his commitment to her. Megan and Brett dated for over two years before his proposal but started talking about engagement and marriage much earlier in their relationship. Megan describes her feelings about waiting to be asked:

The engagement was not a surprise but it was this, when did we start talking about… We’d always been talking about it. All along we’ve been talking about well if we get married. It was always this if. This big if. If we get married. If we have children we’d do this. If we do that. … [He would be like,] ‘Okay, so it’s okay to go look at rings and go see what you like.’ Okay. And then [he would say], ‘Well maybe I’ll go see what it was that you liked.’ And then ‘Maybe I’ll go talk to them about how I would go about buying it if I wanted to.’ It was like this, oh my god. ‘Now I’ll go talk to them about what I need.’ Like oh my god would you just go get the thing already! [Italics mine]

Nicole also talked about the stress she experienced in her negotiation of her proposal from Paul.

Nicole: We really got into a fight… You don’t want to be made to feel like you’re giving someone an ultimatum. Like, ‘Marry me or I’m leaving you.’ Not that kind of, like ‘I’m fine not being married or I’m fine being married. Not a big deal. I can support myself.’ Yeah so, we got into a big fight about that. It blew over quickly once we realized we were kind of saying the same thing.

For Promisemaker women, “waiting” to be asked, especially for women who were unsure of their partner’s commitment or intentions, was very difficult. They viewed their partner’s
hesitation and lack of action towards proposing not as a process they needed to work through, as their partners thought, but as their partner playing games or wasting their time being in a relationship that may not transition into marriage.

The actual proposal for Promisemaker couples is recalled by participants as a sweet event. Their proposals tend to take one of two styles: they are simple and meaningful to the couple, much like a Neotraditional couple’s proposal. For these couples, favorite locations and symbols help construct the proposal as a meaningful event to confirm their decision to marry. For other Promisemaker couples, their proposals tend to be rather plain in comparison to the proposal script. While not necessarily under planned, these proposals focus on finding a “good moment” for him to ask her, usually without any flashy or elaborate items or speeches.

For couples who have a simple proposal, often the man planned the proposal around a location that was special for the couple or that reflected an aspect of their relationship.

Will: I didn’t do anything crazy, took her to a nice restaurant. She loves food so I took her to her favorite place she goes to eat. It wasn’t anything like, you have to, hey! Let’s get dressed up and go to dinner, it was just, let’s go to dinner… We ordered dinner and we ate and, you know, the usual stuff and things like that, and before the bill came, I was like hey, I have a question to ask you. And then I was like, hey, I know we’ve been talking a lot and, what else did I say? I don’t know. We’ve been talking about it a lot and I got this new job and I explained to her my whole new status, and stuff like that. She knew about it but then I was just reassuring her that this was going to happen, this and this and that, and I think it’s a pretty good time… I opened the box … I didn’t get on my knee or anything like that,… she was like, [gasps], I think she was very surprised, she didn’t expect it I guess. We always spoke about it but it came out of left field and she was like, she kind of cried a little bit and she was like, yes, yes I do. And then she put on the ring and that was it.

Samantha: So we drive out [to a nature spot we enjoy visiting] and park and it’s like a quarter mile, it’s not really a hike, just sort of like walk into the woods, up this cliff that’s overlooking this waterfall. And, I don’t know, he just turns to me and is like, I love you very much and I want you to be my wife. And he pulls out this box, … I said, what is that? I opened, I just sort of flipped out and pushed him off, was like ‘No
way!’ [Excited], you know, and it was just bizarre. We just sort of stood there, like ‘Are you serious? Like, you really want to marry me?’ and he’s like, ‘Yeah, let’s do it’ and I’m ‘yeah, alright.’

David: We had gone backpacking in the mountains. I proposed… at the top of, almost the top of the peak that we were climbing. It was special to me because, first date, was hiking. We met each other through [an outdoor sports club] so this was a good fit for us, our personalities.

There was a mix of responses for women as to the level of surprise they felt with their proposals. For some, such as Donna, the proposal was tucked into an activity that the couple enjoyed before that had a special meaning to them but that did not stick out as “abnormally special” in the larger picture of the activities they did together. For her, Will’s dinner reservations at her favorite four-star restaurant were not unusual because they enjoyed eating there a couple times each month. For men to incorporate locations and activities that the couple enjoyed together into his proposal plans, he was able to plan a proposal that surprised her with its timing.

The other style of proposal found in this group focuses on the man finding a “good moment” to propose to his partner. These moments were usually linked to other positive events in their relationship, such as having a fun day spending time together or going on a trip. These men are prepared with the ring and wait for the right time to present itself instead of constructing the right time. For example:

Heather: It was noon and we still weren’t packed [for our flight that day] yet and I was like, I’m horribly irrational when I’m under travel pressure it’s just the way I am, and I was running around the house “this isn’t done!” “That isn’t done!” … But anyways, I was running around and I was standing in front of the garbage can in the kitchen taking the labels off recycling because we had to put the garbage out before we left. I was just standing there, taking the labels of recycling and I’d been griping at him for not being packed or whatever and he just came in the kitchen and he was standing behind me and he was standing behind me and he frequently does this sort of thing so it didn’t really strike me as odd at the time. He’s standing behind me and he was like, “I have something for you.” I just turned around and was like, “what?!” [Laughs] and I saw, he had this
sparkle in his hand and then he realized I had saw it and he covered it up and I was like, “what’s going on?” [laughs] and then he was like, “umm…” I just remember that he started really awkward. He showed me the ring and he’s like, “umm… will you marry me?” you know? [laughs] like he totally said it awkward and afterward we talked about it because I was like you know you sounded really awkward when you said that and he’s like, “yeah, I felt really stupid, actually, saying the words but I figured I had to say them” and I’m like “that’s what you’re supposed to do!” [laughs] so that was the exciting proposal, which is actually kinda funny because, it’s like, how many people can say they got asked to marry them by their garbage can! [Laughs]

Eric: She’d been expecting [the proposal] for a while, so if I tried to do anything you know, special or anything, she would have already known. I don’t know, I’m not big on doing elaborate things like that… We were sitting, I mean, laying and talking [in bed] and I just asked her. It wasn’t anything special… (Erica: Did you give her a ring?) No, not at the time.

Brett: We just had a real good day together and just done a lot of things and had fun and really had a real nice day. And then at the end of the day, before bed, before we went to bed, it was just one of these real nice late summer nights. The stars were beautiful and she was just outside looking at the stars. So I figured well, this seems like a nice time so I asked her… everything seemed to kind of come together nicely.

In discussing their proposals, many of these men noted that they were not into planning elaborate events—that planning a “traditional” proposal would feel weird or fake for them. For them, proposing to their partners is the act that matters and contains value on its own; since they know she is waiting and desires being engaged, the process through which they become engaged is not scrutinized by their partner because she finally gets the proposal (and commitment) from him that she desired. Promisemaker women do not complain of the lack of grandeur involved; instead, they note that it was very much “his” kind of style and that they found it very meaningful. The impression is that any proposal is preferable to waiting longer.

Like with Promisemaker proposals, the process of selecting the engagement ring was discussed at length by many participants in this group. While a couple men went on their
own instincts to pick out their partners’ engagement ring, most couples in this group worked together to select the ring. Megan summarizes the general attitude of Promisemakers towards ring selection: “We decided I’m the one who has to wear it so I was going to go find the one I wanted.” For these couples, one of two processes occurred in picking rings. For some, they worked with their partner to figure out the kind of ring she wanted, either by looking at rings together or by talking about what aspects she desired for her ring. These conversations were very blatant, unlike Neotraditional ring discussions, and provided men with a basis to feel confident picking out a ring that she would enjoy. For Will, he went shopping on his own with some ideas in mind for the kind of ring Donna would like:

Will: I went to [a high-end jeweler]…and I was just like, can I see your engagement rings? … I had like a display of like 20 and then I narrowed it down to like ten, then five... [the jeweler] told me all that stuff, like you know, like it’s this type of cut with this type of clarity and this and this and that, I was just like, I don’t really care, I like the way this one looks so I decided to buy it.....

Erica: Did you know her preferences going in or did you just pick something you thought was nice, that you liked and thought she would like?

Will: She just likes to see a lot of diamonds, whatever has a lot of diamonds on it.

Similarly, David approached ring shopping by asking Joann for information on the kind of ring she wanted:

I know that she had said, she’s even said before that anything I would have picked would have been special. I still wanted to get her something that I knew that she wanted. If she had just specific image in her mind I wanted to try to come close to that. (Erica: Why?) I guess I just wanted to make sure that she got what she was picturing it would be, I guess. I wanted to make sure that she got what she liked. … I thought well, this is obviously a huge purchase that has a lot of meaning so I want to make sure that it has what she was interested in.

Alternatively, other men in this group rejected the notion that the ring was to be something he picked out and actively sought her involvement in picking out her ring. Often, this
concern was discussed as a desire not to mess up the proposal that she has been waiting for by picking out a ring she would not like:

Eric: I didn’t want to buy it on my own…and have it be something she didn’t like. I had never really even thought about doing it on my own. I had always anticipated having her pick it out.

Nicole: He said, ‘You're the one who has to wear it.’ He said, ‘It would be stupid for me to just go pick it out’.

Brett: I cheated on that [i.e., buying the ring] and Megan had actually gone and picked out a ring design she liked… I’ve never been particularly comfortable with giving jewelry for some reason and I really wanted to make sure it was something that she knew she was going to like. …So she went and picked out the design and stuff and then I went and picked out the diamond and paid, got the setting and everything and picked it up. I just wasn’t comfortable with the idea of picking that out myself.

As these quotations highlight, while men gave some control to their partners by allowing her to pick out her ring, these men did maintain many of the other norms associated with engagement rings. He paid for it and presented it to her at a later time when he proposed to her. For this group of men, it was important to them that their partner received a ring that she would like. For Promisemakers, the symbolism of the ring is intimately tied to the meanings it has for their relationship; since they view the proposal—and ring—as symbols of commitment and their love, these couples try to arrange this aspect of the engagement so that it satisfies them. The attention to finding the right ring is surprising, given the lack of formality present in the actual marriage proposals performed by most of the men in this group. This could be related to the desires the woman has for her engagement: to be engaged, which—in a larger social sense—means having a ring to display for others that not only confirms the reality of their engagement (e.g., Schweingruber et al 2004) but also proves to her that he is committed to her, both in terms of their relationship but also in terms of being
committed to making her happy by purchasing the ring she desires. Alternatively, based on the lack of formality of the proposals, it is possible that many of these men sought significant assistance in picking out the ring because they were unclear or unwilling to participate in a significant way to the standard proposal script that required him to take control of most aspects of their proposal.

*Nestbuilders: Celebrating their love*

For Nestbuilder couples, talks about engagement, if they even occur, develop after the couple has a mutual understanding of themselves as a long-term couple. As Joe noted in his interview, marriage is the “icing on the cake” of the commitment Nestbuilders have together. Engagement comes once it “feels” right to the couple, usually with the man initiating the transition. Nestbuilder women, unlike Promisemaker women, are flexible with the eventual timing of his proposal; none expressed concern over “waiting to be asked” or questioned their partner’s commitment to them. For these couples, engagement was simply another way of showing commitment and/or establishing legal connections; it was not a way of creating them.

Discussions of engagement and marriage develop over the course of the couple’s relationship, with several participants mentioning that they would talk about their future together while, at the same time, noting that these talks occurred before they knew they were ready for marriage. In a sense, these conversations implied the couple had a mutual understanding of the future of their relationship but planned to wait until they were “ready” to be engaged. Several mentioned these talks as “daydreams” or “joking around.”

Chris: [We would] joke about it but with some seriousness, you know like ‘where would you want to move? Would you want to stay here? Where would you want to
live? Do you want to have kids? Do you want to have horses? Let’s get horses!’ You know, like all that kind of romantic, like ‘let’s build this future together.’

Yvette: We started making kind of jokes because I was helping him out with some of the bills so I was like, well, I might as well just marry you so that way you’ll never have to pay me back and, um, we started talking, just like random talk about children, family, and things like that. How we would raise our kids, how we would, you know, do our financial stuff if we were to get married, stuff like that so. Just kind of like, little random things that started to get more and more serious…

Marie: I think there was still that mystery early on of where on earth are we gonna be? Because I was still in the midst of school, had no idea where I would be employed, so there was always that. I’d been looking at jobs, even in Alaska, things like that. So we did a lot of day dreaming, oh it would be nice to have this kind of house or I’d like to have land with my house because I want a dog and things like that. There was a lot of that day dreaming kind of thing.

The function of these early relationship talks appear on the surface to mimic the functions they have for Neotraditional and Promisemaker couples. They allow couples to safely “test” their goals against their partners and to develop an understanding of themselves as a couple with long-term plans. However, the nature of the talk differs from the other groups in this study. First, Nestbuilder couples’ discussions are more “floated” within a period when compared to Neotraditional couples, who have relationship projections that are much more ordered and streamlined towards marriage. Nestbuilder couples talk and plan about the future in a way that is less concrete; as several noted, they “daydreamed” about the future instead of planning it. In addition, their daydreams and marriage talk assumed that they would still be together in the unforeseen future. Many discussed the future in terms of “we” instead of framing it as a discussion of what each individual planned to do. In this way, Nestbuilders progress in their relationship with an understanding that they are a long-term couple, even if they are still building commitment within their relationship. Couples see marriage as a process they will experience in the future, once they are ready. This is very
different from Promisemakers, for whom these discussions were wrapped in uncertainty and confusion over the commitment the partnership had towards the longevity of the relationship, especially for women.

As the relationship progressed, Nestbuilder couples would start to transition into thinking about engagement and marriage. Most transitions in their relationship occur when both partners feel ready for them, with readiness being ill-defined by participants. My interviews with Rose and Joe, a couple who had dated throughout their undergraduate education and graduate school, demonstrate how Nestbuilder couples develop commitments outside of marriage and plan engagement when they are both “ready.” Note that with this couple, the gender dynamic is the reverse of most Nestbuilder couples, with the man being ready for marriage before the woman.

Joe: I’d say probably a year and a half or so into the relationship, I mean we totally knew that we were in love with each other and I told her she was the person I wanted to be with and she said the same to me. And I asked her, “What do you think about getting married?” And she said, “I’m definitely not ready.” She said “absolutely not,” she’s like “I may never want to get married” and I said that’s totally fine, if you ever want to let me know. And she laughed and I was like, “I’m serious! I’d marry you tomorrow or I’d live with you until I’m 80 and never get married and I really wouldn’t care. But if you ever want to get married, I want to marry you.”

Rose: It was probably literally four weeks ago we were going for a walk and I said, you know, I’m ready to get married. It would be okay, if you really wanted, I think I’m ready for that and one week later he proposed. It was literally to the day. My dad thought it was hysterical. He was like “He really wanted to really make sure you didn’t change your mind.”

As demonstrated by Rose and Joe’s interviews, marriage is not used by Nestbuilders as a way of signaling commitment to the relationship; couples form mutual understandings, through conversations or not, that they will be together for the long term. Engagement and marriage discussions develop once couples feel ready to make the transition, often noting practical
reasons [e.g., children, legal security] in addition to having a desire to have a wedding to celebrate their relationship, as a catalyst for deciding to marry. In negotiating this transition, couples experienced one of two transition patterns. For some couples, one partner was ready for marriage before the other, which created a lag while they waited for their partner to “feel ready” for engagement. For the second group, engagement timing was mutually understood and developed at similar times.

For couples who transitioned to being ready for engagement at different times, the partner who was ready first would wait for their partner to be prepared. These couples were the most likely of the Nestbuilders to discuss their desire for engagement or marriage. Often this was a gendered event, with women feeling ready before men.

Lisa: The entire time we would have conversations about the relationship, a little bit more after the fantasizing happened, because I started getting my hopes up, right, that this might actually happen. So I would get him down to sit down and talk to him and he would reaffirm to me that he was not ready. As much as he loved to think about [getting married] and fantasize about it, he doesn’t feel like he’s ready.

Jared: She wasn’t overbearing with it, she wasn’t like “when are you going to marry me?” “When are you going to marry me?” “When are you going to marry me?” It wasn’t like that bad, but she would start telling me details, hinting at it, oh, I’d like to have a fall wedding, the leaves are so pretty, she started hinting at it, which was nice.

[Erica: How did you feel about that? ... Were you on the same page as her?] No, definitely not. [What were you thinking?] I was thinking, give it a little more time, don’t rush into marriage.

For most couples, the woman was mentally ready for marriage before their partner; however, unlike Promisemaker women, Nestbuilder women did not view their partner’s lack of readiness as a sign of lack of commitment from their partner to the relationship. Instead, they discussed the differences and waited for their partner to be ready. For men, the social connotations associated with marriage (i.e., losing freedom, having a “ball and chain”) are much more negative than they are for women, who are socialized to desire marriage and view
it as a positive transition for their relationship. Men’s hesitation to marry, despite already enacting a marriage-like relationship, may result from the gendered understandings men and women bring into heterosexual relationships.

Although Nestbuilder men have no issues with commitment to their partner, the transition to engagement and marriage appears to weigh hard on them and they are unable to articulate reasons for this inconsistency. However, several of these men discussed how they reflected on their hesitation and realized the inconsistencies between their feelings of hesitation and the positive everyday experiences they had with their partner. For example, Ryan notes:

I was feeling a lot better about the relationship and our prospects going forward and [unclear] how well we work together and how we both tried and how we were both patient and how we were both understanding. I thought, this is where I want to be for the rest of my life. This is who I want to work with, this is who I want to grow with. We’ve developed such a strong base, there is no other direction to go other than marriage.

Once men realized that they were thinking about engagement in a way that was inconsistent with how they were experiencing their relationship, they were able to prepare mentally for engagement. As couples who conceptualize their relationships as a series of steps together, marriage becomes one of the final steps couples make once they have developed marriage-like understandings of their partnerships.

Alternatively, other Nestbuilder couples report much smoother transitions into engagement. Like the first group, engagement comes when the couple feels that they are ready to make the transition together. However, unlike the first group, the way this transition develops is very subtle and evolves as a quiet agreement that is understood but not specifically discussed. Tamera and Sonya note:
Tamera: [The topic of marriage] came up like joking, but [early in the relationship] it was clear that neither of us was ready for it and neither of us was ready to even talk about it. Once we moved in, we didn’t really talk about it for quite a while, um, until our friends started to get engaged and we started to go to weddings… eventually, you know, we didn’t really outright talk about it but we knew, just kind of knew that we were going to get married.

Sonya: I think it was more just another understanding, that that is how our relationship was going. …I think it was just an understanding because I would start to make comments too, once he said stuff, and I would be like, yeah, when we get married. So we didn’t really have a sit down talk, like we’re gonna go and look at rings together, it was just kind of, more of an understanding.

Here, the transition towards being ready for engagement develops as an understanding the couple develops over the course of their courtship. This agreement is not present early in the relationship, as it is with Neotraditional couples, but develops midway through, as the couple builds their commitment to each other. As time passes, commitment continues to develop until it becomes clear to the couple that marriage is the next step for their relationship.

Although these couples do not report having “marriage discussions” like the first group, their understanding that marriage is in their future develops from very subtle interactions in their relationship, such as comments about desires for their own wedding. For one couple, Sean and Victoria, the subtlety of this discourse lead to Victoria being surprised by Sean’s proposal. As I will discuss in the next section, Nestbuilder couples tend to have surprise proposals, where the women know that they will be proposed to at a point that is not well defined. For Victoria, the prospect of a proposal was not clear in her mind until Sean proposed:

Victoria: I knew that he was much more ready for [marriage] than I was but I really thought that we would talk about it first. It’s just my style is much more of, we would talk about it, ease our way into it, maybe look at rings sometime or something like that and there was absolutely none of that. And I mean, we were ready for it, obviously, I said yes, I asked a few questions though first. We had been on family vacations, we’re part of each other’s family, we’re there, we just hadn’t talked about
it and that’s why it was such a huge surprise to me. Several people in my family and friends said, “Oh I knew this was coming!” or “I was waiting for this to happen!” or “I knew that’s what it was!” and I was like, “I did not!” [Laughs]

In her interview, Victoria highlighted her surprise at Sean’s proposal but then justifies her acceptance by highlighting how the couple had progressed to being ready for marriage, despite their relationship “jumping into” engagement instead of “easing” into it, through discussions, planning, and ring shopping, like she had imagined the progression occurring. Because these conversations did not explicitly happen, she didn’t view engagement as being an upcoming transition even though the partnership was ready for it. In his interview, Sean discussed feeling a little worried about his proposal; he knew that Victoria was unsure if she wanted marriage since her previous long-term relationship was negotiated as nonmarital and she remained unsure of the topic due to this experience. However, Sean highlights his understanding of their relationship in his interview:

Sean: You had asked if we had talked about being engaged, being married. No, we had not explicitly. There were instances where she had said things along the way that made me think that she wanted to [marry me]. We went [on vacation] in March, … we were sitting on the roof of a bar, we were with only one other couple, who was an older couple, about 60 or 70, 50, I don't know how old they were, were sitting over there and she said, “I hope that we’re like that someday” she said to me. So no, that’s not talking about all the issues that come up with engagement and marriage but it was an expression of that so those kinds of signals that I had gotten along the way assured me [that we both wanted marriage].

Although they had not discussed marriage, Sean asserted that he felt they were ready to transition though the marriage-positive interactions he had had with Victoria, such as her comment during their trip that he noted above. For Victoria, even though the couple did not engage in specific marriage talk, her reaction to the proposal (i.e., true surprise) and acceptance demonstrate Nestbuilder’s ability to negotiate marriage in subtle ways.
Yvette reports a similar pattern for her proposal. She had had some vague marriage talk with Jerry and they had a mutual understanding that engagement would occur at some point. However, engagement timing was not discussed:

Yvette: We didn’t have anything specific set out. I know he was probably getting close to asking me just because we had a feel, you know, you kind of have, just that, I just kind of knew! [Laughs] There wasn’t anything that was said. … There wasn’t really anything that stands out though that made it, nothing really stands out. … I didn’t really know for sure. He surprised me when he did propose… it was just little things that I kind of had a feeling that it would be coming pretty soon but I didn’t really know when.

The mutual understanding Nestbuilder couples have about their relationship progression often leads to a surprise proposal. Nestbuilder women often understand engagement as a transition the couple will make once he prepares and enacts the proposal but they generally do not wait for the proposal to happen; they continue with the everyday events of the relationship and figure that the proposal will happen when it happens. In this way, the proposal is often framed by Nestbuilders as something special he can do for her that symbolically highlights the partnership taking the next step towards marriage.

The proposal was a way for the couple to formalize the mutual understanding they had towards the future of their relationship. As noted above, the catalyst for the proposal was the man’s planning and performance of it once the timing was “right” within their relationship. Although Nestbuilders already framed their partnership as long term, the proposal did provide a special confirmation of this agreement. For Frank and Kim, their engagement was highlighted by a promise they made to each other:

Frank: [We] looked at [our discussion] as a promise, a commitment. [I told her], “at this point, I feel like I can commit the rest of my life to you” and she said,” I feel that way too.” That was like, our engagement. And when friends would ask her, are you engaged? We are. Well where is the ring? Well, we just didn’t think that was necessary.
While their method of becoming engaged was not used by any other couple in the study (they were the only couple not to perform, in one way or another, the “standard” proposal script), their engagement discussion does highlight the function the proposal has for Nestbuilder couples, who already understand their relationships as long term: it provides a way to celebrate both the history and future of their relationship and to confirm, especially for others, that the next step for the couple is marriage. Because of the meaning behind the proposal for these couples, they tend to have proposals similar to Neotraditionals. However, men in this group appear to be much more concerned with providing their partner with a special proposal and discuss planning the proposal to ensure that they would have a romantic time. As Chris noted in his interview, “you're trying like create this sort of experience, you’d like it to be a romantic experience that you can remember.”

Nestbuilder men planned proposals using one of two schemes. For the first group, men planned proposals that allowed the couple to be alone, often in nature or a romantic setting, where he could ask her and present her with a ring. The second group used traditions or events that were sentimental to the couples’ history when planning when and where they wanted to propose. For both groups, men tended to place great consideration into how they would propose and focused on making sure that the proposal would provide their partner with an experience that she would enjoy.

Men planning romantic proposals often used trip or vacation locations for the location of the proposal. The following three proposal stories highlight Nestbuilder men’s use of alone time in a romantic location as the first type of Nestbuilder proposals.

Chris: [We went] to the nature trail there, the hiking trail and we sat down on this bench. And the [lake] was maybe about 20 feet away and it started lapping up and it was moving out. And stars and it was really romantic it was really nice. And I asked
her previously that week Venus was really close to the moon it was very low in the sky you could actually see it. It was [a] huge bright star. I asked her if she had remembered looking at Venus and if she thought it looked like anything. And she said ‘well it was really sparkly’. And I said, ‘I thought it looked like a diamond’ and she was like, ‘yeah I guess.’ She didn't get what I was driving at, I was trying to lead in that way but she didn't get that. So then I said, ‘alright, well I guess I'll have to do it like this.’ And I stood up I pulled the ring out of my pocket and I got on my knee. And I asked her to marry me and it was a completely surreal experience. I was sort of out of body watching myself do it. It was really weird. And she said, ‘Yes yes yes yes!’ and she said, “I can’t believe this is happening!” So she was totally thrown off. Then we kissed and we stood up and we hugged and we jumped around a little bit and then we’re like, ‘I can’t believe it.’

Dan: [While visiting her family on the coast] we went to the beach and I was so nervous. I mean like my heartbeat was beating and I didn't know how to do it [i.e., propose to her]. It was like oh, I was so nervous because I had never done anything like that before and I knew how big of a deal. I guess I felt like it was a big deal and I knew how happy it would make her. I was excited and nervous, everything, all rolled into one. And I guess I actually walked with her, ‘oh let’s go all the way down the beach,’ you know like far away from people because I’m so shy…I’m just embarrassed, you know, like if there were people around and I had gone down on one knee and all that. So I actually walked out to the part of the beach that wasn’t all that populated. And then I said, we were talking and talking and I was probably acting a little strange, I think she noticed and then I said, ‘oh I got you something from where we were today.’ … She said, ‘oh, oh.’ I don't remember exactly. But I pulled it out and [the ring] was wrapped and I think she knew then and then she opened it and there was a ring. And then I got down on one knee, like I should have.

Sonya: We were in Paris when it happened. He, I am so not into romantic anything, really I am not, but you know, it was definitely one of those moments in my life where I was like, okay, I am a girl, I guess this is kind of romantic! But we, he, Carl’s kind of funny. He wants everything to be perfect so he’s kind of, worries until it is and I almost got the sense that it was happening because he, we were supposed to go out to dinner on a Friday night and he couldn’t get reservations at a place that he wanted so I could tell he was really worried about something so we ended up going the following night. So we went, it was gorgeous, beautiful view of the Eiffel tower. We went up the Eiffel tower, just check out the view. It was amazing. Then we left and he kind of just, I don’t know if you’ve been to Paris, but there is that big, famous river that runs pretty much underneath it (underneath the Eiffel tower?) yeah, well, maybe not underneath but beside it, yeah, and so he was like, oh hey, let’s check that out and we did and then he just did it right there. So it was pretty cool because, the Eiffel tower was right there, it was definitely a moment I won’t forget.
The first group of proposals relies on a romantic setting in order to create memorable proposal. Based on Vannini (2004), one would expect to see more romanticized commodities integrated into proposals; for these, the only romanticized commodity appears to be the ring. Locations may be considered to be like romanticized commodities; however, none of these locations were purchased (as compared to, for example, a proposal during a hot air balloon ride). These proposals were loosely planned to include the bare necessities men saw as requirements for a memorable proposal: a setting that is special and apart from the everyday and presentation of the ring. This arrangement reflects how Nestbuilder men see the proposal as an event to confirm their agreement; this agreement is what makes it special. Having additional bonuses, such as a nice location, provides a proposal story that is more acceptable compared to other stories, such as proposing at home.

The second group of men is similar to the first in that they plan proposals that are sentimental to the couple. However, men planning these proposals also tend to incorporate others, such as her parents, into their plans because they know it would mean a lot for her to be able to share the news with them right away. In addition, the romantic locations and times that he incorporates into the proposal tend to be less generically romantic and more linked with traditions or special times the couple shares. For example, when Jared set to planning his proposal for Marie he planned to ask her on her birthday by wrapping her ring in a series of gift boxes that nested inside each other. The couple traveled to her parents’ home, where they planned to spend her birthday celebrating with her family and her best friend. Marie notes that she is “horrible with gifts” and that she tended to poke around and ask questions to guess her gift. She was unaware that Jared had planned to present her with an engagement ring for her birthday and she ended up guessing that it was a ring and Jared did not deny it.
She dropped the topic, feeling bad that she ruined the surprise, and tried to continue to enjoy her birthday knowing that he would be proposing that day:

Marie: My parents took us out to dinner and he carried [my present] right into the restaurant. And, but it was not a good atmosphere, there was like children screaming in the background, it was really crowded and then he carries the gift out of the restaurant and so, and then we get home and we’re about ready to leave and so, the gifts sitting there, right on the table, and so…finally, he’s like do you want your gift now? So we’re in my parent’s kitchen and, uh, so I said okay and I started unwrapping it. And I open up the big box and there’s a little box. And I open the little box and there’s a little box. There are probably five or six boxes, each getting littler and littler and so, umm, and I finally get to the small one and it’s this little obvious jewelry box and open it up and he gets down on one knee and, umm, [he asked me] ‘will you marry me?’ And of course I’m crying, say yes, he puts the ring on my finger and so, and the whole time my friend and my mother, my mother’s taking pictures and she’s getting some really great angles and it’s going to be great and I find out later she never put film in the camera! [Marie laughs] … He proposed to me in the same exact spot in the same kitchen where my dad proposed to my mom 28, 29 years ago so he really, I think he really made major bonus points with my parents because they thought that it was very sweet that it happened in the same spot.

Like Jared, Ryan and Yvette’s partner, Jerry, also developed a proposal plan that incorporated traditions that were intimate to the couple.

Ryan: One of the times I enjoy the most is when we just goof around. Like we goof around, tickle each other, wrestle, act goofy and that’s always just a great time for me, for her, for us. We really enjoy it. It’s just fun and carefree. And I kind of thought [the proposal] would come out of that moment. So we were just having a moment like that, on a Sunday night, umm, doing all that stuff and just like, alright, this is the time. So I reached into my drawer, pulled [the ring] out, sat on the bed. She was sitting on the bed Indian style. I sat on the bed Indian style, facing her. That’s how I wanted to do it—eye to eye, face to face. Like, we’re on level ground, this is how we’re starting together. We’re starting on the same page. That’s the symbolism behind it. To be eye-to-eye, face to face, which is what I was looking for. I didn’t want to do the one knee thing or anything spectacular. What did I say? I opened the box and I said, I’d like to, or I want to spend the rest of my life with you and I want to know if you want the same. Something to that effect, I don’t remember the exact words. She said, well, she nodded her head. I wanted her to say yes. I didn’t want a head nod. [Both laugh] I’m like, ‘yes?’ She’s like ‘yes.’

Yvette: He had been bugging me and I didn’t realize about it until after, of course, but he had been bugging me about wanting to go see the Christmas lights and I was like, you know, I’d love to do that. We go and do that every year and he really wanted to
find somewhere where we could do like a carriage ride, because he thought that would be really cool to do and I was like, that would be cool but I don’t think we’re going to find anything, cause he really wanted to do Christmas eve and I don’t know why I didn’t put two and two together [both laugh] but I didn’t. And we ended up going out [to a holiday light display] with my family, my mom, dad, and my grandma. And we were walking, we had just gotten there, and he stopped to go to the bathroom so I had to wait for him and we finally start walking, we’d been there for maybe five minutes, and he’s like, let’s go sit down and I was like, I don’t want to sit down! We just, I was just waiting for you, I want to go walk around and see everything! And he’s like, no let’s just go sit down and I said, okay, fine we’ll sit. [laughs] So we sit down on this bench and he kind of kneels down in front of me and I finally, it starts to click [both laugh] and he tells me, you know, you know I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you and then he pulled out the ring and said, will you marry me? And I’m crying and, you know, I never actually said yes, I just started nodding and crying and, um, he pulled out the ring and put it on my finger and everyone was walking by us. My parents had wandered off ahead and my mom was pretty upset because she didn’t get to take pictures [both laugh] they didn’t know he was going to do it that night.

For Ryan and Tamara, a proposal during a “goofing” around session allowed Ryan to integrate something special to the couple into creating a romantic proposal. Jerry was able to make his proposal to Yvette memorable by timing it both while her parents were with them and during a holiday tradition that they participated in every year. Like the first group, the purpose of the proposal is to provide her with a memorable moment where they confirm their relationship and have a story to share with others.

For Nestbuilder men, planning the perfect proposal did not require romantic commodities as much as it required finding a location that provided the couple with a good setting for enacting their proposal. The agreement that comes from the proposal, that the couple will start the steps required to marry, on its own appears to be the highlight of the proposal instead of commodities, location, or other things that may be used to construct a good proposal. As Chris noted above, “it’s a moment that isn’t just a moment because you’re doing something that affects the rest of your life.” Although Nestbuilder couples use
romantic phrasing in retelling their proposals, which may suggest that the proposal was a
definite turning point for their partnership in terms of commitment, knowledge about
Nestbuilder relationship progression suggests that these “proposal stories” allow couples to
fit into dominant proposal discourses. Because they already have formed a long term
commitment to their partner that may not be fully understood by others, the proposal
provides them with evidence and a story to allow their more postmodern courtship style to fit
within more traditional American courtship narratives.

Rings for Nestbuilder couples were generally seen not as an important symbol; rather,
couples took a much more relaxed understanding of viewing the ring as a gift. In many ways,
it appears that rings were purchased for the proposal because it is normative and helps
provide validation for the proposal. Due to this, couples took one of two approaches to
securing her engagement ring. For several couples, they would openly talk about the style of
ring she wanted and would shop together. For the second group, the man would select a ring
with minimal assistance from his partner, often asking friends and family to help or by using
an heirloom ring.

Ring selection in the first group was generally initiated by the man. Once the couple
was ready for engagement, he would start looking at rings and ask her to join him. Joe and
Tamera explain how they decided on rings with their partners:

Joe: I asked her “I don’t mean to sound unromantic, but would you like to look at rings with me?” and she said “yes” and it didn’t bother her to do that, she wasn’t looking for me to surprise her with a ring that she knew nothing about. So we went and we looked together … and we ended up finding a ring that she liked…But I didn’t want to, certainly I didn’t want to talk about price with Rose sitting there. While I didn’t want to be, you know, I didn’t want to be completely unromantic I also didn’t want to, I don’t know, it didn’t seem as fun to buy it with her actually looking at it as they put it in the box and then hand her the box. That didn’t seem fun either so I went back the next day … [I told the jeweler] “I want white gold, I want a single
stone, I want pave setting, what do you have?” and they brought out 3, 4 rings and I found one, and I was like, “That’s the one.” It wasn’t one she had looked at, it was in the back, they hadn’t even had it out [the day before]. I said that’s the one I know she’ll like…

Tamera: And eventually, he started to say that he had been looking at rings and he’d like me to come with him and look at rings to be sure he picked something I liked, it just kind of progressed like that. … We went shopping on a Thursday night and it was the last day of November. I remember going shopping on a Thursday night and I pointed out three different styles that I liked and he was like, okay, and then I didn’t hear anything. We didn’t really talk about it much the next day. But it turns out that he went back that Friday night and bought the ring and then he proposed that Sunday.

For couples, the role of shopping together was to help him get an idea of the kinds of rings styles she liked, not for her to pick out her ring. Nestbuilder women enjoyed the surprise element of receiving a ring as a gift and generally did not lay down specific details concerning how they wanted the engagement ring to look. After spending time looking at rings, he would go back on his own to make the final selection and to purchase the ring. After receiving the ring, men would propose to their partner.

Alternatively, men would purchase a ring on their own or would use a family ring. These men noted studying the kinds of jewelry she liked and figured that, if they did not pick the “right” ring, that changing it would not be a big issue because they did not see the ring as a symbol; instead, it was like any other gift he may give her. Sean explains this process in his interview:

Sean: It was a, how did I pick the design of the ring? I went online and went through different bands that I was interested in and found one that I liked online. Chose platinum because that’s what the hip thing to do is, get platinum now instead of gold. … I explained to him the characteristics of ring, the diamond that I was looking for, I gave him a price range…. He came back with three, we compared them. I ultimately chose this one.

Erica: Did you get, have any idea or think about what Victoria might like or want in a ring?
Sean: She has, yeah, she has lots of jewelry that I’d looked at. That is why I was okay with the platinum, because most of the things she has is silver. She doesn’t have a lot of gold jewelry. She wears rings frequently, umm, that’s how I was okay with platinum… Ultimately, I really didn’t care if she didn’t, okay, I cared if she didn’t like the ring, I didn’t care if she wanted to change it, that was completely up to her. And I even told her that, I said “hey”. I mean, we wouldn’t have changed the diamond at that point but, because that’s a little more difficult to do, I wouldn’t have been offended, that would have been perfectly fine to do, to change the diamond if she wanted something different or a setting that was fitted different so ultimately if she wanted something different that would be fine. (Okay) so I wasn’t, I was concerned but I wasn’t that concerned because I was completely flexible.

As Sean highlights, the ring is understood similarly to any other gift he may give Victoria. This understanding of the ring appeared common across couples. For most women, as long as the ring he selected matches her general tastes in jewelry (e.g., metal colors or how flashy it is), she was very happy with the ring he selected for her. For Yvette, selection of her ring came after she teased Jerry for claiming that he knew what kind of engagement ring she would like:

Yvette: I caught him looking at rings and he knew kind of what I liked because he had talked about that too and what I had always imagined and he made a comment once about how he thought he know what I liked so I said, tell me, and I’ll tell you if you’re right! [Laughs] And so yeah, he did a good job [selecting my ring]. And like I said, one of my closer friends, he let her know and she went with him to go look at the rings and helped him when he was picking on out but he said he knew as soon as he walked into the store that he knew what one he wanted …

The other way men secured rings was by using a predetermined ring, such as a family heirloom or a class ring that was already created. While only a few Nestbuilder men used preselected rings in their engagements, their understanding of the ring is different from other Nestbuilders. Women told me they loved their rings; the meaning behind the ring was what made it special for them. As Marie and Sonya note below, receiving a family ring from their future family-in-law allowed them to feel closer to being a welcomed member into their partner’s family.
Marie: We’d discussed wanting a family ring, a family heirloom ring type thing. There were a number in his family and very awkwardly, he and his mom, at her house, they pretty much laid out on the table five rings and said, what one do you like best? And it was really, really creepy and um, awkward. How do you choose? They are all very pretty and I ended up choosing this one and it was actually the ring his father gave his mother. [Although his parents had divorced, he told her that without that ring, he wouldn’t have been born].

Sonya: My ring to me has more of a special meaning to me I think. He, well, I found this out later but he picked the ring out with his mom and his sister, which I thought was pretty special… [After he proposed] we got back to the hotel and he said, I have something to tell you. I said, okay what? He said, your ring, the center stone, the stone right here, that came from my mom. I said, what do you mean? Because Carl’s father passed away when he was 19 so I never had a chance to meet him. And again, his parents were divorced when his dad passed away but his mom had the wedding ring and he said that his mom wanted Carl to have the diamond to give to me and so that made my cry. And then he was like, wait, why are you crying now? You weren’t crying earlier [when I proposed to you]? And I just had this overwhelming feeling of, it just meant a lot to me. I’m just very excited, his family is great, they are wonderful, I’m very excited to be a part of his family and it just really meant a lot. Like she wanted me to have this and it was almost like a token of welcoming me into the family...

In addition to family rings, one man, Frank, found a different kind of engagement ring that allowed him and his partner Kim to exchange a ring that has meaning. After their discussion where they committed to each other and agreed to marry (their engagement), Kim asked for a ring to show her friends. Frank wanted to make sure the ring he gave her meant something larger than simply engagement. As he explains:

Frank: People thought that [Kim and I being engaged but without a ring] was mighty strange because, that is the least important of this whole endeavor! The very least important! It just, it’s just a symbol. The engagement ring is a symbol and I thought, if you’re going to get something from me let it be what’s important, means a lot to me. I just don’t give any Tom, Dick, or Harry a [class] ring because my parents struggled, saved, were far from wealthy and [my college]… is very expensive and that meant a lot to me. Family meaning, you know, all kind of meaning. So it is a very big deal. And [a class ring is] not cheap! So it wasn’t like I gave her a cigar band… [So our friends will ask,] “Well, what kind of ring did you get her?” And it’s like, school ring [Frank and Erica laugh] and it’s like, I found it interesting that they’re like, it was, oh, is this the right partner that you’re going to spend the rest of your life with? No, it was something more important, like school ring? I was like, that’s the
least important part of this! It is just interesting how everyone focused on the ring. You’re engaged, where is the engagement ring. Well, I already had my [college] ring, so I said, when you see her next, she’ll show you her [college] ring that I got her. That’s her engagement ring? Yup.

Frank highlights the importance of the right ring in providing legitimacy for the proposal, which provides others with a context for understanding the engagement as “real” (Schweingruber et al 2004). In their discussions about becoming engaged, Frank and Kim noted that they did not want to participate in having their engagement follow scripts that did not allow for gender equality in the process. To Frank, following the traditional proposal script, in which he would ask Kim for her hand in marriage and present her with a ring, was full of symbolism that he did not want to bring into their relationship. The compromise that they found—that she would receive a ring from his beloved college—provided them both with a sense of fulfillment because they were able to incorporate his family tradition into their engagement and it allowed them to redefine how engagement should be enacted that allowed for equality in their partnership.

For Nestbuilder couples, engagement timing develops out of the natural progression of their relationship and occurs once the couple is committed to each other and the idea of engagement. Some couples experience a lag between feeling ready for engagement, often with the woman feeling ready before her partner. For other couples, engagement is not specifically discussed but occurs as a suspected surprise proposal that the woman receives. In both cases, men are in charge of performing the engagement proposal. The lack of discussion over how the proposal will occur suggests two things. First, it highlights the normativity of the man proposing marriage to the woman, despite their common understanding that they will become engaged. It also suggests that engagement provides couples with a legitimating
of their relationship that can confirm to others that they are a “serious” couple, such as the validation several women found in receiving rings from his family. Although many Nestbuilder couples have deep relationships that spanned several years, own homes together, and consider themselves parts of each others’ families, the function of the proposal for Nestbuilders appears to be mostly to having an opportunity to celebrate their relationship and mark the next step rather than having proposals that provided context and understanding to their relationship.

Summary

In creating the perfect proposal, couples in this study incorporated their understandings of engagement, commitment, and tradition into how they planned and enacted their proposals. Across groups, the proposal provided couples with a moment to celebrate the start of their official engagement, a transition that had different meanings to couples based on their broader relationship history. In addition, most proposals were structured around the current proposal script (Schweingruber et al 2004) and few couples deviated greatly from this model in enacting their proposal. However, the specific meanings attached to this script varied across groups. For Neotraditional couples, the proposal signified the start of their official engagement and featured a special proposal planned by him along with the presentation of a ring that he gifts to her as a symbol of their love. For Promisemakers, the main function of the proposal was to solidify the couple’s commitment; as a result, these proposals were less traditionally structured compared to Neotraditional proposals. Nestbuilders’ engagements celebrated the relationship they had and focused on celebrating the moment, placing less emphasis on rings or how the proposal was designed. This suggests that while couples in this study relied on traditional scripts in designing and
enacting their engagements, the meanings behind the production of the proposal varied significantly across groups.

**Being Engaged: Reflections on the Proposal and Transitioning to Engaged Life**

In the first half of this chapter, I detailed the process of making a commitment to engagement and how most couples enacted this commitment through a proposal. Findings suggest that the relationship processes leading up to engagement vary across groups, both in how couples use engagement in their relationship process and what it means to them to be engaged. Furthermore, the proposal planning and enactment stories suggest that, despite being a highly scripted event, that the ways couples negotiate and experience their proposals is fairly complex. Instead of sharing a common experience, couples in each group negotiate, plan, and enact their engagements in ways that are reflective of how they understand engagement within their relationship. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I will highlight findings on how couples experience engaged life, with focus on their reactions to their engagements, the process of “coming out” as engaged to friends and family, and how becoming engaged changed—or not—the rhythms of couples’ relationships.

Generally speaking, individuals across groups identify the proposal as the start of their engagement, announce their engagements, and identify as “engaged” after the proposal. This generalization is consistent with Schweingruber et al (2004) but, based on my interviews, appears to be an oversimplification of how many couples understood their relationship with their engagements. I found that many couples identify both an official and unofficial engagement within their transition and that their understanding of when they were engaged varies by group and, in many cases, gender. However, unlike earlier sections, individuals noted “feeling engaged” in ways that overlapped somewhat for couples, with
Neotraditional and Nestbuilder couples having the most consistent experiences and Promisemaker couples reporting experiences similar to either Neotraditional or Nestbuilder couples. These differences highlight the continuum nature of the groups in this study, with some couples (Neotraditionals, some Promisemakers) engaging in more traditional practices concerning their understanding and enactment of their engagement. On the other end of the continuum, Nestbuilder couples and several Promisemaker couples have more loose understandings of when they consider themselves engaged and they discuss their relationship progression using a discourse of official vs. unofficial engagement. In the following section, I will discuss the differences between these two views of when couples report feeling engaged and end with a discussion of official and unofficial engagements.

Traditionally engaged: Neotraditional and Promisemaker engagements

For Neotraditional and some Promisemaker couples, both men and women identified the proposal as the start of the engagement and, with minor exceptions, did not consider themselves engaged prior to the proposal. Before his proposal, couples considered themselves to be boyfriend/girlfriend, even though most had a mutual understanding that their relationship was marriage oriented. In my interviews with Art and Sarah, this pattern of viewing the proposal as the official start of the engagement and as a defining point of change in the relationship is clearly articulated:

Art: I would say up until [the proposal] we were explicitly and expressantly just us dating because I made a point of that! [Art laughs] [Erica: Oh, okay] Like, no, we’re just dating, we’re just dating.

Sarah: [I started thinking of myself as engaged] when he asked me. That was when I started really thinking about it as engagement.

Erica: So the period in between “this is our game plan for the next few years” and the proposal, how did you think about yourself at that point?
Sarah: Well, I guess I just thought of ourselves as just boyfriend and girlfriend. But I knew that we were a lot more than that. And it always kinda frustrated me that there was this other label, “we’re not quite there, but basically we are.” That sort of thing.

For couples in this group, the proposal marked the start of the engagement and a transition for the partnership from dating or being boyfriend/girlfriend into being fiancées. The proposal provides a clear delineator for understanding this transition and both Neotraditional men and women and the Promisemaker men and women who viewed the proposal as the start of the engagement discussed how it was a defining moment for understanding themselves as engaged. Within this group, however, men and women understood the officialness of the proposal in different ways. Men identified the proposal at the start of the engagement.

Erica: Okay. I’m interested in when you started to consider yourself to be engaged? Like when did you start feeling engaged?

Will: I don’t know, man. I guess it was after I asked her to marry me? … I didn’t know if that was a trick question, I’m like, I guess after, I mean, we’re always together but now we’re just officially engaged and now we’re just having to plan the wedding and stuff.

Will’s uncertainly at what the question I asked him was common for many participants in this group. Several men and women in this group asked clarifying questions or made a comment that lead me to believe that they understood the question “When did you start considering yourself to be engaged?” to be a trick. This may be related to their normative understanding of how engagement works—that the proposal marks the start of the engagement. As a result of this understanding, it is possible that the question seemed out of place since they likely did not think about others ways in which they could understand their engagement. They have a linear understanding of how the process works.
Similarly, other men noted the proposal as a defining moment in understanding themselves as engaged. As Kevin and Tom explained in their interviews, the proposal marked the starting point from which they would plan their weddings and start enacting the role of a couple engaged to be married.

Kevin: [I started to feel engaged] that night. I mean, it really was, there was a big change because wedding planning started happening and like immediately, she was talking about her ideas that she wanted to do so it did hit me like a ton of brinks. I mean, it really did feel that way. Her parents were really happy. I wasn’t just the guy she was dating anymore and it was, it was just a general change all around I guess, the atmosphere of our relationship.

Tom: [I started to think of myself as engaged] probably when I was packing for that weekend. When I actually put the ring in a safe spot where I knew she wasn’t going to find it so I kind of…stepped back and thought, wow, this is actually going to happen, you know. This is, you know, not this is it, but you know, this is the beginning of our lives together, basically.

For women, they saw his official proposal as time to tell others about the engagement, which marks the start of the engagement for them. In discussion when they first thought of themselves as engaged, Katrina, Megan, and Sarah noted the ability to tell others about the engagement as a defining characteristic.

Katrina: I think that….I consider…It depends upon how you define ‘engaged’. I considered that we knew we were going to get married after we talked about it that time in May or whenever it was. But I think officially, in a tell-other-people-about-it way that was after he proposed.

Megan: [A woman at my office is] like, ‘I don’t understand what this big deal is. You’re obviously getting married.’ Like, ‘Why can’t he just give you [a ring?]’ … Everybody knew [we were going to get married]… That’s people would say to me, ‘oh, well you're essentially engaged because you know you're going to get married.’ And it was like, yeah. But we’re not. [Erica: We’re not?] The world doesn’t know. His parents don’t know. That kind of stuff. That was kind of what mattered to me… I want everybody to know. I don’t want to be just the girlfriend. Though he doesn’t like the f-word. Fiancée.

Sarah: Well, I guess officially at that point [i.e., the proposal] we were definitely getting married. And it’s a point where we can tell people that we’re really getting married cause it’s sort of official, because the actual question has been asked.
For women, the proposal and presentation of his ring for her provided the social proof that would be needed in order to be able to tell others of the engagement and have it be legitimate; similar to Schweingruber et al (2004) findings, without a ring and a story, there was no basis for women understanding themselves as engaged, even if the couple had a mutual understanding that the relationship was marriage oriented. In her interview, Tiffany discusses the importance of having the proposal and ring in her own understanding of presenting to others a “real” engagement:

Erica: Was there a point when you're like, “now I’m engaged” versus just?

Tiffany: It would definitely be that day.

Erica: With the proposal, you were like now I’m engaged?

Tiffany: Yeah, because I told everybody.

Erica: So before then you didn't really consider yourself engaged? Even though you guys had talked about? [Tiffany: No] Doing it?

Tiffany: Yeah. Because I know I’ve heard people say like “oh I’m engaged but I don't have a ring yet.” And I remember commenting to [Nate] like, ‘I don't consider them engaged’ [because they didn’t have a ring].

Men and women’s understandings of the start of engagement may be related to the gendered experiences men and women have in the construction of the engagement and proposal. For men, the engagement starts when he presents her with a ring and asks her for her hand in marriage. In many ways, he takes a very active role in initiating and finalizing the agreement or understanding that the couple has concerning the progression of their relationship. For Neotraditional couples and many of the Promisemaker couples in this group, there is an open understanding that the couple will become engaged and married but the timing of this transition is largely his responsibility to plan and enact; without his
proposal, they remain a dating couple and do not plan a wedding even though marriage has
been discussed as a long term goal for the partnership. As such, his understanding that the
engagement starts with his proposal makes sense logically.

In my interviews with women in this group, many noted telling others of the
engagement as the main criteria for confirming that they were engaged, almost in the same
breath as noting that his proposal provided the catalyst for the announcement. Although
women do not have much power in defining when he asks (and, indeed, often look forward to
his proposal as coming as a surprise), her definition of the engagement starting with the
proposal may be related to the social value she receives from being asked: she is able to tell
others of the couple’s plans to marry and, as such, she receives a lot of validation from taking
on the position of informing friends and family of the engagement. The publicly made
change in status provides the criterion from which she defines the start of the engagement.

Unofficially engaged: Nestbuilder and Promisemaker transitions into engagement

On the other end of the continuum, I found that Nestbuilders and several
Promisemaker couples understood the start of their engagement in a more complex way. For
these couples, there were different understandings of what constituted engagement and how
understanding oneself as engaged was negotiated both personally and within the partnership.
For these couples, a discourse of “unofficial” engagement emerged that differentiated how
they personally felt about their relationship and how they discussed their relationship status
with others. The unofficial engagement was often private, located within the partnership or
perhaps with close friends and family who knew the couple considered themselves, in some
way or another, as “like engaged.” Rose shared the story of when she told her partner she
wanted to marry him (versus having a committed nonmarital relationship). In her story, the
difference between official and unofficial engagement becomes clear in her discussion of telling others of their engagement.

Rose: I called my parents the first time I told Joe that I’m ready to get married my mom asked “are you engaged?” and I said, “I don't know, I don’t think so?” And I said “Joe!”—because he was in the same room—“my mom wants to know when we’re engaged!” and he’s like, “we’re engaged, just tell her we’re engaged.” I was like, I guess, I don't know, I don't know if we are and she said “well, just let me know when we can start saying that.” [Like saying that] to other people. Like when we can consider you engaged and let people know you’re engaged. You know, that whole thing. And, but I guess it wasn’t until he proposed and I had the ring that we told people that [we were engaged]. Like we never referred to ourselves as engaged before that moment so I guess that’s when it was.

Erica: Was there a difference in how you talked about your engagement to people based on how close they were to you or…because you say you called your parents and you guys were kind of engaged but then it sounds like…

Rose: Yeah, we made like a more formal, well I guess not formal, he called all of our friends that night [Erica: the proposal night?] Yeah, the proposal night. Like the actual “I have a ring on my finger” night. And there was a lot of excitement from our friends… So everyone’s excited and like “oh my god that’s crazy!” Umm, but that’s the point when we chose to tell them

Rose’s telling of her conversation with her mother and the resulting discussion concerning the start of their engagement highlights the private versus public nature of engagement couples in this group experience. Couples will often understand themselves as engaged once their relationship has reached the point where they understand themselves as ready for marriage. However, they use the proposal as a prompt for announcing their decision to others. This is likely due to the normative structure engagement relies on, especially when presented to individuals outside of the relationship. Because it is hard for individuals outside of a relationship to truly understand the commitment a couple has, proxies such as engagements and marriage provide a context for understanding the level of commitment couples have. For Joe and Rose, although they understood themselves as engaged—and Joe
told Rose to tell her mother they were—her preference to wait until he asked her with a ring is reflective of the norms the previously discussed group relies on in helping others understand their relationship. Without a ring and a story, Rose was hesitant to tell others she was engaged even though they had committed to marriage and saw that commitment as a significant catalyst in their engagement.

The need for “proof” of official engagement prior to announcing their engagement is juxtaposed against individuals in this group having less clear cut “starts” to when they feel or think of themselves as engaged. Although the proposal brings about the official, tell others engagement, men and women in this group report having much broader understandings of their “unofficial” engagements. For men, many knew that it was the right time to become engaged within their relationship because they started to think of their commitment to their partner as equivalent to engaged or married. Jared explains how he experienced this transition in his interview:

Erica: When did you start thinking about yourself as being engaged?
Jared: …officially or? [Erica: Like when you started thinking about it. If there are different points that you saw, you can talk about those.] Umm, … probably I would say about 3 or 4 months before I actually asked her I knew she was the one for me…

Erica: Why did you start thinking of yourself as engaged at that time?
Jared: Umm, [I don't know]… everything kind of fell into place with her. We don’t have major arguments about things. You know, little things here and there, people are different, you know, there are going to be certain things we argue about, leaving the seat up, putting the seat down, silly things like that, that’s not a big deal. So, but never anything overly huge, something small like that would never blow up into something big so we got along very well. So plus all my family loved her. She was up at my grandparents’ house one night and my grandfather is very picky about who’s in the family and whatnot, he’s very old fashioned, and she was sitting there on the couch, he was in his lounge chair, and they were sitting there watching Jeopardy and she started answering questions on Jeopardy like [Jared snaps his fingers repeatedly] really well and it impressed him, which was pretty hard to do. It’s hard to impress my
grandfather. So once she impressed my grandfather, that was it. My grandfather and grandmother just loved her.

Like Jared, Ryan and Sean also talked about “trying on marriage” mentally and felt engaged before they proposed to their partners.

Ryan: Humm. … [I would] say about mid to late 2006. [Erica: Ok, so before the proposal?] Yeah. Well, I had to be sure I was doing it. Asking her to marry me was, to me, is just as good as being married. I was making the commitment as soon as she said yes, you know, that was the big commitment to me. So once I made that decision, I felt very strongly that I had to stick to it.

Sean: You know, it was, by mid-March, around February, March I was trying on the idea. By the time July came around I was, yeah, we were engaged in my mind. [Erica: Okay.] Not in hers [Sean laughs] not at all!! [Erica: Cause she didn’t know?] She had no idea, no.

For men, the need to think about engagement before proposing allowed them to become comfortable with the transition and to confirm in themselves that engagement was a step they were ready for in their relationship. Given the relationship patterns many of these couples have, especially Nestbuilders, this pattern stands out because most of the other relationship transitions couples experienced were smooth and men did not report having to mentally work though being ready to enact them—they simply allowed the relationship to evolve in a way that felt right for the couple. The need to mentally work though engagement may be related to ideologies concerning men’s supposed relationship to marriage: that it is a commitment to fear or a “ball and chain” and not a transition that he should be outwardly excited or waiting for. Additionally, the status that comes with engagement makes their relationship—one that had been existing largely as a private matter within the partnership—a public status and, as a result, open to examination and scrutiny by others. If engagement was a privately understood decision, much like starting to date or living together, one could anticipate that men would not work as hard to mentally prepare for engagement. However, in
a partnership where many transitions were made between equals, the proposal script definitely gives men a new role to take in the relationship—the one who must instigate the transition towards marriage.

For women in this group, the opposite reaction occurred: with the official proposal, women reported there was a sense of shock to the events that had taken place. While they view the proposal as the official start of the engagement, they position this knowledge within a sense of wonderment over the change in their relationship status. For many, this transition was something that they needed to allow to “sink in.”

Victoria: It probably took three days for me to even be able to say “I’m engaged” okay, what does that mean? And what does that look like? And all of that. [Erica: Three days after the proposal?] Yeah, three days. It probably took a good three days for me to not truly think about it as “he proposed” and I said “yes”. But that I’m engaged… okay? [Tone of disbelief] What does that mean?

Yvette: Umm…well after the initial excitement was over, it probably took about a month or two for it to, you know, sink in and realize like, hey, we’ve got to plan a wedding, we’re actually spending our lives together. I’m moving into his house, I’m actually going to be doing this.

This sense of difference and shock women experienced likely suggests that, while women were comfortable within their relationship and welcome engagement, the confirmation of that previously private commitment or understanding publicly and the start of planning the wedding brought to light the reality of their relationship. Although the relationship did not change in a significant way in how it functioned on a day to day basis, the change in status did take women back and forced a level of reflection that they may not have been anticipating. My interview with Marie illuminates this process:

Marie: Umm, to a certain extent after the rings got put on the table I sort of was, I knew it was coming. I didn’t know when. So, and I knew there was definitely that prospect there so to a certain extent, I started to regard him as mine, and I didn’t use the term fiancée yet obviously but, umm, I regarded him in a way very similar to
someone who would be my fiancée but right after we got engaged in April that is when it really sunk in and it was weird for me, having thought about it and dreamed about it and all this other stuff for months it was really eerie and really interested in just being, “this is my fiancée.” It took a moment getting used to and it was one of the water-shed moments with us, so.

The subtle changes in commitment over time that lead to the engagement muddies the point at which individuals in this group considered themselves engaged. Unlike the first group, who conceptualized their relationships as more fragmented (e.g., “we are boyfriend/girlfriend” then “we are engaged”), couples in this group did not understand their engagements as encompassing a separate phase of the relationship. Instead, engagement evolved out of the momentum the couple had been building together, so the realization and transition into official engagement was sensed as strange because they were publicly confirming a reality they already had within their relationship. My interviews with Sonya and Lisa highlight this transition:

Sonya: You know, it’s funny, because I just really started thinking about it this year. Like once 2008 hit for some reason because, I mean, in our relationship, not a whole lot has changed so far, you know, because we live together. I wear the ring, so that is definitely different. People ask us wedding questions, which I’ve never done before and I’m looking at wedding things, which I’ve never done before so that aspect is different but I don’t know. But I still have a hard time calling him fiancée instead of boyfriend, and I still call him boyfriend all the time because its, I don’t know, I just feel weird calling him fiancée. So, I mean, I don’t know, it’s just, I don’t feel like my life has changed soo much right now. I guess I don’t think of it, [it’s] weird to think of myself as engaged as opposed to not engaged. [Italics added]

Lisa: So I wanted to have [it] fully sink in that we were engaged. But and this is the conversations that I would have with him as I would have conversations we brought up where we were. And that just because we’ve became engaged that word doesn’t mean that our relationship has changed. We’re still committed to each other, we still go grocery shopping together all the logistical things are still the same. You know, for me it wasn’t a physical change. I didn’t know that there was a change in the relationship where we acted toward each other or anything. For me. I’m acting the same. I would always hope that it would evolve into the point where we’d be together for a longtime and people have kids and that would be great. Someday. But the
relationship that we had, the openness that we have, the communication, that we do things all the time.

Here, the lack of change within the relationship that comes with a couple’s official engagement becomes clear: the relationship is the same but different at the same time. The changes that do come with engagement, especially wedding planning and attention from others about their relationship bring more attention to the couple and their relationship. The result of this transition is that individuals are required to negotiate the change more publicly, which is likely a significant change from how they had understood their relationship prior to announcing their engagement.

For couples in this study, feeling engaged and viewing oneself as engaged depends largely on how the couple sees the progression of their relationship. For some couples, notably Neotraditionals, the proposal clearly defines the start of the engagement and acknowledging oneself as engaged. In their interviews, couples who subscribed to the “officially engaged” model were able to clearly point out when their engagement started (with the proposal) and enjoyed the change in status that came with the transition. For other couples, notably Nestbuilders, a discourse of “unofficial engagement” emerged that understood engagement to marriage not as a specific time, but as a feeling they had or a point they had reached in their relationship. Prior to their official engagement, in which they told others of the engagement, these couples talked about feeling commitments that were the same as they envisioned the commitment to engagement and marriage being. Additionally, men and women in this group also privately understood the depth of commitment their relationships had prior to their official engagement. The result of acknowledging an unofficial engagement period prior to the proposal was that individuals needed to spend more
mental energy confirming and recognizing the significance of the change their proposal brought to their relationship, especially as their partnership is seen by others.

**Telling Others about the Engagement**

For most couples, announcing their engagement to their friends and families was an exciting event. The announcement brought cheers, congratulations, and, for many couples, a new sense of belonging within each other’s families. Across couples in the study, all but one couple told their family and friends about their engagement soon after the proposal. Couples who had proposals late at night, internationally, or in a remote location that lacked phone service were the exception and tended to inform others as soon as they could conveniently do so. Most couples first called their parents to report news of their engagement or, for parents who knew he was planning on asking, to report the story of the proposal and announce that they were officially engaged.

Although couples tended to have similar reactions from others to the news of their engagement, there were differences across the three groups in the study in the details of how others responded to the news of the engagement. Neotraditionals were excited to tell their friends and family of their engagement and were greeted with excitement over the couple moving forward into a new stage of their relationship. For Promisemakers, couples reported that they took a little time to enjoy the moment together before telling others. Additionally, for some who had been dating for more than two or three years, news of their engagement brought cheers and news that they had been anticipating the announcement. Finally, Nestbuilders reported that news of their engagement to friends and family brought confirmation that others had been waiting for: that the couple was ready to start planning their marriage.
For Neotraditional couples, their reports of others’ reactions to their proposal focused on others feeling excited for the couple and the new family status they were undertaking.

Theresa shared the reaction she and Kevin received after sharing news of their engagement with their family and friends:

Theresa: Everyone was excited. Yeah, like best friend, who is now my maid of honor, was like screaming she was so excited. My mom, his mom, he was [a volunteer firefighter] and before he had told his, who is now his best man, by the next morning the sign actually said “congratulations on your engagement Kevin and Theresa.” Like his best man drove over there like within ten minutes and put the sign up. So everybody was really excited. We got a lot of positive responses. My mom was on the phone at midnight calling my family who was then calling me, like aunts and cousins and stuff so it was really nice. I was, they really adore him, sometimes I think they like him better than me. They absolutely adore him.

Erica: What about his family?

Theresa: His family was really excited too. His mom really wants grandkids. She’s really excited for grandkids. She’s already started knitting a baby blanket and we’re not even married yet [Theresa giggles]. I think she was excited. We have a really good relationship but I think she was, my mom was excited for planning the wedding, like in the moment, she was excited. I think his mom was thinking long term. Like she’s just so excited that we’re going to get married and have a family and so she’s, it was very positive. She’s just very excited for the long term. She’s ready for the babies now.

The way Neotraditionals report telling others of their engagement likely stems from how they view engagement within their relationship; because marriage is viewed as a ritual of adult life and their lives merging together to start a family, the responses from Neotraditionals that center on the couple “becoming one” and focusing on their future together works to maintain the ideology of marriage the couple shares. These couples have often constructed their relationship as marriage oriented from early in their partnership, so news that they were ready to move forward with their plan was something to be celebrated. Interviews from
Tiffany and Katrina highlight how the response Neotraditional couples received from others concerning their engagement:

Tiffany: My two friends were just like they were really happy because they knew that I was like ready I guess. They're like oh that’s great and everybody was excited and they were happy. Everybody likes him and they think we’re a good fit. And then I told, and then when we went to church on Sunday, like one woman she said, she’s like oh it’s about time. And so everybody for the most was really happy and excited.

Katrina: My mom knew that it was going to happen so she was excited but they all knew that it was coming. They were excited but not surprised.

For Neotraditional couples, the responses they received were consistent and overwhelmingly celebratory and positive. To these couples and their friends and family, their engagement signals a joyful transition in their partnership that is to be openly announced and celebrated together. In many ways, they wanted everyone to share in the joy they were experiencing with their engagement.

Alternatively, Promisemakers had a different experience with how they went about sharing news of their engagement. Within this group, there were two common patterns that highlight how they shared the news. First, several couples postponed announcing their engagement, with many viewing their engagement as a private time for the couple to experience before telling others. These couples also informed close family and friends and then let word spread of their engagement instead of attempting to contact everyone they knew. My interviews with Megan and Brett highlight this understanding of the engagement as a private time for the couple:

Erica: Did you tell anybody about your proposal?

Megan: Yeah. I didn't really want to. But yeah.

Erica: Why didn't you want to?
Megan: It was personal. Not everybody has to know everything, I don't know. We had a nice day… It just was, it was us. And I didn't call anybody. It was like 10, 10:30 at night, by that point. I didn't call anybody that night either because it was our time. I didn't need to go rush out and tell other people because it was ours at that point, like we owned it.

Megan’s partner, Brett, responded similarly about waiting to share the news of the proposal with others. In response to being asked why they did not tell anyone that night, he responded, “It’s not a baby. It’s not. It could wait until the next day.” Unlike Neotraditionals, many Promisemakers had a laissez faire attitude towards letting others know about their engagement.

Heather: I didn’t really tell anyone cause I was still sort of, not that I wasn’t prepared to say yes but, you know, it’s sort of a shock, I don’t know. So I was just like, I tend to do things, I tend to ease myself into things too and especially breaking news to my family because my mother has a tendency to overreact to these kinds of things or at least I think she overreacts. She probably doesn’t actually overreact for any average mother but I always feel she is. So I was kinda nervous and I didn’t really tell anybody. He, the first thing he did was call his grandmother and tell her that he gave me the ring cause she was like, you know, bugging him every [Heather laughs] week, “Did you give it to her?” So he called her and then he called his mom. And then he’s like, “I have to call my sister because my mom will call my sister and my sister will be like “why didn’t you tell me!?” so he sort of called his family right away and I didn’t tell my mom because I figured we were just gonna be there later that day anyways and I was going to see if she noticed.

Like Heather, David and Joann’s announcement went only to family members they felt needed to know right away and others, like their friends, found out when they saw them:

David: [After I proposed] we were stuck on the mountain so she couldn't call anybody. She tried calling her mom [but] the top of the mountain [had] very little cell phone service… she had to wait until we got out of the out of the park before she could call anybody, which I know was awful for her. We were on the road on the way to my parents’ house [and] she called and told people. We got to my parents’ house, obviously they found out we were [engaged]. Oh I know why we were down there. We were at a friend’s party, [our] friend had just moved into a new place. We went to his party so a lot of people found out then. We didn't call and tell them ‘Hey, we’re on our way and we’re engaged.’ [We] just waited until we were there so they could all see it and be surprised. If word didn't filter out from them we caught up with the
rest of the stragglers. Obviously, family was quick to find out. Definitely, within a few days most people knew [that we were engaged].

For Heather and David, news of the engagement would reach the people they knew when it was convenient for the couple to tell them, like the next time they saw them. For Promisemakers, their engagement is seen as a private event—a promise they are making to each other—and this likely explains why couples take their time announcing the news to others instead of letting everyone know about their engagement as soon as possible.

A second trend within Promisemaker engagements was that, once the news of the engagement was shared, couples received reactions that suggested that their courtship was due for a transition—that it was “about time” that they became engaged. This was most common for couples who had been together for two or more years in this group and is similar to the reaction many Nestbuilders received, as I will detail in the next section. For couples to be told that their engagements were expected or overdue suggests that it is normative for couples who are perceived to have a certain level of commitment for a while will marry. In my interview with Will, he shared the story of preparing for his proposal to his partner Donna by asking her father’s permission:

Will: Well, I asked permission from her father before, you know, cause over the years I’ve gotten really close to her father and we do construction projects together and one day I was like, hey Mr. [last name], I know for a long time, you know, me and your daughter have been dating and stuff like that. I think that maybe sometime next week or the following week after I’d like to ask her hand in marriage. I’d like to get your approval before asking her and he said, ‘Oh yeah, no problem, you should do it, I was waiting for you to do it,’ like all these things and I was like, cool. It wasn’t like a bad vibe or anything.

It is likely that Donna’s father expected him to propose to his daughter because they had been dating for over six years. Unlike Nestbuilders, who experienced more pressure to move into engagement, most Promisemaker couples did not note pressure from outside the relationship
to transition into engagement. Instead, comments about the engagement being expected or overdue came within the congratulations the couple received when others learned of their engagement. As David and Eric shared:

   David: Good. Lot of good reactions. Like I said, everyone, friends and family get along great with her. Most [comments were like], ‘About time!’ or, ‘Good for you.’ It was very positive.
   Eric: I think they were kind of surprised just to hear it but they were kind of expecting it. Just because we had been together for so long and were still together.

The anticipation of an announcement that the couple was engaged also framed Nestbuilders’ experiences sharing the news with their friends and family. For Nestbuilders, the announcement was often understood as being related to both the longevity and seriousness of the relationship; friends and family knew the couple would eventually marry from their knowledge of their relationship. My interview with Tamara demonstrates the reactions many Nestbuilders received from their friends and families at their announcement:

   Erica: What was the reaction you got from people?
   Tamara: They knew it was coming…
   Erica: How did they know?
   Tamara: Well, we’d been dating for just about 6 years and it was expected. It was just kind of the way our relationship was progressing. Everyone was very happy, my brother said it was about time. Everyone was very excited.
   Erica: Did you have anyone give you a response you weren’t anticipating?
   Tamara: Not really, no. I mean, all of our friends, they like us, um, there wasn’t really anything unexpected.

   From her interview, Tamara notes that her partnership with Ryan had existed long enough that they were established as a serious couple by their friends and family and, as a result, news that they were engaged did not come as a shock. Instead, the announcement was
seen as a logical transition for a couple in their status. Similarly, Sonya, Victoria, and Yvette shared similar stories about the reactions they received when they told others of their engagements:

Sonya: [Everyone was] very excited. It’s funny because I, in fact I was talking to my friend about this the other day. I kind of didn’t think that I, I didn’t want to make a big deal about it because I didn’t want my friends [who had recently become engaged] to think that I was stealing their thunder so I tried to downplay it a little bit. People were excited for me, so I was like, hey, I guess I can be excited too. I mean, it’s been wonderful. People say, well, I think after five years people kind of started wondering when is it going to happen? I don’t know but, good reactions.

Victoria: Well, my sister and her family were the first people we told just because we knew where they were and they were closest to the restaurant we were at. They were just, the biggest grins you can imagine. Everybody is just very excited and some people have been waiting or expecting it. She actually thought that it would happen that week also because we were on vacation and he had said he wanted to plan for us to go away and we didn’t get to go away and she thought, “Well maybe he wanted to go away and propose and da da da da da” she was all strategically thinking. But nobody told me though!

Yvette: They were excited. My one friend said that she knew it was coming, not the one who already knew but my other one said, I knew that it was only a matter of time. And so no one, I think my sister was the only one who was shocked but everyone else was kind of, oh, that’s cool! We expected this to happen!

In many ways, the expectation that a couple would become engaged at a certain point suggests how engagement may be a normative relationship step for long-term couples. Although this cannot be generalized beyond this study, it does provide a basis for better understanding social expectations and practices for couples who are engaged in long-term relationships. For couples in this group especially, the assertion that it “is about time” that they are engaged demonstrates how engagement may function as an important signal for others to better understand the couple’s relationship. Engagement is the only commonly recognized relationship stage that is recognized between “boyfriend-girlfriend” and “husband-wife.” The lack of terminology for the different ways couples can publicly situate
their relationships is highly problematic; for long term, committed couples, the only normative structure they have to help others understand their commitment is through the use of engagement and marriage. Their engagement—and confirmation of their commitment in a way others can understand and celebrate—is complex and often disconnected from the commitment the partnership has, as was discussed earlier in this dissertation.

The understanding that the friends and family of Nestbuilder couples gain of their partnership post-engagement is also highlighted in the second theme found in the reactions they received: public acknowledgment that each partner was loved and welcomed into their partner’s family. In several interviews, especially with the men in this group, discussions of having their partner being welcomed into their families was common.

Joe: Everybody we called was thrilled! The main thing I heard from my friends was, “Well, it took you long enough” or “About damn time!” I mean, that is what all my guy friends were saying to me. … My parents were absolutely thrilled and my dad wanted us to get married pretty much from the first day he met Rose and my mom was really happy, her parents were crying happily on the phone and stuff like that…

Jared: Umm, happy. Everyone was very happy about it. Everyone in my family, they really like her.

Dan: I think everyone was pretty excited. I mean everyone loves her … And I guess the reaction was good. Everyone was excited. Probably excited to hear I’m finally getting married.

Although a few individuals in other groups talked about how their families loved and welcomed their partner into the family, only Nestbuilder men were consistent in coupling the excitement others expressed in their engagement with comments of how their family liked their partners. It is possible that the official engagement confirms for men that their family likes their partner and is excited for her to marry into the family. For couples who have significant commitments to their partners that go largely under-acknowledged or even
misunderstood by others outside the relationship, it is likely that engagement provides others with an understanding of the couple’s commitment and allows them to officially confirm their enjoyment of their child’s partner marrying into the family. The normativity of marriage as the way to enact long term relationships becomes clear in this understanding—only though marriage can his partner become part of his extended “family.” While his family may enjoy or even love her, without marriage she cannot be a real part of his family.

For couples across groups, the announcement of their engagement provided them with a time to celebrate the transition they were making in their relationship, both privately and publicly with their friends and family. Almost universally, couples reported that friends and family were excited by the announcement and that they celebrated the couples’ relationships in a genuine way. However, reactions were also situated within the ways in which couples experienced their relationships, with small but meaningful differences developing between groups in the specific ways couples announced their engagements and the specific reactions they received from others. For Neotraditional couples, the early momentum in their relationship towards marriage allowed their announcement to be a celebration of accomplishing the first step in their long term goal: to marry and start a family. Friends and family were excited to know of the transition the couple was making and the couples enjoyed celebrating their engagement with others. Promisemakers, on the other hand, were slightly more private in how they shared news of their engagement, often sharing the news with close friends and family first and allowing others to find out more casually. For couples who had been dating for over a couple years, often news of their engagement was responded to positively with statements like “it’s about time” or “we knew this was going to happen!” This trait was shared with Nestbuilder couples, who often had longer courtships.
and had engagements that occurred after a few years of dating. For these couples, news of their engagement was met with happy surprise; friends and family had been anticipating their engagement for some time. However, these couples’ announcements were also coupled with feelings of acceptance and/or acknowledgment of their partner choice by others.

**Changes with Engagement**

In the first half of the chapter, I summarized my findings on how couples in each group plan, enact, understand, and share news of their engagements with others. Across groups, the couples in this study used traditional proposal scripts as the basis for planning their proposal; however, the details concerning how couples enacted and understood their engagement was linked to larger understandings they had of marriage, commitment, and the everyday negotiations of their relationship. In the final section of this chapter, I will discuss how engagement changed the relationship of the couples in this study. For Neotraditional couples, engagement provided a context for the couple to start merging their lives together by spending more time together and planning for their future. For Promisemakers, the engagement allowed the couples to feel more connected to each other and to start focusing on planning their future. Finally, for Nestbuilders, engagement brought the very private nature of their relationship that they had enjoyed into the public eye and allowed them to fine tune their communication skills in order to strengthen their relationship.

**Neotraditional: Life merge**

For Neotraditional couples, engagement provided a significant transition in their relationship between dating and being married. When asked about changes in their relationship that occurred with their engagement, several men and women stated that their relationship did not change when they became engaged. However, further investigation
found that becoming engaged often provides the catalyst for the couple to start merging their lives together in new ways: linking finances, spending more time together, building concrete plans for the future, and, for some couples, living together, either officially or not. For these couples, engagement largely brought about changes in how they spent time together.

In his interview, Kevin touches on many of the changes Neotraditional couples faced post-engagement. Although Theresa and he planned to cohabit officially after marriage, they used engagement as a period to start merging their lives together in preparation for marriage:

Kevin: I think we started living together more I guess, there wasn’t that clear separation between my things and her things. It wasn’t as black and white, it was a lot more grey in that kind of regard. She was more welcomed, I think we started feeling more at home at each other’s places. I think I saw her family a lot more, I think she sees my family a lot more. We’re together most every days of the week …. I think financially, too, money changed. I think that was a big thing too. [Erica: How did that change?] We didn’t, I don’t think we looked at it as my money, your money, you know, that’s her money, that’s my money. I think she looks at it as her money is my money, I mean, my money is her money I should say… like if we went out to dinner, it wasn’t like, who was paying, it wasn’t a big deal anymore. It wasn’t like we were constantly trying to balance 50/50 because, to us, the black and white was just blurred. It was ours and I just kind of considered whatever I had to be hers and whatever she had to be mine.

Several couples discussed viewing their home, possessions, and money as something that they owned jointly. After engagement, a few couples opened joint banking accounts and started to manage some or all of their finances together. For couples, the changes that occurred during engagement largely took place to help the couple prepare for their marriage. Many individuals discussed changes in how they spent time together. For George and Kelly, their engagement meant it was time for them to focus more on building a strong relationship. For them, they spent more time together, “hanging out” and finding ways to relax together on the weekend. He also discussed how their friendship circles changed with engagement:
George: We associate with [other couples] because I’m not going with some of my friends that are single. … I’m in a relationship, I’m going to be getting married. So therefore, I need to be around other people who are already in the same situation that I’m in, that’s already married. Also I need to be around them [sic] kind of people so I can basically get the feel of what it’s going to be like to be married. What it means to be committed—you know what I mean?

Instead of hanging out with his single friends, who he revealed might encourage him to engage in “single man” behaviors (i.e., going out, drinking, flirting with women), George found that he was more comfortable spending time with his fiancée and with other couples. Other Neotraditional men did not express this concern but did discuss how engagement brought about changes in how the couple spent time together. As Kevin explains:

I think we spent more time together, you know. Instead of being like day to day, it would be like a whole weekend. Just, I don’t even think, I think that now, and I think this started back when, like it wasn’t just, I think we, we were living together but not really living together… Everything is assumed. You assume that you are going to be together that night unless I tell her otherwise that I have something else going on. We just assume that the other one is going to be around. I think that is probably the best way to put it. Instead of saying, hey, what are you doing tonight? It’s like, unless we say to the other otherwise, we’re doing something together that night… From going from, um, like seeing if it’s okay to spend time together to assuming that you’re spending time together unless something else is going on.

In addition to spending more time together, couples also discussed how they worked to plan their future together. For couples, engagement provided the first step towards marriage for the couple and they used it as a time to both work out spending more time together/living together and planning their lives after marriage. Tom, Theresa, and Katrina reflected on working to merge everyday life experiences with their partners after they became engaged:

Tom: [We talked about our future] but not like hard core like we did afterwards [i.e., their engagement]. Like, okay, now we should really start putting a time line together, when we should have things set in place kind of things.
Theresa: [After we became engaged, the only thing that changed was] our ideals about living together. That’s really, one [of] the core stuff, we both really want kids, we both, family is really important to both of us and rituals with our families and traditions are very important. And none of that has really changed. It’s just, umm, really trying to work out those little everyday things of living with somebody.

Katrina: I don’t think day to day things have changed, but saying that you are going to get married to someone makes you think about how the day to day things will be if you have to do them for the rest of your life. Like I think that I’m hyper-critical of things, not of him, but everything we do I go home and think, ‘wow, this is what happened today. What if this happened every day’? It’s very weird, all sudden the things that weren’t a problem before become a problem only because you have to think will this annoy me if it happened every Thursday until we die? Is this something that I can do without every day to the end of time? So I think in that sense it was very weird. I think [being] engaged is a time where you can do that, so that you know you are making the right decision.

These talks allowed couples to continue to build their relationship and provided opportunities to learn more about what life with their partner would be like once they marry. As Anika noted about how her relationship was different after engagement, “we’re always discovering new things about each other, which I kind of think is fun.”

For Neotraditional couples, the excitement of engagement provides a catalyst for making changes in how they enact their lives so that they are prepared for marriage. These changes, such as spending more time together and the start of combining households and finances provides couples with a new sense of oneness within their relationship. With engagement, couples are excited to find themselves one-step closer to marriage and are excited to negotiate the changes needed to allow their marriages to function as they see fit.

*Promisemaker: Connecting as a couple*

Promisemaker couples found that engagement brought a stronger sense of connection to the relationship for the couple. Unlike Neotraditional couples, who found engagement as a time to physically prepare their lives for marriage, the changes that occurred for
Promisemakers involved both a greater connection to their partner and their future together and, as a result, shifted the way they spent time together. For many couples, becoming engaged allowed them to feel more comfortable with the future of their relationship. When asked how his relationship with Heather changed after they became engaged, Art noted:

[Heather] definitely is, again, less stressed because I think part, even though I moved in, after I moved in for a while she was like, you know now that you moved in are we ever gonna get married? Is that it? Is that your big move and is that all you’re gonna do? And partly it is the thing with the kids. I never really thought about having kids either cause some of my friends have kids and that’s always been sort of a …. Marriage has always been what other people did, what adults did, and I never, I still don’t consider myself an adult. I’m going to be 30 in august and like, that’s fucked up! [laughs] I have no right be 30, that’s just weird. … [The] relationship, it’s less stressful [she] is no longer asking, when are we getting married? And the kids thing is kind of been decided, roughly, and we’re not waiting until October of 2010 or whatever. There’s no “set” time but it’s still 3 or 4 years off in the future and that’s good enough for both of us right now. So there’s less stress, we have a common goal, at least something to look forward to, we’re planning a wedding…

When asked, several Promisemaker men and women noted how engagement, especially for women, brought the couple together in a way that being boyfriend/girlfriend did not allow. Although they did not plan their future in as much detail as Neotraditional couples, they did view the engagement as a way of confirming their desire to marry and settle into sharing their lives together in a way that was more significant than was possible before their engagement. In my interview with Joann, she talks about how engagement changed the rhythm of her relationship with David:

Joann: I think that we’ve sort of moved forward at a faster rate than before we were engaged, sort of like since this decision was made there are more things that, I don't know how to put this into words…. I feel that we’re moving forward, faster than we were before we were engaged, partially because we’re planning a wedding together. I just started my first job. So there’s been a lot of financial conversation that’s come up because of the simple fact that I’m paying back college loans. I have my first real salary, that kind of thing. Whereas if maybe we weren’t engaged, if we weren’t at that point where we wanted to get married yet I would be handling those things differently, or separately. And now it’s you know there’s more communication about
all of those things. As far as how we spend our time together how I feel about him, that hasn’t changed because the commitment was there before.

Erica: How is being engaged different than…How is your relationship, now that you’re engaged, different than when you were dating, pre-engaged?

Joann: It’s hard to answer because the relationship really has progressed throughout all of that and it’s continuing to. It’s more of an intense progression, I would say. For the reasons that I told you before, the combining of lives, you know. There’s so many things to be excited about I think that I …things that I would maybe hesitate to really think about and plan on, such as buying a house together and having kids together and those things. Maybe there’s a little bit more excitement rather than just concentrating on each other now. Maybe more thoughts about the future.

For Joann, the engagement allowed the couple to combine their lives in a way that she would “hesitate” to do if they were not engaged. They are able to starting having conversations about their personal finances, home buying and children because their engagement provides them with an understanding of change in their relationship; they know that they can safely transition into discussing topics that are related to married life. Although she notes that how they spent time together and how they feel about each other did not change as a result of their engagement, changes did occur in how they viewed the seriousness and permanence of their relationship. Engagement made conversations about married life something to be excited about and not something to hesitate in discussing.

The second trend for Promisemakers is in how they spent their time together. Many individuals talked about how they tried to spend more time with their partner, both doing activities they mutually enjoyed but also in trying out new activities that their partner enjoyed. In many ways, engagement renewed a focus on spending time together as a couple and having fun.

David: I think that maybe not change, again, the day of the proposal but when you live with somebody and you’re committed to somebody your behavior does change. I mean I could play video games and watch TV every night for probably the next
month and it wouldn't faze me a bit. I know she wouldn't like that. I would rather do things with her than do those things, as well. If I was by myself I could do those things, no problem. But I would rather go for a walk or if we do watch TV it might just be one show that we watch together or whatnot. So I, it, being together definitely changes habits. I don’t think it’s in a bad way. It’s more of a balance, really. She does things that she likes to do that I don’t. I do things that I like to do that she doesn’t. And then we do things that we both like to do together.

Similarly, Sarah and Eric tried new activities that their partner enjoyed. Sarah noted:

> We have fun together. Not that we didn’t have fun together before [our engagement] but it’s more…..of a compromise with things. He’s getting me to do stuff that he’s used to and I’m getting him to do stuff that I like. It’s a lot more… [Erica: Like what kind of things?] I’ve never been waterskiing before so I started [doing] that. I’m teaching him how to alpine ski and we play tennis a lot because we both like tennis.

For couples, becoming engaged helped reshape how their viewed time use within the partnership. Time with other friends is reduced for some couples as they spend more time with their fiancé. For example, when asked about how his time with others changed after his engagement, David noted that he “didn’t think that [my friends are] ever upset. I think it’s just…you know, you used to this all of the time with us. Now you only do it three times a week with us.” Instead of spending his free time hanging out with his friends and organizing his social life around them, he now spends more time with Joann. It appears that his friends are okay with seeing him less often; he noted that they did not see upset about his reduced availability. This is likely because they view his relationship with Joann as having a new level of priority to it now that they are engaged; when they were dating, they might not have constructed a major difference between their friendship with him and the one he had with his girlfriend.

_Nestbuilder: A newly public couple_

Unlike Neotraditional and Promisemaker couples, who noted specific changes in how they understood and enacted their relationship post engagement, two themes emerged from
my conversations with Nestbuilders about how engagement changed their relationship. First, several participants discussed how they felt their relationship did not change in any meaningful way but that others were more aware of the transition in their relationship. Second, members of this group discussed working harder on communication within the relationship and discovered that the stress of planning their weddings allowed them to discover ways to negotiate disagreements and, as Karen stated, “fight better.”

The lack of change reported by Nestbuilders is consistent with the ways these couples have discussed their relationship progressions throughout their interviews. Their deep level of commitment allows engagement to be a meaningful transition; however, it is just another step they are taking together in their relationship. In my interview with Lisa, she talks about her relationship after her engagement to Chris:

Just because we’ve became engaged that word doesn’t mean that our relationship has changed. We’re still committed to each other, we still go grocery shopping together, all the logistical things are still the same. You know, for me it wasn’t a physical change. I didn’t know that there was a change in the relationship where we acted toward each other or anything… I’m acting the same. I would always hope that [our relationship] would evolve into the point where we’d be together for a longtime and [we would] have kids and that would be great. Someday. But the relationship that we had, the openness that we have, the communication, that we do things all the time.

Similarly, Sonya shared with me how they had started planning their future some, but that the everyday aspects of her relationship with Carl have not changed.

Sonya: We’ve talked about children, when we’re planning on having kids, so that’s defiantly different. But, as far as our actual relationship I don’t feel like, you know, “wow, all of our, we don’t have any major problems, but everything’s perfect now because we’re engaged.” I feel that our relationship is still generally the same.

In her quote, Sonya references the idea that, perhaps for some couples, engagement changes or makes “everything perfect” for the relationship. She rejects the idea that engagement changes relationships and makes them perfect; instead, she views her
relationship being the same post-engagement. For Nestbuilders, there appears to be a
disjunction between how they experience their engagement as simply the next step to the
relationship and the way others outside the relationship understand their relationship. Several
couples, when asked about change in their relationships after engagement, noted now much
attention their relationship received from others and the validation they received for
becoming engaged. Dan and Marie shared their experiences:

Dan: I don't think anything changed. I think we’re still just the same two people, just
that we’re planning the event [i.e., wedding] now. That’s about it. I guess maybe,
maybe it will hit me again when I get married. When I actually get married, like, how
big of a deal marriage is, stuff like that. For right now [it] feels like just like it always
did and I have a feeling after marriage, it’s going to probably feel the same way too. I
didn't think marriage really in the end is as big of a deal as it seems. I don't think it
really changes the relationship. As far as it, personally, I think it does in a social
aspect, in a, in a community aspect, of how you're viewed by other people.

Marie: I don't think there really has been a whole lot that’s changed necessarily other
than that it’s been a, the relationship has become more official, more concrete in the
eyes of the world kind of thing. But I don’t know if a whole lot has changed between
us, umm, we’ve been really close for a long time and, I don't know, it’s probably just
a feeling of this is it, this is the one kind of thing and beyond that, I don’t know if a
whole lot really changed, really.

The validation that comes from others concerning the couple’s engagement appears as an
oddity for Nestbuilder couples; although they appreciate the recognition of their relationship,
they find the social roles that come with being engaged in relationship to telling others and
enacting “engagement” as a couple to be odd. This is very different from the other two
groups, who are more likely to enjoy the excitement and attention that their engagement
brings to their relationship. In my interview with Rose, she told me she felt “embarrassed” by
the attention she received after her engagement, noting that her “relationship [with Joe]
hasn’t changed so it feels weird to suddenly get congratulations on something that we’ve had
for a very long time.” Her interview further highlights the mismatched understandings
couples have with how they understand their relationship compared to the attention they receive from others post-engagement:

Rose: I feel like [our relationship has] been validated by other people but I don’t think, we keep laughing about it, how everyone is all of a sudden, everyone else is excited about us being together now, you know? Everyone’s congratulating us on Facebook, everyone is sending us messages, people are calling us, you know, buying us drinks at the bar, everyone’s so excited and we’re just like, okay? … But I mean, I don’t think that we’ve even had time to really think about if it really changes us in any way, I don’t feel like it has. I don’t feel different. But one of my best friends from home is getting married in a couple weeks and when I called her to tell her, I said, ‘It’s kind of weird, right?’ saying that [it’s weird to be saying], ‘I’m engaged to be married.’ And she’s like, ‘It changes you, right?’ and I was like, ‘It’s not really what I meant but okay.’ I’m not really sure what to say to that because I don’t feel different about it. Maybe it is just because we’ve been together for so long it just feels sort of natural. We’ve always knew we would and it just happens to be now but, I don’t know… it’s just weird. I don’t feel like it’s different [laughs] so that’s the thing…

Erica: Did you think that it, do you feel weird you don’t feel different?

Rose: No, I like that I don’t feel different, honestly. I felt weird when everyone else is making this big deal out of it because I’ve always felt that when you get married, if everything changes, it seems like something would be wrong like if suddenly your relationship isn’t the same. The things that were making you happy as a couple are different, that’s not what I would want at all. So I kind of like that. You know, he and I are the same. Everyone else is going crazy around us but [we are still the same].

In many ways, the public aspect that engagement makes for a couple’s relationship progression highlights the normative value engagement holds in contemporary courtship processes. Because marriage is understood as the most serious commitment and that other relationships, such as cohabiting in a marriage-like relationship, are viewed as a lesser commitment, the announcement of engagement confirms for others the level of commitment in a couple’s relationship that is otherwise hidden within a grey area of boyfriend-girlfriend discourse. American culture does not have a term that signifies deep levels of commitment other than engagement/marriage, so for couples whose courtships deviate from the normative model may have a harder time rectifying the different understandings others place on their
engagement. For Nestbuilders, engagement is a step before marriage that is tangential to the commitments they have for each other. To those outside the relationship, the engagement is viewed as the couple finally committing to each other.

In addition to noting very little change in the day to day experiences of their relationships post-engagement, several Nestbuilders discussed how they found that communication within their relationship was changing. The way the couple fought was mentioned by several participants in this group as a change within the relationship post engagement. In my interviews with Ryan and Chris, both men discussed how wedding planning brought about a need to better compromise with their partner and how they used the experience to strengthen their relationships:

Ryan: We, the major thing that changed about our lifestyle was the planning of the wedding and all the things that are necessary. Making appointments with people, seeing multiple vendors or whatnot, making decisions together. And that is where the challenge came in—making decisions together. We really learned to compromise though this process and, with that, comes lots of other things like mutual respect and understanding and patients and so it was a very important process for us, I think, because I think it helped bring us closer together. We realized that we’re really working together, we’re really on the same team, you know?

Chris: I think if there’s anything that has changed it is with respect to like the planning and the financial aspect of the wedding causing some more challenges for communication between us. So there have been times where she has gotten really, like actually she got more upset with me than I’ve ever seen her be mad at me and I actually, this is good, I sort of, I experienced it as now that she knows we’re connected she can really get mad. And she’s allowing herself to really be mad because in the past she didn’t want to stir the pot so to speak or ruin something.

In addition to using the stress from planning the wedding to learn new ways to negotiate conflict within the partnership, other Nestbuilders discussed how they now felt that they worked harder to meet their partner halfway and to employ better conflict skills when
disagreements did occur. Both Karen and Tamara told me in their interviews about how they focused on having more positive interactions during disagreements after their engagements:

Karen: We how do I put this. We fight better. [Erica: Fight better?] We realize what triggers our fights and you know after. I’m the kind of person I don't let anything we don't go to sleep angry. We, maybe some couples are like that forever and some say they're going to be like that and then 20 years later they just don't care. But I’ll always like talk something out until we figure out what it is that set us off. And he’s gotten like that too so we’ve noticed that, actually, that our fights are shorter and we don't set each other off as much. You know I think some people purposefully say things to hurt each other and we don't do that anymore. We don't dig at each other so I think we’ve definitely, we’ve learned how to communicate a lot better.

Tamara: We’ve never been a couple to argue very much, except for that time in college, but I mean if there is an issue now, we talk to each other. He used to, if I were angry with him about something he would take it very personally and get into almost like a deep depression over it. The next couple of days he would mope around, you know, I don’t know if I can say what would cheer him up, but with me, when I’m angry with him, once I’m over it I’m over it like it never happened. But now, I think he feels more comfortable with me just saying this is how I feel, like, me too, really, we’ve opened up a lot more I think about how we’re feeling and how we’re feeling about different things. It’s good, it’s good.

Although it doesn’t appear from Nestbuilders’ interviews that dramatic changes occur to the relationship post-engagement, there does seem to be a little “fine tuning” that takes place, where couples realize that their relationship is taking the next step and that, in order to make the relationship work at this next level, that behaviors that may hurt their relationship, such as poor conflict skills, need to be resolved. In this way, the focus on discussing problems, avoiding conflict that is not needed (i.e., setting off each other’s triggers), and developing open communication become key changes during the couples’ transitions to marriage.

For Nestbuilders, the experience of being engaged does not bring overt changes to the everyday experience of their relationship; couples report that the transition is very smooth and that they do not feel or act differently as a result of the change in their status. Couples note increased attention from others outside the relationship in recognizing their partnership,
which is viewed as strange because the outside excitement from others is not confirming a
new way for the couple to experience their relationship but instead is seen as being late or
overdue in terms of the commitment the couple had been sharing for a while. However,
couples do report changes in communication and conflict resolution after engagement, with a
focus on developing more open communication and to “fight better.”

Chapter Summary

This chapter summarizes the engagement experiences of couples in this study by
highlighting how couples plan, enact, and share with others the news of their engagements
and how engagement changes how couples’ day to day interactions and understandings of
their relationships work. Across groups, couples tend to negotiate engagement planning
together; in no cases in this study were women shocked by his proposal. Instead, couples
develop an understanding that engagement is the next step for their relationship and then
allow the man to plan his proposal. The engagement groupings introduced in the previous
chapter help to frame how couples’ individual engagements fit within the larger cultural
engagement scripts. For Neotraditional couples, who view engagement and marriage as
important life course steps, the proposal is framed as a gift he performs for her. Their
proposals tend to be sentimental, well organized, and incorporate locations and items that
reflect their relationship history. They consider themselves engaged after their proposal and
celebrate their new status with friends and family as soon as they can. Promisemakers, on the
other hand, view their engagement as a commitment to their relationship and this focus
shapes the way that the proposal is planned. For these couples, he plans a proposal for her
and focuses on finding a special location or moment that will allow them to share the
moment to themselves. They see their engagement as an important transition for their
partnership and tend to share the news with those closest to them. Finally, Nestbuilders use engagement as a way of celebrating the commitment they already have for each other. Because these couples have marriage-like commitments to each other before their engagements, they use the opportunity to celebrate the transition with each other and their friends and family. For these couples, concern for gender equality helps to shape the way they experience engagement planning and enactment.

The impacts of engagement on the everyday experiences of participants’ engagements were also shaped by their group’s characteristics. Across groups, being engaged changed the couple’s relationship in ways that were different from before they were engaged. For Neotraditional couples, engagement led them to focus on spending time together and planning their future. Promisemakers also experienced these changes; however, their changes were shaped by a new understanding of commitment that developed from the engagement and not, as is the case for Neotraditional couples, the excitement that comes from confirming a decision they made together. Nestbuilder couples were the most different from these groups. Many noted no outright change with engagement but did discuss how others outside the relationship were more accepting of their partnership with the announcement of their engagement.

These findings suggest that engagement is an important phase for some couples when negotiating marriage in the early part of the 21st century. In a period marked by marital deinstitutionalization (Cherlin 2004) and increased visibility of nonmarital relationships, this research suggests that engagement still holds an important function in how couples negotiate marriage and—perhaps more importantly—for signaling to others outside the relationship the nature of the commitment. In addition, for many couples, engagement functions as a form of
commitment and normalcy in their partnering practices. Instead of letting a relationship develop as it might, engagement is used as a goal (Neotraditional) or as a marker of commitment (Promisemaker). For these couples, it appears that the deinstitutionalization of marriage has led to a recommitment to the meanings of marriage in the relationship and that perhaps not all groups in society have abandoned marriage. Instead, it is likely that marriage is becoming more of a marker of prestige for a partnership for a privileged set of individuals than as a normative pathway everyone undertakes.
CHAPTER 7: THE PUBLIC COUPLE: GENDER, OUTSIDERS AND MEANINGS OF ENGAGEMENT

In the previous two chapters, I have focused on providing a framework for how the engaged men and women in this study identified with marital engagement and how this transition was negotiated, enacted, and valued within the couples’ relationships. These findings provided three distinct ideologies from which participants accomplish engagement and which inform their understandings of their relationship as a dyad. In this chapter, I turn the focus to more macro roles that engagement filled for couples. In particular, I am interested in discussing how engagement as a social institution provides the friends and families of participants with a way to comprehend their relationship. Here, I argue that engagement allows couples to go public with their private commitments and that engagement functions to provide outsiders and the couple with a way of negotiating, understanding, and performing their commitments. The ways couples navigated their engagements were intimately linked with their perception of the role of marriage in their lives and the macro functions that the institution played in helping them define and identify themselves as a public couple. In the second half of the chapter, I will focus on how gender shaped men and women’s experiences with their engagement, both within their partnership and with their interactions in those outside their relationships.

Understandings of Engagement in Relationship Progression

In the first part of the chapter, I will focus on how engagement provided couples in this study with a mechanism for becoming a public couple. One of the key issues being explored in the relationship processes literature is how the deinstitutionalization of marriage has created some ambiguity in courtship processes that, on the surface, appear similar but
have very different meanings to those who participate. For example, the reasons couples cohabit are varied, ranging from low levels of commitment (e.g., convenience, housing needs) to high commitment levels that look like marriage (e.g., Brines and Joyner 1999; Bumpass et al 1991; Clarkberg 1999; Sassler 2004). The ambiguity that develops from these new stages can help couples negotiate their relationships within the changing courtship and intimacy discourses that started to develop in the later 20th century in the United States. However, these new partnering practices are not institutionalized and the norms that govern behavior within contemporary relationships, especially early in a relationship, can be weak or unclear to those in the partnership. In addition, the meanings of these new relationship forms are often very vague to those outside the couple’s relationship since there are no clear levels of commitment attached to these phases.

For couples looking to find a normative foothold in which they can define their relationship, both engagement and marriage provide a clear structure that both the couple and those outside the relationship can employ to understand the commitment within the partnership. Marriage, and by proxy engagement, provide a framework of norms and expectations that are associated with the relationship: monogamy, family oriented, permanent commitment. These norms and values are institutionalized and, as a result, are products of socialization. As previous chapters demonstrate, engagement and marriage have different meanings to each group but are both used to solidify and define the relationship for the couple and those around them. Although definitions of what engagement and marriage mean to a couple may vary from group to group, for all groups the institutionalization of heterosexuality is reinforced in the reproduction of marriage as the ideal form for partnering relationships to take.
The role of engagement and marriage to help “settle” the relationships of participants emerged as a clear function of engagement within participants’ relationship histories. Although different groups understood engagement and marriage to mean slightly different things, the stories told on the periphery of their relationship narrative provided a rich field for understanding the more macro functions of engagement. In addition, the reasons participants gave for wanting to marry helped to further inform the institutional roles marriage played for them as they worked to define and enact their relationship in the transition to marriage.

This section will discuss why individuals wanted marriage for their relationships. During my interviews, I asked participants “Why do you want to get married?” What I believed to be a simple question was often met with confusion or shock from participants. “Why do I want to get married?” was a common response, along with “What do you mean?” At first, I was not sure why this question proved to be a difficult one to answer; to me, it seems that if one is going to marry someone there must be something about the institution or one’s partnership that makes it a desirable choice. However, in reviewing the responses from participants, a question about whether these participants viewed marriage as a normative institution influenced their confusion. After all, why would I ask them about why they wanted to participate in an institution that, for various reasons, we are socialized to desire without question?

In attempting to make sense of this disjunction, I will first discuss commonalities across all groups in their responses to the question “why marriage?” Participants discuss how marriage is both normative for long-term relationships and an appropriate next step for their own relationship. Second, I will focus on group-specific themes. For Neotraditional couples, the importance of the “promise of a shared life” dominated discussions. Promisemakers
discussed marriage as a “grown up” way to enact their partnership and Nestbuilders discussed the expectation they received from others concerning marriage. From their interviews, the story of marriage as an expected, normative process highlighted how and why couples chose marriage.

*Marriage as a socially recognized next step in a partnership*

For many couples across groups, a common explanation for the desire to marry was because they perceived it as being the next step for their relationship. As Tamara noted in her interview, “We both knew that [marriage] was going to happen.” For many, the assumption that marriage would logically develop from their long-term relationship was viewed as a natural transition that brought with it a lifestyle change. As Kevin and David explain:

Kevin: I want to start a family. I mean, that’s the whole reason that I want to get married, just as a general idea. To have that security, to start a family… buy a house, get old, retire. Just the natural life progression.

David: We obviously have been together for a long time and [have] now lived together for a number of years now and so we knew what it was like to live together. But I think we still saw marriage as like the next step of being together.

For individuals, marriage was viewed as differentiated from nonmarital relationships. As I will discuss later, some viewed marriage as a promise to share their lives together in a way that was not possible without making the transition to marriage. However, others—especially Nestbuilders—were not able to easily articulate how this transition would change the relationship. Regardless, many participants discussed their desire to marry as being a part of the process of solidifying, documenting, or completing the commitment process they have developed with their partner. As David and Joe commented:

David: I know people that live together that aren’t married. But I feel there’s just an additional, there’s an additional connection being married. I think it’s sometimes a little bit beyond just living together with somebody. I think it’s kinda two separate
steps in a relationship, maybe. If you get to that step where you can live with somebody and be with them and you’re happy, that’s great. If you feel like you’ve gotten to that next step which can be marriage, you know that’s a good thing. That’s, you know. It feels good. I felt like it was beyond living together.

Joe: I want to wake up to her for the rest of my life and, if we were doing it without getting married, what would be okay. If we’re doing it with being married that’s awesome too. I really, I wish I had a more poetic answer. I want to wake up to her for the rest of my life. I, really, I’ve never felt anything even one–one hundredth towards somebody else that I feel towards her and, if getting married, getting engaged, all that stuff is just a few more steps on the path that I feel that we’re already on anyways together and we know we want to be together and, the same way I said the ring was icing on the cake, I feel like marriage is just another nice, fun thing that we get to do together. It’s not a defining point in our relationship where, okay, this is what we were like before we were married. Now that we’re married things will be different, we’re going to do this differently. I don’t think that I, I know I don’t want that. She has said that she doesn’t want that. We both want our relationship to be the same as it is now because our relationship is awesome. Marriage is just one more nice thing we get to do together. You know, a nice thing we get to do in front of our parents, a nice reason to throw a cool party for our friends and a nice way to celebrate being in love with each other. Just another nice thing to do together.

For David and Joe, marriage provides a “little something extra” to the relationship and provides the couple with the highest level of commitment they can have towards each other. It provides the final step that a couple can take in demonstrating, both physically and symbolically, the commitment that they share with each other.

The social construction of marriage as the ultimate form of commitment likely helps to reinforce couples’ desire to marry, especially since other relationship types, such as a marriage-like cohabiting union, are assumed to be “less commitment than” marriage. This meaning of marriage not only provides the couple with a way of framing their commitment—it also plays a large role in how others view the couple’s relationship. The role of engagement in helping those outside the relationship understand the couples’ partnership is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.
The importance of engagement and marriage as a way for couples to enact long-term relationships was important for couples across groups. In addition to providing couples with a way to attach meaning to their relationships, which was especially important for Neotraditional and Promisemaker couples, it also provided the couple with a way for others outside of their relationship to grasp the level of commitment they had for one another.

**Neotraditional: Marriage as normal and right**

For Neotraditional couples, the desire to marry is couched in their view of marriage as a normal, right passage for adulthood. When I asked Tom why he wanted to get married, he responded:

Tom: Umm… that’s a good question. I don’t know, I just always envisioned myself, you know… at a certain time, just being married, being settled down, having a family… I’m just, you know, I feel like I’m getting to that age where I just want to be settled down with my wife and not having to worry about trying to do the whole dating thing, that anymore and it just happened that Anika came along at the right time and, you know, we just clicked basically … it was more so that I felt like I was getting older and I wasn’t with anybody. I was kind of losing out on those things I wanted growing up. Being married by a certain time, having kids at a certain time. Kind of being at a certain area in my life. And I was just getting past that. [Erica: So [marriage was] something you’ve wanted since you were a kid?] Yeah. It was.

Tom had a long-standing desire to marry, even before he met Anika. In her interview, she also discussed how when “you’re a little girl you do picture your wedding and what you want [for your future].” As discussed in the previous chapters, Neotraditional men and women view marriage as an important goal in their life and they shape their courtship choices and practices in order to meet their goal. As a result, when they do find a partner for marriage, they are able to enact the relationship that they have always envisioned themselves as having. Aaron’s comment about his desire to marry is linked both his understanding of
marriage as normative but also how marriage completes the commitment he will have with Katrina for the rest of his life:

Aaron: It seems like the right thing to do. Um, it’s a way for us both to show each other that we’re committed for the rest of our lives, you know, officially. You know, there’s no question about it… it puts it down in writing, you know there’s something different…it’s nothing you feel about being married or not married. It’s a way to show the world that your together as…From what I’ve heard you feel the same the next day after your wedding, it’s not like something magical happens, but umm, I guess that it’s a way of expressing that you’re together to the rest of the world.

For Aaron, his marriage is “the right thing to do” and that it allows the couple to “express that you’re together to the rest of the world” hints at the normative nature of marriage as a script for long term commitments. Instead of being viewed as a choice one makes (e.g., West 2007), marriage is recognized as the proper institution for the enactment of long-term relationships. For both Tom and Anika, this perception is both socialized from a young age and championed by the dominant culture as how couples confirm their commitment to relationship outsiders. This is not to suggest that Neotraditional couples marry because they seek approval from those outside the relationship; instead, marriage is viewed as the norm for how they should enact their partnership. By becoming engaged and married, Neotraditional couples are simply following the guidelines that they believe dictate how committed relationships should be accomplished.

**Promisemakers: Marriage as a grown up choice**

In harmony with Neotraditional couples’ belief about marriage as a good, normative practice, a key viewpoint of marriage to emerge from Promisemakers’ interviews is that marriage provided a “grown up” way of enacting their relationship, by providing norms for how the relationship should be practiced. For many Promisemakers, the lack of clarity presented by a postdating culture often created questions about the status of the partnership
and couples appeared to be unsure of how to approach their relationship when choices needed to be made that affected larger life course issues, such as the potential move of one partner. As a result, marriage provides couples with a way to settle into having a mutual point of view concerning their commitment. The normativity of marriage and pressure, both within and external to the partnership, work to encourage Promisemakers to view marriage as a “grown up” choice for their relationship since their courtship path was viewed as ambiguous or unclear in terms of commitment. Heather’s interview discussed the problem of relationship ambiguity and marriage as the “grown up” step to take when confirming commitment.

Erica: Did your friends or family have any kind of reaction to [Art’s decision to move in with you]?

Heather: Umm, well his family has sort of always been, his family has constantly been like, ‘Why don’t you get it over with already and get married?!’ And, you know, his family has been like that since probably … after we were dating initially. I mean, his family has always been very, I don’t know, his sister got married really short notice [Heather laughs] [Erica: Oh, okay.] and she’s always been sort of pushing him to, she knows he has this whole complex about getting old so she’s always pushing him to grow up. ‘Why don’t you be an adult and do this?’ I mean he’s totally grown up, don’t get me wrong, but as a family element they push you sometimes in ways that other people don’t so his mom and his grandparents were always like ‘So when are you two gonna get married?’ you know, and it was sort of an awkward question at the time… a sticking point for a while…

The pressure from outside the relationship to marry was a little higher for Art and Heather in comparison to other Promisemakers, although other groups did report some questioning of their commitments to their relationships because they were not engaged. I will discuss this more later in the chapter. The assumption made by Art’s family is that he is not grown up or is immature in his hesitation to marry Heather, even though he felt committed to her and had no plans to dissolve his relationship with her.
For Promisemakers, the use of dichotomies often framed their views of their partnership and marriage. Unlike Neotraditional couples and, particularly, Nestbuilders, Promisemakers often interpreted relationship choices and transitions not as complicated continuums but as simple dichotomies: immature/mature, child/adult, not committed/committed, not married/married. This may be why engagement was so central to the couples’ understandings of themselves and their partnership; in their postdating world, there was little room for exploring alternative ways of enacting the partnership. Samantha notes this dichotomy in her interview:

Samantha: I was still hanging around with a lot of people from college so it was hard to see myself as taking that next step. Even if I was in law school, it still felt like I was in college, I wasn’t really in that “getting older” mentality. And I sort of felt, like, inclined that I now have to believe that I’m older, like I’m now this new stage of my life where I have to be engaged and thinking about a house and relationship kind of stuff and before that our relationship was very, it wasn’t, it was serious, but it wasn’t like demanding. It wasn’t like, you know, I had to think about my relationship it was just there. And now it became this sort of conscience thing where I had to consider all kinds of things about marriage and what are we going to do about this? So we started having serious conversations about having kids.

For Samantha, a clear dichotomy exists between youth, college, and dating relationships that are not very serious or demanding and maturity, engagement, and adult concerns such as buying a home and starting a family. In the transition into engagement with her partner Alex, she struggles with the expectations of growing up and having adult-style relationships and concerns as she gives up the “hanging out” youth culture she enjoyed in college and during law school. Her transition into adulthood is highlighted as she notes how she “sort of felt, like, inclined that I now have to believe that I’m older, like I’m now this new stage of my life.” The expectations that come with marriage work to reinforce the
dominant ideologies of society, e.g., commitment to a monogamous relationship, nesting, and having children.

For Samantha and other Promisemakers, the grown up transition that occurs with marriage provides the only framework in which commitment is easily understood. It is not possible to imagine other ways of existing as a couple because marriage is championed from an early age as what a couple should do if they are going to be together for the long term. Promisemakers demonstrate more concern with their relationship status because they use marriage as a way to stake claim to and organize their partnerships. Their commitment to the institution is linked with concerns of having a way to secure their partnership, both publicly and privately. They want to be seen as mature and responsible adults and marriage allows them a clear pathway to achieving this status with their partner.

*Nestbuilders: Marriage as the expectation of others*

For Nestbuilders, a common theme discussed by couples was the pressure they felt from others outside of their relationship for them to marry. This pressure most likely develops as others work to make sense of the couples’ partnership. Since there is no relationship stage between dating and engaged-married, these couples found that outsiders were unable to grasp the private commitments they had in their partnership. Those outside of the partnership can use cues, such as moving in together, as a way of better understanding a couple’s commitment. However, cohabitation is a tricky marker of commitment since many cohabiters live together without intent to marry (Sassler 2004). These factors likely made it difficult for others to accept the nature of commitment in Nestbuilder couples and lead to increased pressure to define clearly their commitments.
In his interview, Chris discusses how his family and friends understood the transitions he has made with his partner Lisa as their commitment built:

Chris: Well, I think that my close friends saw that [moving in together] as a real step to in a direction of obviously marriage, ultimately. They saw that as a pretty big deal. I think my family saw it as a pretty big deal too. Most of my, all of my family has been rooting for me to ask her to marry me from almost the beginning. They really like her a lot. For them the experience of us moving in together… That’s the way they look at it [as a real step we were making towards marriage].

Many Nestbuilders reported having friends and family members asking about marriage timing and, for some, what was taking the couple “so long” to become engaged. Participants in this group were the most likely to report having others discuss their relationship status, ask about engagement, cohabitation, and marriage plans, and to pressure couples to enact marriage. Sonya discussed the reaction she received from family and friends when she told them, four years into her partnership with Carl, that they were taking a vacation to Hawaii together.

Sonya: I can say right before we went to Hawaii, we got a lot of pressure from people, like, ‘Oh, are you guys gonna get engaged?’ We’ve gotten that quite a bit I guess just, even after just a couple of years [into our partnership]. People would, you know, drop hints, ‘Oh are you gonna do this soon?’ And so, it’s funny because I think I felt the pressure more from other people so when we went to Hawaii, people really thought because we were together for four years at that point and, apparently, that’s a lifetime for some people so they, a lot of people, all of my friends were like, oh you’re going to get engaged aren’t you? And people were saying that to him and so he actually brought it up to me. He said, you know, people are bringing this up, he’s like, and he’s like, ‘I don’t want to disappoint you but I’m not going to propose in Hawaii!’

For Sonya and Carl, questions about their possible nuptials started within the first two years of their courtship and increased with the duration of their relationship. Like other couples who were committed but not yet planning marriage, pressure from outside the relationship to marry impacts the couple’s progression towards marriage. For Sonya and
Carl, the discussions from outside their relationship concerning their engagement led him to tell her that he was not planning to propose to her on the trip. This most likely would not be a conversation they would have had if it had not been for relationship outsiders asking about their relationship and suggesting that their engagement was “overdue” based on the amount of time they had been together.

The negotiation of the public/private nature of couples’ relationships is seen in Joe and Rose’s deviant response to those who question their commitment. Having developing a marriage-like partnership outside of marriage after many years of dating, Joe told me of how friends and family would neglect to see the commitment in their relationship and instead would ask the couple why they were not married.

Joe: [Questions and comments about our relationship] would always be directed at me, because I’m the guy and that’s sort of the socially, that’s the cultural idea I guess, that it’s never [directed at] Rose. ‘When are you going to get married?’ It was always to me, ‘When are you going to pop the question!?’ ‘When are you going to hop off the fence and land her!?’ And all that and I’m like, my running joke, and she and I would say this in public, and we’d always get a chuckle out of it, that I’d say, ‘I keep asking and she keeps saying no!’ And people would sort of laugh but also feel weird about it because it wasn’t really any of their business anyways and I kind of called them on it, I guess.

The way that Joe and Rose “called out” those who requested private information negotiation their relationship is telling of the normative nature of being able to ask about marriage. For many couples in their position, the response to questions about engagement might be to brush it off or give an answer like “when the time is right for us,” which allows those asking about the partnership to develop an understanding that the couple is on the path of marriage. However, Joe’s response is atypical because it highlights a truth about their partnership—that he was ready for marriage and that she, at the time, loved the nonmarital commitment they had together—but also “calls” askers “out” by providing an answer that is
very private and that, in itself, violates several norms. For outsiders asking questions, they found that they were uncomfortable when the answers to their questions about Joe and Rose’s relationship when they did not match the response they might have expected.

Joe’s experience with others, along with Sonya’s, suggests that the normativity of marriage for these participants’ families and peer groups—that it is something “everyone does”—works to provide a context for others to figure out the relationship. In addition, those outside the relationship are free to question a couple’s relationship if it is not progressing in a manner that they see as appropriate. Since engagement provides outsiders with a realization that the couple is marriage oriented and serious, as opposed to simply dating or not settling down, the positive responses towards couples that enact marriage work to reinforce marriage as normative. Until the couple announces their engagement or wedding, those outside the relationship have the right to ask questions, hint, pry, and seek answers to the questions they have concerning the legitimacy of the couples’ partnership.

Across groups, how participants understood marriage at the macro level dominated how they worked to describe their relationship transitions and experiences of engagement and marriage in their partnership. Couples framed their decision to marry as the “next step” for their partnership. As discussed above, the framing of marriage as the next and ultimate step works both to define marriage as a committed relationship and to reinforce marriage as a normative institution for those in this study. For these couples, no other options were discussed or presented in how they might experience their partnership outside of marriage, despite their varying views of marriage in their commitment and relationship processes. Additionally, each group’s reasons for desiring marriage for their partnership reflected how they understood their relationship progression. For Neotraditional couples, the normativity of
a life together shaped their desire for marriage. Promisemakers had a similar view of marriage but instead discussed it as a “grown up” way to enact their partnership. They distinguished a dichotomy between courtship and marriage by level of commitment in the relationship and the transition to having an “adult” life together (i.e., buying a home, having children together). Nestbuilders differed from the first two groups by highlighting the expectations of others for their transition into marriage.

**Marriage, Outsiders, and Gendered Relationship Experiences**

In the first part of this chapter, I discussed the reasons couples provided for wanting to marry. For most couples, marriage was described as the next socially recognized step for their relationship. The groups’ discussions concerning this transition often framed as marriage as a normal and right decision (Neotraditional), a grown up choice in living their commitment (Promisemakers), or as an institution that is engaged in because it is the normative expectation for a long term relationship (Nestbuilders). In many ways, participant’s support of marriage was based in views of marriage being a normative phase in the life course.

Although these contexts help bring meaning to how participants related to marriage as an institution, it remains central to this discussion to provide a basis for how the choice to marry was influenced by others. Within American society, marriage provides not only couples, but also those outside of the relationship with a way to be aware of the roles, expectations, and commitments between those in the partnership and outsiders. In addition, the expectations are based in gendered understandings of how men and women should appropriately participate in their relationship processes. As such, exploring the macro roles of
marriage in how these couples negotiated their relationship towards marriage requires examination, especially in relationship to the expectations of those outside the relationship.

The information required to delve into this problem was not directly asked in the interview schedule; however, as I reviewed the transcripts I found small yet frequent mentions of how others outside the relationship—here, referred to as outsiders—interacted with the couple as they negotiated their relationship. Taken alone, these mentions of how mothers or friends reacted to or commented on their relationship might be interpreted as simply the nature of courtship—that mothers will ask when one plans to marry, that friends will tease couples about their relationships. However, when these stories are collected and analyzed, the role of marriage for an outsider to the partnership becomes increasingly clear. In this section, I will evaluate these themes to uncover how outsiders to the partnership rely on and benefit from a couple’s marriage. First, I will discuss how marriage provides a framework for others to interpret the commitment level of the partner relationship that is highly gendered. Afterwards, I will discuss how, for these participants and their family and peers, marriage was viewed as a normative partnering path that, when couples deviated from the path, required outsiders to intervene in the partnership.

One of the main roles of social institutions, such as marriage, is to provide a way for individuals to interpret the behaviors of others. Although marriage and family life have changed in many notable ways in recent decades, the symbolic nature of marriage as an institution remains strong (Cherlin 2004, Ingraham 1999). In reviewing how outsiders responded to couples’ engagement announcements, my findings suggest that engagement helped to define couples’ commitment levels. As Dan explained in his interview, the
connection between Karen and his engagement and how others interpreted their partnership are intimately connected:

Dan: Well, other people that are getting married [are] like, ‘Wow, I guess they’re taking that step to move forward and build a life together’… I felt like we’ve always been moving forward and building a life together and I guess, my perception of people [becoming] married is, like, you know, they’re like a team… But I guess other people perceive those things rather than just us perceiving those things. And it kind of, it also formalizes the relationship in the sense that anybody in the family that, like my sister has, my sister and Karen have a couple of issues and maybe marriage kind of formalizes things where my sister has to just realize that, you know, [Karen is] a part of my life now. Even if they don’t get along very well they kind of have to get along because she’s going to be with me for the rest of my life. Which I know they’ll get along eventually, it’s just going to take time. But then I think marriage kind of helps ease that process because it’s kind of like I’m saying this person is good enough to marry me. [Italics mine]

Dan’s comment highlights not only the function of marriage as a normative way of building a life with one’s partner, but also how it provides others with an understanding of the expectations that develop because of marriage. For Dan, the announcement of his engagement with Karen is coupled with an increased need for his sister to work on developing a better relationship with Karen because she is confirmed, by engagement, to be a legitimate part of his life. Their engagement, Dan states, sent a clear message to his sister to work harder at developing a good relationship with his partner.

This recognition of the partnership was echoed by many participants. Samantha and Megan discuss the importance of marriage in providing a way for outsiders to identify with the couples’ commitments:

Samantha: [Marriage] makes sense I guess, like it feels like it’s [i.e., their relationship] more official, I mean, he always talks about it like, ‘I can’t wait to get married and get that over with so we’re in that new stage of life.’ … But I guess it just makes sense to get married, I feel like, not that it will make [our relationship] more official but that it’s more official to everyone else, maybe?
Megan: There’s little things like that when you're married, but, you know, to us we want to have a family. For us it makes sense—we are a family. And to be a family it’s recognized by our families that we get married and we have a family [i.e., children].

For Samantha and Megan, engagement—the promise of marriage—provided others with proof that their relationship is legitimate. This need for legitimacy was especially seen in women’s discussions of why they desired marriage. For couples in this study, marriage works to validate the partnership to others largely by following the normative framework established in contemporary American society for how couples should enact serious commitments. Others, such as Edin et al (2004), have supported the importance of marriage for clearly defining the roles, rights, and responsibilities attached to individuals both within and external to the partnership. Because of the importance of marriage for others to interpret and validate their partnerships, it appears that marriage, for these couples, is compulsory because they viewed marriage as the only routes by which their relationships would be recognized by outsiders as serious and committed. For example, one woman commented on how she was not allowed to participate in her partner’s family’s holiday gift exchange game because they were not married, despite the fact that they had been together for several years and she knew his family well. She thought little of the meaning behind this rule until one of his relatives had a whirlwind romance and married within a few months. The new spouse, whom most family members knew little about, was allowed to take part in the holiday game because she had married into the family. However, she was still unable to partake because she was not viewed as really part of the family.

For many couples, especially Neotraditional and Promisemakers, the acknowledgment of the relationship as serious with the engagement coincides with feelings that the couples reported having in their own relationship transitions. For many in these
groups, becoming engaged was a defining moment in the relationship that allowed them to view themselves differently as a couple. However, for Nestbuilder couples, a mutual understanding of long-term commitment to the partnership was developed long before the engagement and several of these couples talked about the disconnect between how they viewed their commitment compared to how outsiders interpreted their commitment. My interview with Rose highlights the inconsistency many Nestbuilders experienced. She had been with her partner, Joe, for six years and lived together for a large portion of that time before they became engaged and they viewed their partnership as “marriage like” in terms of the commitment they had towards each other from early in their courtship. When asked to reflect on the response she and Joe received to news of their engagement, she commented:

It’s so weird. It’s so weird. I feel really odd about [how others responded to news of the engagement]. I mean, I think it’s really nice that people are happy for us and think that we suit each other well and I think that’s what people are saying, when they congratulate us, you know, this seems like a good thing for both of us and they’d like to see us together but it’s really weird that we’ve been together for six years and no one, [commented at the] the five year mark like ‘Congratulations! You guys made it this far and you’re happy! That’s great!’ Now that I have this [the ring, engagement] people are very happy about it, or speaking up about it. So it’s just weird to me, really bizarre.

The private nature of the relationship is made public via the engagement announcement and this provides the couple with legitimate claims to their commitment. Despite owning a home together and having a marriage-like relationship (long term plans, commitment to each other), their relationship was not viewed as finalized by outsiders because they were not engaged. The role of engagement is highlighted in Marie’s interview. When asked about the experience of becoming engaged, she noted, “The relationship has become more official, more concrete in the eyes of the world… It’s probably just a feeling of this is it, this is the one kind of thing and beyond that, I don’t know if a whole lot [in our
relationship] really changed.” From her perspective, the engagement did not change the commitment between her and Jared; instead, it legitimated their relationship “in the eyes of the world.” Her comment links intimately with perceptions of marriage as an institution and as a marker of seriousness for a partnership.

**Gender and Engagement Experiences**

In the final section of this chapter, I will discuss participants’ experiences with gender in their engagement. The social scripts concerning engagements are highly gendered and I found, as previous chapters highlighted, that most men and women in this study followed the norm when planning and enacting their proposals. However, gender also was central in providing insight into other areas of couples’ engagement experiences. First, I will discuss how pressure to marry, especially for couples who were “waiting too long” is gendered. Afterwards, I will discuss gender and wedding planning. Although wedding planning was not an area explored in detail for this dissertation, it was one area where gender difference manifested itself in obvious ways: she planned and he assisted her with “her wedding.” Finally, I will discuss how couples who discussed wanting gender equality in their partnerships negotiated the gendered engagement scripts to align with their values.

*Gendered expectations from outsiders*

In this period of changing partnering practices, the norms that dictate our behaviors have changed but the ideological framework—how we identify with marriage—has remained. Lauer and Yodanis (2010) note that, while relationship patterns are changing, there remains social pressure to marry and that marriage, as an institution, still maintains a strong foundation for how we think about partnering. A majority of participants discussed the desire others outside their partnership expressed concerning their plans for marriage. This
expectation ranged from others expressing happiness at the thought of the couple marrying to pointed questions and pressure placed on couples to marry. In addition, men and women experienced pressure to marry differently, with outsiders assuming couples who failed to meet the expectations of outsiders were violating traditional gendered expectations for how men and women should transition into engagement.

Across groups, there were patterns in how this pressure manifested itself. For Neotraditional couples, the pressure to marry was tempered largely because their partnerships were marriage oriented from early in the partnership. As a result, members in this group did not discuss having others outside the partnership asking them about their marriage plans. Additionally, many did not mention that they talked about their marriage plans in any detail with those outside of the relationship. From the lack of comments from others about their intent to marry, it appears that Neotraditional couples adhered to the expectations of their friends in families in terms of courtships. Instead, celebration and joy was highlighted when the couple made the transition to engagement. From the interviews, the most pressure reported by these couples were comments about their married life, such as expressed excitement for future grandchildren. While these couples experienced the lowest level of pressure to marry, many of their comments and interactions with outsiders conformed to gendered understandings of engagement. For example, Neotraditional women would report outsiders share in their excitement of waiting to be asked.

For Promisemaker and Nestbuilder couples, pressure to marry presented itself in two ways. For some Promisemaker women especially, the frustration they shared in waited for their partner to be ready was discussed as part of a larger question of the commitment he had (or did not have) to the partnership. However, since most couples in these groups became
engaged within what appears to be a fairly normative timeframe (two to three years from start of courtship), pressure from outside the partnership was often light and framed as teasing or hinting at the future.

For couples with the longest courtships prior to engagement, the issue of “waiting too long” clearly presented itself. Here, the pressure to marry from those outside the relationship worked to shame or stigmatize couples who friends and families felt were not “following the rules” that came with how to have a committed relationship. The shaming these long term couples experienced was highly gendered, men and women being seen as “failing” to accomplish their gendered role in the engagement process. Men were seen as needing to “get it done” and to “settle down and commit to her” while women were seen as not working hard enough to convince him to marry her. To outsiders, the need to understand couples’ commitments is framed through a gendered ability to successfully “do” engagement. My interviews with Chris and Lisa highlight the importance to others for the couple to become engaged. When asked about his family inquiring about his future engagement to Lisa, Chris noted:

Chris: Oh yeah, they would [talk about us getting engaged] in front of us. Family gatherings. ‘When you going to ask her? You got to hurry up!’ That kind of stuff. It was not cool at all. I didn't experience that well. It was not.

Erica: What wasn’t cool about it?

Chris: It was like sort of shaming? I felt shamed by it. In some ways, it felt like I was doing something wrong, you know?

Erica: Doing something wrong by not--

Chris: --by not asking her. And part of, I know that their motivations were, they like this woman a lot [and] they know that she’s good for me. Everyone else in my family that’s my generation is getting married and having kids and they want me to be a part of that. So those are the reasons that they're encouraging me to like go in that direction. Which is fine, that’s all good. And but in a room full of people to put me on
the spot like that was very uncomfortable and I wasn’t there [ready to become engaged] yet. So how can I respond to that in a way that doesn’t make her feel bad? I think [that] was the hardest part, how do you respond to that and not make her feel bad? When you’re really not in that place because of whatever, because I am not. I was not there.

His partner, Lisa, recounts the teasing Chris received from his family.

Lisa: We would have situations with family members where, one instance comes to mind where we were at his sister, his sister’s son’s christening party. So the entire family was there. They really started getting on him and me, not picking on us but being like, ‘When, well, when is he going to pop the question?’ ‘When are you guys going to move to the next—’, ‘Why can’t you just get him to ask you?’ Or, joking around, or you walk by and, ‘Dum dum dum dum’ [sings wedding march] type thing. It got to the point that night that I’m like, ‘you know what Chris, I can’t handle any more… We would talk to his mom and dad [about the teasing] and they’d be like, ‘oh, ok, ok, we’ll calm the family down. You won’t hear from us.’ They were very good about it, like, ‘don’t worry about it. We’ll talk to them, we’ll get them to calm down.’ I think the tipping point on that night was his grandmother pulled Chris to the side and said, ‘You better get married before I die!’ ‘Ok, yup, nanny, we’ll do that.’

Compared to other couples in this study, Chris and Lisa experienced a lot of direct pressure from outside their partnership to move the relationship forward. His family’s views of how commitment should look—that Chris and Lisa should be married—is reflected in his comments about how he “understood their motivation” behind the teasing and that how, in his family, marriage was the normative path for a couple with Lisa and his status to take. The pressure the family placed on them is framed as concern for them to follow the expectations of how the family has practiced long term relationships (marriage) and to provide the family with a sense of permanency and closure concerning the status of their relationship. In conversation, the focus on “what is taking so long?” suggests that Chris and Lisa’s commitment will not be fully recognized or understood by the family until they married—that their engagement and marriage would confirm for others that they really were committed to each other.
For couples, marriage pressure was informed by gender. For men, pressure manifested itself in that it was his role to enact the proposal and, if he was seen as overdue in his timing, that he need to “get it done” and “pop the question.” Women received less pressure than men, likely because social scripts concerning marriage encourage them to “wait” to be asked instead of encouraging them to propose to their partner. Instead, women reported wishful daydreaming (e.g., a mom might say that she cannot wait for her grandbabies) and/or sympathy over what others perceive (and is often true for her) as her anxiety filled waiting. Here, there is clearly a link between understandings of gender and how pressure manifests: men are active, in charge, and making the decisions about the engagement timing while women are passive, waiting, and working to influence his decision.

From Chris’s and Lisa’s quotes in the previous section, it is clear that Chris is the one who “needs” to “get married” and he felt the most shame by his family’s desire for him to become engaged. These comments suggest that the family felt as if Lisa and Chris were ready for marriage and that there was no reason for them not to be engaged. It is clearly his responsibility as the man to “move the relationship forward” (“hurry up,” “you better get married before I die”) by proposing to Lisa. Although the decision to become engaged is a couple process, it is clear that his family identifies him as the one failing to maintain his role in the engagement process (Schweingruber et al 2004). For them to be not engaged is Chris’ fault since he is the one who is supposed to enact the proposal.

Gender and wedding planning

Wedding planning was a second area where gender difference shaped the experiences of many couples. For the most part, women did a major part of the planning for the weddings while men “helped her out” when asked to finalize decisions or to provide ideas. The framing
of weddings as “the most important day of her life” (Ingraham 1999) likely contributes to the highly gendered nature of wedding planning. In addition to the lack of expectations for men to be excited or active planners of their weddings, social roles for men attached to wedding planning are largely nonexistent.

For many women in this study, the inequality present in wedding planning—that she was doing a majority of the work planning the wedding—was viewed as a natural outcome of the wedding being an area she has knowledge about but that he does not know about. Many women expressed that they had a vision for their wedding and that, while locating vendors and managing budgets could be stressful, that they enjoyed planning the couple’s special day.

Erin: It was just really funny because he, he doesn’t know anything about getting married. I’m much more into, like the planning part of it and the details and it’s not like he’s totally excluded. I ask him, we’re both really into music so music is going to be a big thing at our wedding so he wants to be in on the DJ, he pretty much wants to make a huge song list for the DJ. He loves the cupcake idea because that like reflects us. He and I really feel we want the wedding to be more a reflection of us.

Heather: Umm, no, because he’s not a planner. He’s never been really good at planning that kind of thing. And he said, you know, he said—he also knows that I’m a little bit of a control freak about that kind of stuff and it’s way more important to me, the details of it are more important to me than they are to him as far as like how things occur and what kind of decorations there are and all that kind of stuff that’s involved in planning a wedding. So he just said, you know ‘I’m not good at planning so you just plan and the major decisions just pass by me first and I’ll probably be okay with it’ and that’s fine. And I was totally fine with that.

For many women, wedding planning was understood as a process that the couple is involved with together; none of the women I talked with said anything that suggested that their partner was completely removed from wedding planning or that they were unhappy with his lack of participation in wedding planning. Indeed, many couples viewed her planning of the wedding being related to her ability to plan and create, a skill many men distanced themselves from when it came to contributing to the wedding plans.
Dan: Otherwise I kind of left everything up to her and I just kind of approve things. I’m in charge of what I get to wear and what the men get to wear. I haven’t really started on that yet. I’ve looked at a couple of things but I haven’t really, I’m not a very good planner. She’s better at that. She’s like a super planner. If she had super, if she was a super hero with powers it would be, you know, super planner. She’d have the ability to plan and organize things. So she kind of covers that area and I think that’s pretty much with the wedding, with my involvement.

Often, the differences in men and women’s participation, as is noted in the above interviews, are framed as issues concerning wedding knowledge and ability to plan. The gender literature has long identified family planning and organizing as kin work as an area where the burden of work is placed on women (e.g., di Leonardo 1987; Rosenthal 1985). While wedding planning is often framed as something women are interested and skilled in, for many couples in this study clear inequalities in the amount of labor developed in how couples planned weddings, with women often doing the lion’s share of work.

Men in the study reported being interested in having a basic idea of what the wedding day would be like and were willing to “help out” their partner in making decisions about their wedding. For example, if they were asked their opinion on different options of cake flavors, they would give an honest opinion. In addition, if they were asked to gather information on a topic or to create something specific for the wedding, men were happy to “help out” by doing what their partner asked. However, for the most part, a majority of the men reported that they gave their partner a lot of freedom in planning the wedding and they acted mostly as having “veto” power over things they really did not like. When asked about their roles in wedding planning, Art and Dan noted:

Art: [My role is] vetoing, I guess. I’ve pretty much given her [total freedom], like if she wants to do something, as long as I don’t really oppose it she’s gonna do it cause I don’t have a preference. Like I said, the wedding is because she wants to have a wedding, and at this point I’m excited about it because it’s my wedding… If she
doesn’t want to do something that I don’t have a preference about we’re [not] gonna do it. That’s kind of my point of view.

Dan: [For the] ceremony, she’s kind of putting, getting those details together how she wants it. I kind of approve. I’m more of an ‘approval’ person, rather than somebody that actually creates. So I’m more ‘approve’ of what she creates.

Men’s lack of interest in wedding planning matches the gendered expectations of men and weddings— that weddings are the realm of women. When talking with men about wedding planning, many did not provide a lot of information about what they were doing beyond the usual response of helping out when needed. When I asked men for more information on their lack of interest in helping with wedding planning, the typical response focused on the gendered interests they saw in weddings. For example, Jared shared:

Erica: What other [wedding] plans do you have, I guess?

Jared: [We’re] starting to work on colors. I know that. She wants fall colors, which I’m totally fine with. I’m letting her plan it. I have no problems with that. I pretty much told her, plan your wedding and make sure you invite me, that kind of thing.

Erica: So you’re kind of, why are you telling her to do it?

Jared: Umm, it’s the, growing up, though my family and whatnot, it’s always been taught to me that it’s the bride’s day, it’s not really the groom’s day, it’s the bride’s day. [Erica: Okay] So everyone focuses on the bride at the wedding, which I’m totally fine with. It doesn’t bother me at all. So it’s whatever makes her happy.

Erica: So she can pick what she wants to do?

Jared: Yeah, as long as it isn’t completely insane! [Laughs]

Erica: What would be completely insane?

Jared: Like if she wants like 30 turkeys running around, or something like that, at the wedding, something like that.

Jared’s interview supports the normative framework for how weddings should be planned.

Gender and wedding norms identify weddings as feminine and, for men, it appears that their lack of interest in wedding planning is related to this distinction. Because weddings are
something that “little girls dream of” and not little boys, it is quite possible that the inequality in time and energy spent wedding planning is the result of couple’s justifying the unequal division of work for two reasons. First, the wedding planning is feminized as “her day,” which provides a justification to couples that it is her job to plan the event so that the day will go as she wishes. Second, the gendered nature of kin work further differentiates his and her roles in who should “do” the work. The construction of wedding planning as women’s work is particularly highlighted in my interview with Theresa. Her experience planning her wedding differed from other couples because her partner, Kevin, was actively involved in planning the wedding, including having strong opinions about the details of the wedding. After telling me about how she and Kevin had different ideas about the fonts and styles of their invitations, I asked how she felt to have a partner who was interested in participating in planning the wedding in a significant way. She noted:

Theresa: I like [that he is involved with the wedding planning] but it’s driving me crazy! If that makes any sense. I do like the idea behind it. I want it to be “us” doing it. It’s just frustrating because we want two separate things and I feel myself keep saying to him, “You don’t understand, this is what I’ve wanted my whole life, you just have to deal with it!” [Laughs] So, the theory behind it is very nice but it’s driving me crazy.

*Pushing for gender equality*

A small handful of Nestbuilder couples – Frank and Kim, Joe and Rose, and Ryan and Tamara—discussed in their interviews the negotiations they made as they attempted to navigate marital engagement when the traditions and rituals of the engagement script contradicted beliefs they had about gender in their partnership. For many of these couples, their desire to enact their relationship in a way that felt right to them and their ideologies clashed at times with the expectations that outsiders had for how their engagement should be
accomplished. These pushes manifested themselves as script violations in how couples negotiated and enacted their marriage proposals and engagements.

For men, a major area of concern was in how to propose to their partner. No couples in the study took issue with marriage as an unequal institution but couples in this group did express concern for wanting to make sure that their engagements reflected the values they had concerning equality in their partnership. For Ryan and Frank, their desire to keep their partners as equals in the process led them to edit the script to reflect their views.

Ryan: She was sitting on the bed Indian style. I sat on the bed Indian style, facing her. That’s how I wanted to do it—eye to eye, face to face. Like, we’re on level ground, this is how we’re starting together. We’re starting on the same page. That’s the symbolism behind it—to be eye to eye, face to face, which is what I was looking for. I didn’t want to do the one knee thing or anything spectacular.

In his proposal, Ryan’s focus on thinking about gender meanings in his relationship in planning how he performed the proposal for Tamara was uncommon. For even other men who cited concerns about gender equality in their partnerships, traditional engagement proposal scripts were used to perform the proposal that maintained more components that reflect gender difference.

Frank: Well, there wasn’t any formal thing, just a leading up, just a very informal and casual. So, and not so much a proposal but an agreement to commit. And I mean, there wasn’t like an engagement ring. I deliberately said, only because, not because I’m cheap, but because I don’t want either one of us to feel pressure… [I told Kim] if you want an engagement ring, I will go shopping, together, I’m not trying to save money but I’m trying to say [something] about our relationship. I don’t want you to feel pressure, either one of us to feel pressure. I don’t want someone to go to work, “oh you’re engaged!” So it was more like, we just agreed. We are, we are engaged but we are committed.

For Frank and Kim, their engagement started when they had a mutual conversation and agreed together that they wanted to commit to each other though marriage. Frank explained to me why he rejected the proposal script in how he determined the start of his engagement:
Frank: [Kim] was used to the old, stereotypical guy, “Uh, we’re going to do this, we’re going to the football game, we’re going to move into my place” and that is what she was used to and I thought, well, this is about two people, two human beings, I tried to keep it as gender equal as possible.

In his mind, a traditional proposal would reflect the “stereotypical guy” making decisions about the partnership and not reflect the equality he was striving for in his relationship with Kim.

In this study, Frank and Kim were the only couple to completely reject the traditional proposal and use their mutual agreement that they wanted to marry as the marker of their engagement. For other couples who discussed valuing gender equality in their partnerships, I found the men were very conscientious of explaining the decisions they made concerning how they planned their proposals. These detailed descriptions differ in comparison to those provided by men in partnerships where gender equality was not a theme in how the couple discussed their relationship. Men outside this group often discussed the process of becoming engaged in a clear, linear fashion that conformed in many ways to the traditional script. For men in this group, more discussion was provided during their interviews concerning how their engagement proposal was planned and enacted. For example, Joe discussed the following concerning how he worked to provide Rose with a proposal she would enjoy but that was balanced in the values they maintained in their partnership:

Joe: So we talked about that first and then I said, I was like, “I’d like to get you’re an engagement ring but there have been times in our relationship when you said that you didn’t want a ring” — she had said that — she was like, “no, it’s not that important to me, it seems like a lot of money, I don’t want you to feel like you have to do that” and I said “I’d like to buy you the ring but if it feels condescending to you, if it feels like it is something against your wishes, I don’t want to do that.” Because I, she and I had talked about it and I got where she was coming from on the basis of the ring, it’s a pretty patriarchal thing, where “here’s this expensive piece of jewelry. Can I buy you with this? If I give this to you, will you marry me?” and it’s sort of, it almost makes like an exchange of goods like a dowry instead of an actually romantic engagement. I
said to her, “So if you don’t want it, I totally understand. But don’t let money be a
factor. I’ve saved some money and I can’t by the biggest ring on earth, but don’t let
that be the factor. But if you search your heart and you feel like a ring, an actual
proposal and a ring is something you want, I’d like to do that for you. I’d like to do
that but if you don’t want it, I understand. And she looked at me and gave me a little
smile and said “Well, every girl”—she said, “I think every girl would like a diamond”
and I said, “Well, that’s perfect.” And she back tracked after she said that, “Well, I
don’t want you to feel like I have to. I would marry you without. I’d marry you with a
ring pop on my finger.” She’s like, “I really don’t care” and I’m like “No”, I said, “I
understand that but I’d like to do this for you and if you wouldn’t be insulted by me
doing this, I’d like to do it.” So that is sort of where we came to that agreement and I
asked her if she wanted to go look at rings with me and we did.

Here, the traditional proposal script is enacted but only after close examination of its
meaning and the desires both partner had in how they would enact the start of their
partnership. Unlike most other couples in the study who defaulted to the traditional proposal
script, Joe and Rose discussed the meanings behind the script and what values they wanted to
express in developing their proposal. They view the proposal as a gift that he performs for
her based on their mutual desire for her to have a ring. Outsiders will read this proposal as
being highly normative and would likely not see—or understand—Joe and Rose’s
conversation concerning how they would enact their engagement.

For Nestbuilder couples who placed discussions concerning gender at the center of
their engagement transition, the key problem identified was the symbolic inequality built into
the proposal script. In order to address the inequality they saw in the process, couples’
engagement practices worked to revisit the scripts to reflect their values. For some couples,
this meant reflecting on the meanings of gender they wanted within their partnership and
determining the best way to approach their engagement. For one couple, the way to enact
engagement was to reject the entire script in favor of a mutual agreement.
Conclusion: Defining Gendered Relationships

This chapter discussed the macro functions engagement held for couples in this study. In many ways, the findings help to highlight and refine the social meanings engagement employs as a relationship stage. For couples, the engagement script provided couples with a way to formalize the commitments within their relationship to outsiders. Many couples discussed how they felt marriage was normative and that, for them, marriage was required in order to finalize, confirm, or otherwise make their partnership more official. Often, the more macro roles of marriage as an institution were obscured in interviews, with conversations focusing on personal desire or family tradition. However, the championing of marriage within the families and peer groups of these couples, along with socialization favoring marriage and the construction of marriage as the most legitimate commitment a couple can make, point to several of the broader social forces that help subtly shape what participants see as a very private choice.

In addition to the expectation and desire for marriage participants reported, gender difference emerged in how couples understood the transition. As discussed in this and previous chapters, couples rely on gendered scripts and understandings of engagement and marriage in enacting their engagements. Most couples discussed plans to marry prior to an official engagement, which makes issues concerning gender in the negotiation appear more equal since his proposal of marriage is an act and not a “true” proposal.
CHAPTER 8: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The meanings and structures of how we organize our intimate lives have undergone dramatic transformations during the past few decades. The deinstitutionalization of marriage and transformation of how intimacy is conceptualized plays a major role in how individuals organize their relationships today (Bawin-Legros 2004; Beck-Gernsheim 1998; Cherlin 2004; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Giddens 1992; Seidman 1991). For example, cohabitation, nonmarital sexuality, and the increased focus on individualism have recreated normative relationship practices in recent decades. Additionally, these changes have been championed as good for reducing many of the sexual and gendered inequalities found in more traditional courtship norms and scripts (Bogle 2008; Coontz 2004).

As a result of these shifts, family scholars have been eager to research courtship, marriage, and relationship processes to better discern how they are enacted in contemporary America. This literature has provided keen insight into marriage as a changing institution but has also explored in detail many of the new institutions that have emerged as a result of this “post-dating” culture, such as cohabitation and “hooking up” (Bogle 2008; Brown 2005; Cherlin 2004; England and Thomas 2007; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Sassler 2004).

However, as I started this research I was surprised at the lack of discussion around marital engagement and how it fits within this system of changing partnering practices. One might believe that this lack of discussion may mean that engagement is an old fashioned process but this appears to be far from the case. Outside of academia, engagement is alive and well, even if the norms concerning how it fits within contemporary relationships is sometimes unclear or unexamined.
Many representations of engagement in the media rely on the gendered scripts associated with the proposal: it is romantic, he asks her for her hand in marriage, he presents a (huge) diamond ring, and she is excited and says yes. While the script represented in the media appears clear, the norms concerning how to “do” engagement today appear shaky. For example, it is easy to find advice columns online and in the newspaper where people write in to ask questions about the proper ways to enact marital engagement. When should a couple become engaged? What do you do when one partner wants engagement and the other is not ready? Is it a good idea to become engaged before moving in together? In many ways, the questions concerning engagement found in these popular sources highlight two key ideas in my mind. First, engagement is a practice that some couples enact their relationships. Second, the rules associated with engagement may have changed as a result of the deinstitutionalization of American courtship. Instead of being linear and well defined, the anxiety surrounding engagement suggests more information is needed to grasp how engagement fits into contemporary relationship practices.

Within the literature, engagement is not discussed in detail, even when other related topics are the focus of the research, such as cohabitation or commitment to marriage. The cohabitation literature, which suggests that close to one-half of cohabiters have plans to marry their partner, is largely mute on engagement (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006; Sassler 2004; Thomson and Colella 1992; Watson and DeMeo 1987). Even the wedding literature, which seems as though it would be intimately connected to the topic of engagement, rarely mentions marital engagement. As a result, we know a lot about issues relevant to marital engagement but we know practically nothing about how engagement is used by couples to enact meaning within their partnership.
This dissertation provides preliminary research on marital engagement to highlight the need for work in this area. Indeed, participants in this study provided insight into some of the meanings that may be attached to marital engagement today. The groups uncovered in this work, Neotraditionals, Promisemakers, and Nestbuilders, all relied on engagement as a way of creating meaning both in their partnership and to the outside world about their relationship. Additionally, my research found that engagement is a complex ritual that marks the relationship as marriage oriented. It also demonstrates that the meanings of engagement are informed by both gender and institutionalized heterosexuality. For participants, engagement was not a simple, sweet step on the path to the altar; instead, engagement provided couples with an opportunity to celebrate their relationship and define it to family and friends. For couples, engagement acted in important ways for solidifying and/or defining their intimate relationship.

In this chapter, I will start by providing a summary of the key findings from this research. First, I will discuss the three groups that emerged from my data and how they enacted engagement within their partnerships. Afterwards, I will highlight key themes concerning how engagement fits into our understandings of contemporary relationship processes, including offering a preliminary definition of engagement that includes how it is a relationship transaction, a scripted and marked event, a privileged status, and a process that is embedded with gendered meanings. The second half of this chapter will discuss the limitations and implications of this work along with suggestions for future work on engagement and relationship processes.
Neotraditional, Promisemaker, and Nestbuilder Approaches to Engagement

The key findings from this dissertation center on the three groups that emerged from the data. These groups are defined by not only how they enact engagement, but also the meanings they attach to marriage and the rhythms of the relationship transactions they experience. In many ways, these findings suggest that contemporary relationships can take many different forms with the styles of the transitions being shaped by how the couples negotiate their relationship processes.

For Neotraditional couples, engagement is a rite of passage associated with marriage. Many of these couples entered their dating relationships with marriage on their minds; they wanted to marry, settle down, and start families and hoped to find someone with similar goals and values. These couples found commitment to marriage early in their partnership and dated to ensure compatibility for marriage. Once ready for engagement, the man in the partnership would plan a surprise proposal to officially become engaged to his partner. With the proposal the couple viewed themselves as officially engaged, solidified their commitment to each other, and notified their friends and family of their changed status. During their engagement, couples would plan their weddings and prepare for married life.

Alternatively, Nestbuilder couples approached engagement because they felt it was the appropriate way to enact their long-term commitment. Many of these couples dated for several years prior to engagement and had commitments based outside of marriage. Discussions of engagement emerged once the couple either started to think about having children or as the result of pressure from outsiders to “commit” to the partnership via marriage. Nestbuilder couples were often excited about their engagement and wedding but did not view these events as providing grounds for increased commitment to the partnership.
Instead, their engagement and wedding provided outsiders with confirmation of their commitment to each other.

Lastly, Promisemaker couples viewed their engagements as commitments to the partnership and marriage. For these couples, becoming engaged provided increased clarity in defining their relationship, increased individual reports of feeling committed to the partnership, and allowed couples to move from what they perceived as an “ambiguous” dating period to a relationship stage that was defined by commitment, marriage, and building a future together. Gender difference emerged most clearly in how Promisemaker couples enacted their engagements, with women relying on engagement as a marker of his commitment more readily than men, who used engagement to show his commitment to his partner.

*What is engagement?*

The central question of my research was to develop a foundational understanding of how couples comprehend and enact engagement in their relationships. The lack of literature on engagement provided me with a wide window through which to develop this project. Although the findings of this study are not generalizable to the engaged population in general, they support and build on findings from the literature on relationship progression and engagement. In addition, these findings suggest that engagement may be a significant stage in the life course for some couples that warrants consideration in future research. These key findings include engagement as a marked relationship transition, the proposal as a marker of engagement, and engagement as a public relationship status.
A marked relationship transition

For participants in this study, engagement provided couples with a clear relationship process that defined the couple as marriage oriented. The way that couples in this study enacted their proposals complemented the findings of Schweingruber et al (2004) in that the decision to become engaged and its timing was mutually discussed and agreed on by both partners. This provides strong support that relationship processes, especially the decision to marry and/or become engaged, is an intentional process that couples negotiate and plan together. Research on earlier courtship processes, particularly dating, hooking up, and cohabitation, suggest that early relationship processes may not be strongly negotiated before they happen (e.g., Bogle 2008; Sassler 2004). The lack of definition around these early courtship moments may stem from the lack of normative structure present in post-dating culture (Bogle 2008; Cherlin 2004; Ferguson 2007). In addition, the low levels of commitment attached to a hook-up, date, or even cohabitation may cause couples to be less careful when making early relationship transitions. Marriage is a legal and highly symbolic public commitment (Cherlin 2004) that couples make and it carries more sanctions if it does not work out. The need to “be sure” before making a significant commitment like marriage seems to provide couples who are thinking about engagement the momentum to discuss the transition and to follow social scripts concerning their proposals if they choose to formalize their commitment via marriage.

The value of engagement in providing couples with a normative structure though which to understand their relationship, both privately and publicly, was central to the findings of this dissertation. All except one couple planned and/or enacted a marriage proposal (e.g., Schweingruber et al 2004) to commemorate the start of their engagement or to
mark the official start of their wedding planning. The engagements of most couples mirrored findings by Schweingruber et al (2004) in that their engagements officially started with the proposal and not with their mutual agreement to marry. This research worked to better define and understand the issues concerning commitment to the partnership, an issue that was not addressed by Schweingruber et al (2004). For example, I found that a clear, mutual commitment to the partnership depended on how the couples understood the role of engagement in their relationship. For Neotraditional and Nestbuilder couples, commitment to the partnership was found to predate the proposal. For Neotraditional couples, the proposal was a celebration of their commitment to each other being “ready” for engagement and marriage. For Nestbuilders, I found that mutual long-term commitment to the partnership was established long before discussions of engagement developed and that these couples viewed engagement as largely functioning to signify the meaning of their relationship to their family and friends. The only group to view engagement as marking a new commitment to the relationship were Promisemakers. Within this group, engagement played a significant role in helping both individuals in the partnership know that their relationship was committed and long term. Gender played a key role in this group, with his proposal helping women clearly recognize that he was committed to their partnership to the point that he wanted to marry her.

The differences found in this study highlight the importance of understanding engagement as more than simply a commitment to marriage—that engagement is a complex process for couples that has different meanings depending on how couples think about commitment and how they view their life course as playing out.

Within these groups, connections to previous literatures discussing relationship processes were uncovered. For example, Surra and Hughes’ (1997) discussion of
relationship-driven versus event-driven relationships help to further understand the commitment processes occurring within these groups. While Nestbuilders were clearly relationship driven and Promisemakers were event driven, Neotraditional couples did not fit neatly within this framework. In some ways, such as their discussion of “markers” along their relationship history that guided them towards “being ready” for engagement, these couples also had a subtle way of allowing their relationships to develop naturally—although quickly—and rarely mentioned events as causing ups or downs in their feelings of commitment. For example, both Nestbuilders and Neotraditional couples reported little change in feelings of commitment with their formal engagements. However, Promisemakers, particularly the women in this group, would discuss feeling more committed and/or connected to their partner after the formal engagement.

Proposals, scripts, and marking engagement

A second key finding is related to the marriage proposal. Previous literature, particularly Schweigruber et al (2004) and Vannini (2004) suggest that marriage proposals are highly scripted events that, if followed carefully, would provide couples with a legitimate claim to the “engaged” status. The proposal script, according to Schweigruber et al (2004) and Vannini (2004), is that the man proposes to the woman, that the proposal is planned in some fashion, and that she is presented with a ring. Their findings concerning how couples enact their marriage proposals match closely with the non-scholarly literature and pop culture understandings of how proposals are enacted. The finer details, such as how he proposes, the words he says to her, and the location of the proposal, vary depending on the couple but do not deviate from the script in any significant way. For these authors, especially Schweigruber et al (2004), the reasons couples follow the script—as reported by the couples
they interviewed—was that the script, especially the story of the proposal—was required for others to view their engagement as legitimate. As the authors argued, “a ring and a story” were essential for the engagement to be creditable to outsiders.

The importance placed on the proposal script in the literature led me to believe that the script would be a common element in my interviews. However, I decided not to define engagement as requiring a proposal because I was interested in seeing how couples defined their engagements—indeed, if I defined engagement as involving a formal proposal I would limit the possibility that other kinds of engagements might emerge from the data. This also allowed me to discover how proposals—or lack of a proposal—were used by couples to frame their engagements.

For a majority of couples, especially Neotraditional and Promisemaker couples, the proposal was the defining moment in identifying their transition from “dating” to “engaged.” While each group’s commitment to their partnership was different, as discussed above, I was not surprised at how they enacted their proposals because their stories and the meanings they attached to the proposals fit the literature. While their proposals ranged from very planned to very casual, they all incorporated the marriage proposal as a central theme in defining their engagement. Couples noted that their engagements provided them with a special way to celebrate their commitment and that it also provided them with a context to confidently come out to their families as engaged to be married.

However, by recruiting individuals who identified as engaged I also encountered a small subset of couples who questioned and/or rejected the proposal script or who defined their engagement as separate from their proposal. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Frank and Kim completely rejected the proposal as the official marker of their engagement.
Their rejection of the proposal script was met with some disbelief from their friends but, overall, Frank felt that despite the hard time family and friends gave them, others accepted their agreement and announcement as legitimate. His experience with some friends and family members rejecting the proposal suggests that some couples may use engagement as a framework for shaping their relationship progression but that the proposal may not be a necessary component of being engaged. While the proposal is normative, it seems it may be possible to reject it and still have an engagement.

A second theme that emerged from my data that was lacking in the literature is in how couples time their engagements. Sassler and Miller (n.d.) note some participants talk about “being engaged to be engaged” but do not see themselves as legitimately engaged despite plans to become engaged in the future. Given the previously discussed literature, it seems as though “feeling engaged” and “being engaged” were connected. For many couples, especially Neotraditional and Promisemaker couples, this was true. When asked to talk about when they felt engaged, they would cite their proposal as the start of their engagement and further questions about “feeling engaged” were met with the same answer. For these couples, there was a clear delineation between being boyfriend/girlfriend and engagement. These reports are consistent with Schweingruber et al (2004).

Nestbuilder couples tended to report different understandings of “feeling engaged” and “being engaged.” For these couples, differentiations between informal and formal engagement were discussed in some detail. These couples often started to think of themselves as engaged around the time that they determined that they were ready to move forward with planning their proposal. Commitment to the partnership was high for these couples before serious engagement talks occurred and often one partner (usually the woman) would report
privately thinking of the partnership as engaged before the other. However, both partners would often discuss feeling engaged before the proposal occurred. For these couples, the informal engagement was highlighted by the lack of change in both their partnership and how they thought about their partnership after their formal proposal/engagement. In many ways, they described feeling strange about their proposals because others treated them as though the relationship was now different when, based on their experiences, everything about their relationship felt the same after their engagement. The key differences that occurred with formal engagement are that a) a proposal occurred and b) outsiders learned of the engagement.

*Engagement as a public status*

Additionally, this research uncovered how marital engagement works as a public status for the couples’ private relationships. While Schweingruber et al (2004) discuss the importance of having a proposal story to share in creating a “legitimate” proposal, this dissertation found that the public nature of the engagement works not only to confirm the legitimacy of the engagement but, and perhaps more significantly, functions to signify to outsiders that the couple is seriously committed to each other.

The importance of the proposal as a sign of commitment to the partnership was found only for Promisemaker couples. However, the role of the proposal in communicating commitment to outsiders varied in significant ways. For couples who had been dating for three or four years, the proposal appeared to bring relief and a sense of understanding to those outside the relationship that the couple was serious and marriage oriented. This perception appears to be clearly based in the social meanings attached to engagement and marriage and not in outsiders having knowledge of the commitment within a couple’s
relationship. In many ways, it appears that one of the most important roles of engagement is that it allows others to make sense of the relationship, since two of the three groups in this study (Neotraditional and Nestbuilder) felt secure in their commitments and plans apart from their engagements. For these couples, becoming engaged was not a confirmation of commitment; instead, it was understood as a rite of passage, a way to celebrate the commitment they had together, or as a way to confirm to others that they were planning marriage. Only Promisemakers viewed their proposal as a source of increased commitment to the relationship.

The literature identifies marriage as an important and highly symbolic relationship for the couples who undertake it (Cherlin 2004) that remains highly institutionalized in its form and meanings. From my interviews with couples in this study, it was clear that marriage held value for them and their relationship. For some couples, particularly Neotraditionals and Promisemakers, their relationship progressions were designed around having marriage as a goal. In this way, marriage was a highly valued status for the couple. As a result, the transition to becoming engaged confirmed to others what they suspected for the partnership: that they were marriage oriented and, now that they are ready, they will confirm this status with engagement. These couples received a lot of positive support and reported few awkward or difficult interactions with outsiders, most likely because outsiders understood that they were marriage oriented and clearly valued the institution of marriage.

For Nestbuilders, the relationship between the value of marriage and the perspective of outsiders was rougher to negotiate. For these couples, the relationship-driven nature of their partnerships (Surra and Hughes 1997) allowed them to build very strong commitments to each other that, outside of their cohabitations, appeared to be vague and ill-defined to
outsiders. For example, these couples would report being teased about not being married or
told when they would “settle down” or “commit” to each other. Many of these couples
reported pressure to marry from outsiders. The engagements for these couples worked
efficiently to declare to outsiders that they were committed to each other and that they were
planning to marry. For these couples, the newfound interest and appreciation they reported
for their partnership after announcing their engagement provided further evidence to
outsiders who appeared to be unable to understand the private commitments couples held
within their relationships.

Gender and “doing” engagement

At various points in my findings, I highlighted issues concerning gender in my data.
From the literature on proposals, the wedding industry, and, to a lesser extent, relationship
processes, I was anticipating that my findings would be more defined by gender than they
actually were. In many ways, the scripts identified in the literature by both Schweingruber et
al (2004) and Vannini (2004) for how to enact engagement suggested men and women would
have wholly different experiences as they negotiated the transition into engagement. For
example, Schweingruber et al (2004) suggested that gender plays a major role in how men
and women plan, enact, and report their proposals. Although I did find gender differences, I
was surprised that it seemed to matter less than I was anticipating. Instead, couples seemed
focused on maintaining a mix of gender equality along with “doing” their engagement using
the socially defined, gendered scripts provided to them. In many ways, the inequality that
presented itself in how the proposal was formed was not viewed by most couples as a symbol
of inequality but rather as a romantic rite they were following.
During the era of dating culture and earlier, courtship was highly defined by gender (Bailey 1989; Freedman and D’Emilio 1988; Whyte 1992). Men and women had specific roles within the courtship process that, from the literature, appear to have been fairly rigid and institutionalized. Although there is little scholarly research on how marital engagements were negotiated or enacted prior to the post-dating period, it seems fair to assume that gender helped to shape this transaction also, since both courtship and—especially for privileged classes—marriage were highly gendered institutions (Freedman and D’Emilio 1988). With the transition to post-dating culture, the normative structure that once guided heterosexual partnering norms became less stable while new, less regulated courtship practices, such as hooking up and nonmarital cohabitation, emerged (Bogle 2008; Cherlin 2004; Sassler 2004). The major outcome of this shift away from a norm-driven courtship culture was that the roles between men and women in heterosexual relationships became less defined and, in many ways, more focused on creating equality between the sexes.

This deinstitutionalization of courtship practices is likely the main reason for the varied engagement experiences couples in this study reported. For both men and women, the negotiation of engagement was a mutual affair and not a decision that one partner had over the partnership. In addition, the courtships of couples in this study, which ranged from going on dates to hanging out and hooking up, were not clearly defined by understandings of gender difference. Men and women both reported being the ones who initiated various parts of their early courtships. The freedoms couples experience concerning gender expectations in how they partnered were discussed but not in a way that led me to believe that participants felt as though they were violating courtship rules; indeed, it appeared as though they did not
feel gender rules applied. Instead, both men and women sought out interactions and meetings with their partner during the early stages of courtship.

The gender neutrality of participants’ courtships was also present in how couples negotiated their engagements. Unlike popular films, in which the man is often shown as being in charge, my findings reflected those of Schweingruber et al (2004) in that the negotiation of proposal timing was fairly balanced. With the exception of a few Promisemaker couples, men and women negotiated being ready for marriage together and, if one partner was not ready, the other had no problem waiting for their partner to be ready for engagement as long as they felt their partner was committed to them. While more women reported waiting for their partner to be ready, I did have cases where men were waiting for their partner to be ready. Across couples, the choice to become engaged was negotiated together.

However, gender differences emerged in the rituals of engagement that couples enacted. For example, proposals and wedding planning provided couples with opportunities to engage in highly gendered performances. For all couples who had a proposal, none had a proposal that was planned and enacted by the woman in the partnership. When asked to explain why he was the one to “pop the question,” both men and women, including couples who stressed that they were egalitarian, would give reasons to support using the script. For men, common reasons included that it was it was expected that he would be the one to propose or that he wanted to propose to her because she would find it romantic. For women, reasons given for waiting for him to propose included not wanting him to feel pressured to become engaged, because she always envisioned him proposing to her, she thought it would be romantic, or that she knew it was something he was looking forward to doing for her. For
both men and women, the reasons to resort to using the gendered proposal scripts reflected an understanding of proposals as gendered arenas for men and women. Similarly, the reasons provided to explain differences in time and energy spent on wedding planning also relied on gendered explanations to justify the inequality, with most participants noting that weddings were something that interested her and not him.

With the exception of the hooking up literature (Bogle 2008; England and Thomas 2007; Glenn and Marquardt 2001), gender is often left out of contemporary discussions of relationship processes. When it is discussed, it is treated as a variable and not as a social institution that creates different experiences and expectations for men and women. However, the marriage literature is rich in studies examining gender difference across various relationship experiences, most notably in the areas of families and work and parenting (Arendell 2000; Gerson 2010; Hochschild 1989; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, and Lamb 2000; South and Spitze 1994). My findings, while not representative of all engaged relationships, suggest that gender may operate in heterosexual relationships in ways that challenge conventional understandings of gender, especially when examining relationship processes. A more focused investigation will determine exactly how gender shapes union formation.

**Limitations**

This dissertation has three key limitations. The exploratory nature of this research helped to better define how some couples understand marital engagement and provided a basis for theorizing relationship processes and for thinking about appropriate methodologies to use in future research. Here, I will take the opportunity to reflect on the choices I made in this study and outline limitations that, if addressed in future work on engagement, could help those interested in relationship progression become more familiar with how engagement
operates in contemporary American society. These limitations include defining the sample, the sampling method used, and the methodological timeline used in recruiting participants. I will address each of these limitations in more detail, reflecting on how these considerations could be incorporated into future research on marital engagement.

**Defining the sample**

A key limitation of this study was defining the sample that I wanted to study. As I explained in my methodology, I was interested in limiting the sample to couples who were taking the most “traditional” pathways to marriage and, as a result, many couples who may identify themselves as being engaged were removed from the study. As a result, the experiences and stories of couples who were entering second or higher marriages, those who were pregnant or had small children together, or who considered themselves engaged but felt they would not “count” for this study for whatever reasons, were left unheard. To truly understand how engagement is used today would require a more representative sample of those practicing engagement within their partnerships.

**Purposive, limited sample**

Many of the participants in my interviews were white and highly educated. Of the 56 individuals in the 28 relationships discussed in this study (number includes noninterviewed partners), only three had educations limited to a high school diploma. An overwhelming majority of participants were working on or had completed some graduate work (N=28) and the remainder were in college, had completed a Bachelor’s degree, or had a post-high school technical degree. In addition, several participants who had completed graduate training told me during their interview that they volunteered for the study because they remembered how
hard it was to collect data for their own graduate research. As a result, there is likely a clear bias in those willing to take time to participate in this project.

Another limitation of the sample is related to the sampling limitations. Those who are the most likely to qualify for the study, especially in terms of entering a first marriage and being child free, are going to be individuals who have pursued higher education (e.g., Goldstein and Kenny 2001). Because of the relationship between education, age at first marriage, and age at first birth for women, it is highly possible that those who met the requirements for participation were a select group of men and women who fit within this particular demographic trend.

Additionally, the use of heterosexual couples further limited the findings. This resulted in a sample that was, for the most part, largely heteronormative in terms of how they perceived relationships, gender roles within their partnerships, and in their understandings of how to enact their partnerships. While this limitation does benefit the study by allowing for understandings of heterosexuality to be discussed in this work, it would be beneficial to open future research to recruiting and using a more diverse sample of participants. This would allow for a better understanding of how institutionalized heterosexuality organizes the relationship practices of not only heterosexual men and women, but also the practices of non-normative heterosexuals and non-heterosexual men and women.

**Timeline for sampling**

A third limitation is related to the timeline within couples’ relationship progressions where couples were sampled. By sampling couples who fit the study criteria and who considered themselves engaged, I was able to develop some findings about how these couples enacted their engagements. However, this method is problematic because it may
allow couples to over-interpret of their qualifications for the study. For example, a couple may consider themselves engaged but assume that a study about “marital engagement” is focused on couples who had “grand” proposals and that the researcher is not really interested in their experience. An alternative way to avoid these issues with timeline would be to sample newlyweds and to interview them about how their relationship progressed from “dating” to “married.” This method would reveal if there are variations in how couples enact engagement but would also provide a more informed context for understanding how the transition to marriage is negotiated and understood by contemporary couples. By seeking out “engagement,” which may be interpreted in different ways by couples based on my findings and the previous literature (e.g., Sassler and Miller n.d.; Schweingruber et al 2004), it is very possible that recruiting “engaged” couples led me to only find those who viewed themselves as engaged through traditional definitions (e.g., had a proposal story).

These limitations are important to consider in the context of the findings of this study. The exploratory nature of this dissertation does provide some insight into how some couples who participated in this study understand and enact their engagements. The lack of prior research in how couples negotiate marriage provides evidence that engagement may be a varied experience for couples. More research is needed to better comprehend how engagement fits within relationship progressions. The above limitations should be viewed as opportunities for future research seeking to expand on the findings in this study to work towards building more generalizable data on engagement.

**Implications of Research**

Two central implications developed from this dissertation that provides insight into both the contemporary relationship processes literature and how we might study couple
relationships in the future. First, these findings suggest a need to bring discussions of institutionalized heterosexual into how family scholars study and interpret contemporary partnering patterns. While the families literature has made good efforts to understand the dynamics of gender in relationship processes (e.g., Bogle 2008; Sassler and Miller n.d.; Schweingruber et al 2004), more focus on heteronormativity would highlight and provide better context to understanding both heterosexual and non-heterosexual unions. Secondly, the use of qualitative dyadic data by this project clearly outlines some of the advantages and limitations of doing separate interviews with both members. In this section, I will review these implications in more detail.

*Bridging family processes with sexualities*

The issue of sexuality, in particular heteronormativity, is largely ignored within the study of families. Indeed, emerging research on gay and lesbian families provided one of the first opportunities for sexuality to be integrated into the field (e.g., Carrington 1999, Stacey and Biblarz 2001). However, this interest in understanding sexual diversity does not bring to the forefront an honest discussion of sexuality, in particular heteronormativity, as a foundation through which family processes are imagined, socialized, and practiced by a majority of couples. For example, it is rare for scholars to integrate the meanings of sexuality into discussions of how we partner within the families literature. While some outside of families studies have worked to trouble gender and sexuality within marriage as an institution (e.g., Ingraham1999; Shanley 2004; West 2007), for the most part the forces of heteronormativity are unspoken of, which leads me to imagine that they are viewed as nonissues for discussion.
However, my findings suggest that there may be merit in better understanding relationship processes as they are related to heteronormative constructions of partnering. At the very least, I believe that an honest discussion of these forces could help the relationship processes literature develop a more complex meaning of not only how relationships work, but also why they work the way they do. My concern for envisioning partnering and engagement practices though a lens of heteronormativity kept pushing me to think about the stories I heard as being something more than individual choices to marry or individual choices to enact engagement in any one way. In many ways, especially given the stories I shared from participants in the previous chapter, it appears that institutionalized heterosexuality, as imagined not only by my participants but also by their friends, families, and everyday experiences, shaped and motivated many of the choices they made about their partnerships. While the meanings Neotraditional, Promisemaker, and Nestbuilder couples attached to their engagements varied, the views of engagement and marriage each group had relied on the notion that marriage was a normal, natural, and right part of how to enact their partnership. Institutionalized heterosexuality is a privileged status position that differentially rewards those who follow it and penalizes those who stray from it (e.g., West 2007). As a result, these findings suggest that an integration of this literature into the study of relationship processes would be very valuable in better comprehending the social organization of intimate partner relationships.

*Qualitative, dyadic data*

Research on relationship processes and contemporary romantic relationships have used a mix of both couple (e.g., Sassler and Miller n.d.; Schweingruber et al 2004; Surra and Hughes 1997) and individual data about couples (e.g., Bogle 2008; Sassler 2004). However,
for a majority of these studies there is a lack of discussion concerning the purpose of using individual versus dyadic data. In this section, I want to reflect on what I learned from using dyadic data in this project and to think about when dyadic data is necessary for studying relationship processes and when individual data might suffice.

Overall, I would argue that this dissertation benefited from using qualitative data gathered from both partners. Although I was unable to gather dyadic data from all 28 couples, I was able to gather dyadic data for 18 of the couples. My initial desire to collect dyadic data was so that I would have separate “slices” or accounts (Glaser and Strauss 1967) of the partnership so that I could better understand how gender fit within the accounts couples provided for their courtship and engagement stories. Both Sassler and Miller (n.d.) and Schweingruber et al (2004) relied on couple data because they were interested in studying gender processes within their research. In my data, couples reported similar stories and differences in their accounts were minor. This was a bit surprising, given that I expected to find that men and women would experience their partnerships though gendered lens.

However, I was able to use these similar stories during my analysis. Having two accounts of the same relationship allowed me to develop a better understanding of how couples worked together to create their engagement. Dyadic data was especially helpful in thinking about early group formation because it highlighted major parallels in how couples talked about their relationship. I found that couples who participated in the study tended to talk about the meanings within their relationships in similar ways. For example, Neotraditional couples would both talk about their early desires to settle down and start a family while Nestbuilder couples would talk about letting their relationship move at its own pace. For these groups, having interviews with both members helped me to focus in on the
narratives they attached to their relationships. In forming groups, the common narratives that emerged from my discussions with couples played a major role in shaping the groups reported in this dissertation. Additionally, these narratives emerged as part of a discussion of how participants talked about their relationship histories and desires for marriage. This was especially helpful because participants had a difficult time answering questions about the meanings they attached to their relationships and in identifying the reasons for many of the choices they made. The overarching narratives from both members helped to highlight some of the answers to questions participants had a difficult time answering because most dyads told very similar stories about how and why their relationship progressed the way it did.

However, the neat linear matches in relationship forms and progression were lost in my discussions with Promisemakers. For these couples, particularly ones who viewed engagement as the man’s commitment to the partnership, the meanings within the relationship stories varied between partners. Often, women’s accounts were emotional and focused on fears or worries during courtship that he was not truly “committed” to her because he was hesitant to live with her and/or become engaged. Men’s accounts of the relationship progression matched their partners’ but were more relaxed in tone. These men often talked about her worries that he was not committed to her and that the pressure he felt to become engaged to her was troublesome. Men stressed that, despite her worries about his commitment, that he truly was committed to her. However, for whatever reason, he was just not ready for engagement and he wished she could see his commitment to her beyond his hesitation to become engaged. From these interviews, I was able to focus on the importance of the idea of “commitment” being central to how Promisemakers constructed their relationships. Without engagement, long-term Promisemaker relationships appear to involve
a constant tension. For this study, having both accounts of this strain allowed for an analysis of this disjunction and how it shaped the relationship.

Collecting couple data also allowed me to observe that having matching ideologies concerning partnering led to having the smoothest relationship progressions. Neotraditional and Nestbuilder couples were, in many ways, mirror opposites of each other in terms of how they understood marriage and how their relationships progressed. However, I would argue that having harmony between partners in a relationship concerning how the relationship should work—regardless of how one understands the relationship—allows couples to grow together and come to engagement in a way that allows them to never doubt the commitments they are building. Alternatively, for those with mismatched views of what commitment means, such as Promisemakers, the relationships involve much more drama. Instead of moving together and having a sense of trust in what is to come, these couples rely on engagement and marriage to define for them what their commitment is to each other. Without this symbolic act, the definitions members attach to the relationship are misaligned. This finding would have been difficult or impossible without having accounts from both members in the partnership.

While I found that having dyadic data was helpful, the similarities in most of the stories suggest that future research could focus on data from one member and still maintain valid accounts of the relationship process. Research wishing to understand gender differences in accounts or experiences within a partnership appear to benefit from using dyadic data. Research interested in questions related to relationship experiences, timelines, and projections of clearly measured or conceptualized events could likely use individual data with minimal risk to validity. Data from single members of the partnership would reduce
interviewing labor and allow for more couples’ stories to be integrated into the research. However, I would suggest carefully writing the interview guide to allow for comments about the partner’s perceptions and feelings about different parts of the relationship to be discussed so that differences can emerge from the data if they exist. For example, I was able to categorize Promisemakers by the different stories each member told about commitment within their partnership. Because I did not ask participants to talk about their partner’s feelings, influence, or actions during interviews, I would not have learned that Promisemaker men and women viewed commitment to the partnership in different ways. However, if I had anticipated difference, I could have asked about how the participant’s partner experienced the engagement and gained information second hand.

**Future Research**

There are many directions that research on marital engagement, relationship processes, and commitment to marry can move. For the most part, this is a literature that is currently developing (Sassler 2004) and there are several key questions that could be explored in more detail to allow researchers to better understand union formation, especially how couples commit to marriage. In this section, I will divide my discussion of future research into addressing two key areas. First, there is a need for continued research on understanding how marital engagement is defined, recognized, and used by couples and outsiders in contemporary partnerships. Additionally, historical work on this topic will provide a better context for understanding changes in couples and commitment to marriage over the last several decades. Second, future research should continue to focus on considering how intimate relationships develop across a wide range of demographic groups.
Within this work, it is critical that work develops that frames relationships processes, especially normative ones, though the lens of institutionalized heterosexuality.

**Developing representative work on defining engagement**

This dissertation highlighted the complexities and problems of studying marital engagement during a period where courtship norms are increasingly destabilized. The first goal of future research on engagement should focus on continuing to learn about what engagement is, how it is negotiated within partnerships, and the meanings it has to the couple, outsiders, and society at large. The following suggestions for work on this topic will continue to help fill in the gap present in the literature by better understanding the function of engagement in contemporary relationships.

First, a representative study exploring who, how, and which couples use engagement will contribute significant knowledge to the literature by providing insight that was not possible by this work, namely representative data. While popular sources, such as advice columns, magazines, and the media provide evidence that marital engagement is a common practice with norms attached, it is unclear who practices engagement. Is it only a particular subset of the population? Do different groups envision engagement in different ways? Do the norms attached to engagement change across groups? It is very possible that the meaning of engagement is varied and flexible depending on who is using the term, much like the term “hooking up” or the meanings attached to cohabitation (e.g., Bogle 2008; Sassler 2004).

One way to gather representative data on marital engagement would be to sample couples who have recently married and to ask them about how they negotiated, framed, or labeled their premarital time together. Did they consider themselves engaged? How did they
negotiate marriage? How did they discuss their relationship transitions with their friends and family? By doing this, not only would one be able to gather a sample representing who married but one would also be able to learn if engagement is a common practice or if it is limited to specific groups in society. While this method of sampling would possibly limit low income couples who are less likely to marry but who may consider themselves engaged (e.g., Edin et al 2004), it would provide evidence into the frequency in which engagement is used by couples who marry. Additional studies could focus on how engagement is defined and enacted within populations that were selected out of this dissertation, including lower income individuals, individuals entering second or higher marriages, and couples with children.

Additionally, a more representative account of the meaning of engagement today could be found though a representative attitudinal survey. This method would be ideal for learning what men and women view as engagement and would help further both findings from this study and from other work (e.g., Schweingruber et al 2004) about what constitutes engagement and how outsiders view the relationship transition. This method could include questions about both the participant’s personal experiences with engagement (i.e., have you ever been engaged? Was there a ring? How did you and your partner start talking about marriage?) but also include questions about how engagements are accomplished, what events take place during engagement, what criteria or milestones couples should pass before talking about engagement, and vignettes addressing various norms concerning engagement. Although this project would not focus on couples enacting engagement, it would allow for outsiders to provide input into the norms and expectations attached to contemporary marital engagement.
Lastly, accounts from older generations could also provide more of a historical context for how couples negotiate marriage and enact (or not) marital engagement. Much of the research on relationship processes, particularly work focusing on post-dating culture and cohabitation, focuses on the lives of college students and individuals in their 20s during the past 20 years (e.g., Bogle 2008; Sassler 2004; Surra and Hughes 1997). Little information is known about how older generations related to marital engagement in the past or even how older generations today negotiate relationships post-divorce. Additionally, much of what we know about relationships in the past seem to be collected from secondary sources such as writings, pictures, and accounts and not from individuals as part of a systematic study of courtship practices. Research that gathers stories about partnering practices in the past will provide a better context for understanding the changing meanings of marriage over time.

*Commitment within partnerships*

While there is a substantial literature on commitment processes in relationship formation (e.g., Sassler 2004; Surra and Hughes 1997), a majority of this literature is quantitative and focused on demographic trends and patterns within partnerships. More qualitative research is needed to explain the patterns found in largely demography-focused quantitative literature. For example, Sassler’s (2004) qualitative study of the reasons couples enter cohabiting unions provided a context to better understand cohabitations that were loosely linked with commitment processes, such as when one partner lost their job and needed a place to live. This same insight is needed in investigating other aspects of late term union formation, especially marital engagement and/or the negotiation of marriage for a partnership. Although it is helpful to recognize demographic trends, qualitative research could better explain what is going on in partnerships. This study provides a good example for
the urgency of developing more qualitative work in this area. In rare cases, when engagement is mentioned in the literature, it is either not conceptualized or conceptualized by the authors in a way that does not match common understandings of what engagement means. This study found that, while definitions of engagement are consistent across couples studied, the meanings and practices couples enacted during their engagements were varied and could be very difficult to capture in a quantitative project unless the variable was carefully conceptualized to encompass a range of definitions. Qualitative research allows details to emerge that shed light on new questions and directions for research that may be hidden in a more deductive approach.

Additionally, the relationship processes literature is dominated by research on normative, heterosexual relationships. The exclusion of other types of relationship patterns and experiences by those who are nonheterosexual and/or nonnormative is important in developing a better awareness of the role of heteronormativity in relationship processes. The family literature is essentially mute in examining social forces that shape partnering experiences and an integration of sexuality studies would help to better inform the relationship formation literature, particularly when attempting to include heteronormativity in relationship processes.

The first consideration, exploring commitment in nonheterosexual relationships, should be to develop parallel research to explore the dynamics present in same sex partnerships. How do these couples understand commitment? What milestones do they celebrate in their partnerships? What are their goals (e.g., children, home ownership)? The current tendency of activists in this area, particularly those advocating for the legalization of same sex marriage, appears to be “we’re just like them” in comparing their partnerships to
heterosexual marriage. Having a better understanding of how these partnerships work, with focus on both commonalities to heterosexual marriages but also keen focus on the differences in the relationship progression and commitment processes, would allow for a better conceptualization of these partnerships. Much like the research that has been done on comprehending same-sex parenting in the context of heterosexual parenting (e.g., Stacey and Biblarz 2001), this data could provide better justification for providing social policies and legal protections to these families.

In addition, while recognition of normative nonheterosexual relationships are important to understand, there are also individuals whose partnering practices deviate from the norm. The relationship processes, ideologies, and challenged of those who are asexual and who remain single, those who are in open or otherwise nonmonogamous relationships, and those who practice polyamory could be explored in more systematic ways in the relationship processes literature. With both of these directions, researching “the other” would help researchers better comprehend of how social forces, expectations, and desires construct relationship outcomes across a diverse base of relationship types.

This research has provided a detailed exploration of how some couples use marital engagement to construct their relationships, negotiate marriage, and provide meaning to friends and family about their commitment to each other. In many ways, these findings suggest that engagement today may be an institution with varied reasons behind how it is practiced. For some couples, engagement was a very traditional way of negotiating marriage and provided a clear framework for how to organize, envision, and plan their futures together. For other couples, engagement provided a way to create meanings for those outside the relationship, who felt that the promise of marriage brought meanings concerning
commitment to the partnership to the couple. Indeed, the complexities of how engagement fits within the relationship processes of these participants highlight the need for more research to examine how engagement fits into contemporary courtships. In some ways, it appears that engagement holds on due to socialized traditions related to gender and heterosexuality. However, given the importance of engagement for outsiders to find meaning in participants’ private relationships is intriguing and highlights the need to bring critical examination to institutionalized heterosexuality into the relationship processes literature.
REFERENCE LIST


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APPENDIX 1: RECRUITMENT FLYER

Marital Engagement Study

Are you engaged to your partner? I’d like to talk to you about it!

I am looking for engaged heterosexual individuals and couples willing to be interviewed about their engagement and relationship.

You are eligible to participate if:

- You and your partner consider yourselves engaged to be married
- Neither you nor your partner have been married before
- Neither you nor your partner have children

Participating individuals will be interviewed about their relationship and engagement. Interviews will last approximately 1-2 hours. Individuals will be compensated $10 for participating. Couples (interviewed separately) will be compensated $25 for participating.

If you are interested or would like more information, please contact Erica Hunter by email (eh8199@albany.edu) or leave a voice mail at (518) 442-3979 (office).

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University at Albany. Research done in conjunction with the Department of Sociology at the University at Albany.
APPENDIX 2: NEWSPAPER ADVERTISMENT

Researcher seeking engaged couples for a research study. Participating couples must be entering first marriages and have no children. If eligible, each member will be interviewed separately. Couples will be compensated $25 for participating. For more information, please email Erica Hunter at eh8199@albany.edu or leave a message at 518.442.3979. This research is being conducted though the University at Albany and has been approved by its Institutional Review Board.
APPENDIX 3: CONSENT FORM

Marital Engagement and Relationship Study
Consent Form

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing to participate in a study on marital engagement and couple relationships. This interview is being conducted by Erica Hunter, M.A., a doctoral student at the University at Albany and will be used to complete a dissertation on marital engagement. This research is being done under the supervision of her dissertation chair, Dr. Glenna Spitze, at the University at Albany.

Your involvement in this project will be to complete an open ended interview that I anticipate will last between 1 and 2 hours each. I will ask your permission to tape record your interview. This interview will ask questions about your relationship history, the history of your current relationship, how your relationship changed once you became engaged, and what you think is typical in terms of how other couples you know experience engagement. In addition, I will ask some questions about your demographic background. Your partner will be asked the same questions. I am interviewing each of you separately because I am interested in knowing each of your experiences with engagement. As a result, I request that you do not discuss your interview with your partner until I have completed both interviews.

To compensate you for your time, each couple will be given $25. This money will be distributed to the partner who attends the second interview. Although you may not personally benefit from this research, the information you provide will help others gain a better understanding of engagement and couple relationships. I do not anticipate any risk in your participation beyond possible discomfort answering some of the questions. If there is a question you are uncomfortable answering, simply let me know and we can continue on to the next question. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the Institutional Review Board, the sponsor of the study, and University or government officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records.

By signing this consent form, you understand that:

- You will be answering questions about current and past relationships and your views about marital engagement today.
- All personal information that you provide will be kept confidential. Files with identifiable information (consent form, audio recordings) will be stored in a locked cabinet separate from transcribed and edited materials. In addition, you understand that the researcher will not share what you say with your partner nor will you be told what your partner has said.
- All publications that result from this research will use pseudonyms to protect your identity. Other identifying information that could harm your image or relationship will be changed to protect your privacy.
- Your participation in this research is completely voluntary.
- You may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty.
- You may also choose not to answer any question(s) you do not wish to for any reason.
- Each couple will be compensated $25 for their participation in this study.
You will be given a copy of this consent form for your personal records. You have the right as a participant to contact the researcher or her faculty supervisor if you have any questions or concerns about your participation. You can reach Erica Hunter at 518.442.3979 or by email at eh8199@albany.edu. You can reach Dr. Glenna Spitze at 518.442.4667 or by email at g.spitze@albany.edu. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University at Albany Office of Research Compliance at 518-437-4569 (toll free 800-365-9139) or orc@uamail.albany.edu.

_____ I agree to participate in this study. I have read and understand the information provided about this study.

_____ I give permission for my interview to be audio recorded for the purpose of transcribing.

_____ I do not give permission for my interview to be audio recorded for the purpose of transcribing.

Signature_____________________________ Date____________________

Name (Print) ______________________________
APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW GUIDE

In this interview, I am interested in listening to your experiences and stories about your relationships and views of engagement and marriage. I’ll be asking you a few broad questions. Feel free to answer with any response that comes to mind because I am really interested in your experiences and ideas. If I need clarification on something you say, I’ll let you know.

Relationship History

Before we start talking about your relationship with, I am interested in hearing about other serious relationships that you have had in the past. Can you tell me about all of the serious relationships you have had, other than the one with?

Prompts: age when relationship began
Length of relationship(s)
Level of commitment (cohabitation, children, engagement)
Why relationship(s) ended

Current Relationship

Now I would like to talk about your relationship with <cp>. Can you give me a history of your relationship? I am interested in hearing about the whole progression of your relationship, from how you met <cp> to up until now.

Early Relationship
Prompts: how/where did you meet <cp>?  
First impressions?  
What activities you did together (dates)?

Cohabitation (if ap)
How did you and <cp> end up living together?  
How did your relationship change?  
<if no> do you have plan to?  
Why or why not?

Talk about marriage
When did you first start talking about marriage?  
Prompts: who started these conversations?  
What were these conversations like?  
Why do you want to marry <cp>?  
Did you talk to anyone other than <cp> about getting engaged?

Engagement
When did your engagement start?  
When did you start to think of yourself as being engaged?  
Prompt: How long will your engagement be?
Why did you feel you were engaged at that point?

Proposal
Did you and <cp> have a proposal?
Prompts: what happened?
How did you feel about it?

Ring (if given)
What kind of ring?
Did you pick it out?
Is the ring important for your engagement?
Why or why not?

Did you tell anyone about your engagement?
Prompt: who did you tell?
When did you tell them?
What did you tell them?
What was their reaction?

Do you plan on doing anything special because of your engagement, i.e. shower?
Prompt: what events are you thinking you’ll do?
Are there any you think your <cp> may do?
Who is hosting these events?
How do you feel about them?

Engaged Life
Has your relationship with <cp> changed now that you are engaged?
Prompt: time spent at home?
Things they want/don’t want you to do now?
Has your relationship with others, such as friends and family, changed?
Prompt: How?
Why do you think that is?

Understanding Engagement/Marital Norms

Finally, I am interested in talking to you about engagement in more general terms to get an idea of how you think the typical couple experiences engagement.

Engagement Norms
Prompts: when do you think it is appropriate for a couple to get engaged?
How long should an engagement last? What is too short, too long?
Why this length?
Should couples cohabit before marriage?
Why, why not?
Is it okay to break an engagement?
What reasons?

Marriage ideology
Prompts: What does marriage mean to you, in regards to <cp>?
Are there things that you think are best done after a couple gets married?
In what ways do you think it will be similar/different than your parents?
Is getting married different from other arrangements, like cohabitation?
How?

Demographic Information
Thank you for sharing your stories and experiences with me. Before we end, I want to ask you a few background questions.

(Ask ones that I do not know from interview)
Age:
Race/Ethnic identity:
Religious affiliation:
Religiosity:
Class:
Living situation:
Children:
Education level:
Work: