

Marriage 101

Instructions & Questions for Conducting and Writing Up the Mentor Couple Interviews

Overview and rationale

While challenging, this assignment should be fun. It is consistently rated the most enjoyable component of Marriage 101. Read these directions carefully to get the most out of it.

The couple interviews you will be doing are an opportunity to observe and check out the concepts you have been learning about in the course—to bring them to theoretical concepts to life. In this respect, they resemble lab experiences in some science classes which demonstrate concretely what their textbooks are describing theoretically.

Unlike lab experiments in chemistry class, the couples you will be interviewing are all unique with different histories and experiences of their relationships. Some of them will be happier and more content than others. Some will be poster examples of how to succeed in intimate relationships allowing you to witness the substantial pleasures achieved when one does. Some will be on second marriages and may tell you about the scars left from prior disappointments, as well as discomfort in their current ones. Some will be more insightful than others in describing their experiences; and some pairs will differ on just what happened and how to interpret those events. Almost certainly each couple will have struggled with some unforeseen challenges along the way. Some may wish to minimize the actual pains they have experienced, while others will proudly tell you how they faced them and grew from such challenges. All should prove instructive to you. Whatever your couple's experiences have been, their accounts should breathe real life into the concepts you have been studying.

After completing your interviews, you will have a chance to compare your couple's marriage(s) with your parents' marriage(s), and with the couples interviewed by your classmates. These discussions should further deepen your understanding of course concepts, and allow you to consider the great diversity of modern marriages, while pondering the question of what leads to success and happiness in intimate relationships.

Scheduling

Call your assigned couple as soon as possible to schedule your interview in their home, ideally for about three weeks into the course (the interviews will be better if you've had some course material to orient you, but don't delay since your write-ups are due during the sixth week of the course.)

The couple are expecting your call and have received a letter from us describing the rationale for the interview. So that they will have some lead time to prepare for the interview, we have also enclosed a copy of the questions that you may be asking them.

Tell the couple to allow about 90 minutes for the interview and try to pick a time when they will be free from interruptions.

Interviewing strategy

When you begin the interview, thank the couple for agreeing to talk honestly with you about their marriage. Let them know a bit about the course and how it is going for you. We have oriented them some and given them the list of questions below, but they will want to hear from you in a more personal way. Your own honesty will help them be honest with you in what follows.

Tell them that if a question feels too personal or makes them too uncomfortable they may decline to answer it.

Take the role of “reporter” who has some ground you know you want to cover, but who **also is able to “follow leads” as things develop** in the interview (this is one mistake students frequently make, not following up on interesting developments).

Allow yourself to change the order or wording of the questions as necessary to keep the interview flowing. (To allow yourself to do this, you’ll need to review the questions enough times so that you pretty much know most of the topics by heart before you go to the interview.)

Don’t get so caught up in slavishly asking all the suggested questions that you forget to remain curious about what you are hearing. The main idea is to cover the big topics which appear below in bold print, and to let the couple talk reflectively about what they have learned during their marriage.

If they answer a question on their own without your asking it, so much the better. You will probably find that towards the end, the couple will already have answered some of your later questions, so that you won’t need to ask them again.

While the suggested questions which follow should allow you to get into things pretty well, **don’t be afraid to think up your own questions on a particular subject.** This is your chance to ask about things that concern you and your future.

Note that while we have provided a template with suggested questions, **the many varieties of marriages may make our template imperfect for the specifics of your couple’s marriage.** We could not possibly be comprehensive about every possible variation that can occur. For instance, your couple may have adopted a child, taken one in for a relative, or cared for other relatives who live in their home. With such variations in mind, **allow yourself to ask the questions that flush out the history of your particular couple.**

Allow yourself to ask not just about content and history, but about interesting aspects of the interview “process” as it develops. For example, if they seem to want to avoid a particular topic, you can ask why that is a difficult subject, rather than just moving on to your next question. Or if one person seems always to answer your questions, you might ask them to tell you about what that says about them.

Note taking: Because of confidentiality issues, **tape recording is not allowed.** It's also probably better not to take notes during the interview since this will most likely distract you and also make the interview seem more formal. However, if you are new to this sort of interviewing, you might decide that one of you will take notes while the other asks questions. But be sure to let the note-taker also ask questions of their own. If you do things this way, switch roles about midway through. Another compromise is to keep the note taking to a bare minimum by just jotting down key phrases or words that will help jog your memory for more complete recall after the interview. Whether you take notes or not *during* the interview, get together immediately afterwards to review what you heard and what was said "between the lines" and via body language. Use these notes to write up your more detailed account of your interview. Specific examples of stories told you will be especially helpful, and may slip too quickly from your memories if you don't write them down.

Suggested questions for the couple interview

Before Marriage (20 minutes)

Initial meeting

- How did you meet and get together?
- What were your first impressions of each other?
- How did your initial impressions of each other pan out?
- Did any of the things which *most* attracted you turn out to be problems later?

Courtship

- How long did you know each other before you got married?
- What do you remember of that period?
- What were some of the highlights? Some of the tensions?
- Were there any problems that you ignored at the time, but that came up later?

Decision to marry; living together

- How did you decide to get married?
- Of all the people in the world, what led you to decide that this was the person you wanted to marry?
- Was it an easy decision or a difficult one?
- Was one of you more certain than the other?
- Were you "in love" or were your feelings less intense? How did this influence your decision?
- Were there important differences that you knew you would have to overcome? How did you overcome them, or, are they still with you?
- Did you live together before you decided to get married? How did this work out and how did it influence your decision to marry?

Wedding and honeymoon

- What was your wedding like?
- If you had a honeymoon, what was that like?
- Did any problems surface that you had to work out, or that came up later?

Married Life: Specifics (40 minutes)

Years Married

How many years have you been married?

First Year

What do you remember about that year?

Were there any surprises?

How was it different from your courtship or, if relevant, the time you lived together?

Good times

Looking back over the years, what moments stand out as the really happy times in your marriage so far?

What constitutes a good time for you as a couple?

Has this changed over the years?

Careers and marriage

What sort of work have each of you done in the past and now?

Do you talk about your work with each other, and what is that like?

How have you balanced work and marriage?

What problems have you encountered?

[If relevant] How did having children affect your solutions?

Parenthood [if applicable]

How many children do you have and what are their ages?

If you do not have children, what has that been like for you?

Did you decide to have your children or did this just happen?

What was the transition to becoming parents like?

What have been the most difficult and most rewarding aspects of being parents?

If one or both of you are step-parents, what has that been like?

Do you think it is true when people say that you can't really know what it is like to be a parent until you are one? How does this apply to your experience?

Togetherness, we-ness, friendship, intimacy, separateness

How much do you feel like "partners" experiencing a sense of "we-ness" as contrasted with feeling like separate individuals leading overlapping lives?

Are you "best friends" or do you rely more on others for that sort of closeness?

Do you have important activities, other than childrearing, that you do together?

Aside from work, do you have major *unshared* activities and interests?

How do these activities and time-commitments, shared and apart, affect your marriage?

Friendships and leisure-time activities

What are your outside friendships like?

How have these worked out in your marriage?

In-laws and extended family

How have relationships with your in-laws and extended family affected your marriage?

Conflict

What are the particularly difficult areas of conflict for the two of you? If you have had difficulties about money, in-laws, childrearing, or other areas of serious disagreement, could you describe the specific differences you have had to deal with?

Have these content areas changed or are they the same ones you've had almost from the beginning?

How do you understand these problems now?

When you argue, what seems to make things worse, and what seems to help? Has this changed over the course of your marriage?

What have you learned about arguing and problem-solving that you wished you had known before?

Sex life

To the extent that you are comfortable doing this, could you answer in general terms some questions about your sexual life with each other? If so:

How important was sexual experience during your courtship? How important has it been in your marriage? Has this changed over time, for instance, after you had children?

How have you managed when one person was more interested in having sex than the other?

What other problems, if any, have you encountered?

Have you been able to discuss your sexual feelings, desires, and difficulties out loud with each other?

What advice would you offer undergraduates?

Gender differences and issues

[For heterosexual couples] What surprises, difficulties, adaptations occurred because one of you is a man and one a woman—are men and women really from Mars and Venus, and, if so, when does it feel like that?

[For homosexual couples] What surprises, difficulties, adaptations occurred because you are gays/lesbians?

Religion

How have your religious beliefs and practices shaped your marriage?

Cultural norms and expectations

Were there any ways in which your marriage did not fit with cultural expectations or norms?

If so, how did you cope with this?

Difficult times

Looking back, what moments stand out as the really hard times in your marriage? Have you weathered severe stresses or incidents which brought you closer or made you feel proud? If so, please describe them.

Did you ever think about divorce? If you did, why do you think you stayed together? How has this affected your marriage subsequently?

Have you ever sought therapy because of marital or other problems? What was your experience?

Prior marriages (if applicable).

If either of you were married before, tell us something about these prior marriage(s)?

How did these marriages compare to your present marriage?

If a marriage ended in divorce (rather than death), what problems do you think contributed? Could these have been avoided? How?

Given what you have been through, how important do you believe the other person is to causing marital problems, versus you notice pretty much the same problems in each relationship?

Married Life: Overview, General Attitudes, and Learning (Remaining time, 30 minutes)

Expectations, change, future

How would you say your actual married lives compare with the expectations you had about marriage?

How is your marriage different from when you first got married and how has it changed over time?

Have you stopped doing things together that once gave you pleasure?

Are there new activities that you pursue together?

How have your feelings for each other (love, trust, respect, irritation, etc.) changed over the years?

How do you see your future together?

Theories about marital happiness

What is your philosophy about marriage and what makes it work?

Consider which of your friends have particularly good marriages and which do not seem happy: what is different about these marriages?

How would you compare your own marriage to these couples' marriages?

Final thoughts

After having answered so many questions, is there still something not yet discussed that is important to know about your marriage?

In the context of our course for undergraduates, what information or ideas about marriage would you have liked to have known before you married? How do you imagine this would have helped your marriage?

Any final thoughts?

Format for Mentor Couple Interview Write-Ups

- ◆ Your report should be **10 to 12 pages long** and certainly no more than 12 pages (typed, double-spaced, 12 point font). Papers longer than 12 pages will not be accepted.
- ◆ You can share the writing with your partner. But note that you will each have to write your own Section 4 on Personal Learning.
- ◆ **Do not use the couple's real names**; give them fictitious first names for ease of writing.
- ◆ **Do use direct quotes and telling examples from the couple; these will improve your report.**
- ◆ Write your report approximately as follows:

Section 1: General description and process of the interview (about 1 page):

- ◆ **Demographics:** State their ages, how long they have been married, previous marriage(s) (if any), their occupations, where they live and work, and the number and ages of their children.
- ◆ **Process of meeting and of the interview:** Describe the process of the interview (the nonverbal communication or “music” which went with the words), including how it was arranged and how it progressed, the couple's appearance, the physical setting in which the interview took place (including who sat where), their level of comfort and willingness to be candid about various topics, and your observations about their interactional style. Some of these topics should be presented in this section on the overall process, while others can be woven in as you describe the content of their answers to specific questions (for instance, they may become anxious when talking about money or childrearing). In describing their process, some of the following questions may be relevant:
 - ◆ How did they decide who would talk, and how well did they work together to answer questions?
 - ◆ How did they relate to you?
 - ◆ What was their general attitude about talking to you about their marriage?
 - ◆ How did they manage any conflicts or disagreements between them that came up during your questioning?
 - ◆ Were they trying to hide or minimize certain problems?
 - ◆ How insightful or superficial were they?
 - ◆ Did they have a hidden agenda?
 - ◆ Did the narrative they told seem credible to you?
- ◆ **Your feelings and yourself as the instrument of assessment:** Describe what it felt like to be in this interview, how this may have influenced the process, and (in the next subsection) what it might say about the couple.

Section 2: A summary of the couples answers to your questions about their marriage (about 6-7 pages):

- ◆ This should be the lion's share of your write-up.

- ◆ You can simply follow the outline of the questions above, but do so in a narrative form including specific quotes and incidents that the couple related to you.

Section 3: Assessment of the marriage along the following dimensions (about 2-3 pages):

- ◆ Assess briefly the couple's marriage in the following areas; how well do you think they did and are doing?:
 - ◆ Compatibility generally and with reference to how they met.
 - ◆ Friendship, warmth, trust, closeness, love, respect.
 - ◆ Sexuality (if discussed).
 - ◆ Communication and management of conflict.
 - ◆ Ordinary challenges they described (money, children, in-laws, division of labor, etc.).
 - ◆ Extra-ordinary challenges they described (if any).
 - ◆ Any additional strengths or weaknesses not already mentioned.
- ◆ **In writing this section, be selective.**
 - ◆ Don't try to cover everything equally; discuss what seem the most important issues relevant to the couple's happiness and functioning.
 - ◆ Don't just repeat what you already said in the previous section, but do remind the reader of key points to make your case.
 - ◆ Use your best judgment and don't obsess over squeezing everything in.
- ◆ **Be sure to use your observations about their "process" to help you make your judgments.**
- ◆ In this section, **show that you have been learning in the class, by making use of concepts covered so far in lectures and in the required readings.** Don't obsess on this either, but some of your grade will depend on this.

Section 4: Personal Learning (about ½ to one page):

- ◆ Describe any recommendations the couple made to you about what you should do to succeed in your marriage, together with your take on these.
- ◆ Reflect on what the interview added to your knowledge concerning marriage generally, and on *issues specific to yourself*.

Grading criteria for the write-ups:

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| ◆ Completeness of relevant topics as listed above: | 30% |
| ◆ Quality and psychological depth of the description of the couple and the interview: | 30% |
| ◆ Explicit use of course concepts | 15% |
| ◆ Description of personal learning (<u>Don't forget this!</u>): | 15% |
| ◆ Writing quality: | 10% |

