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# The Role of Career Identity Formation in Reshaping Marital Schemas Among Young Women: A Phenomenological Study of Inner Conflict and Identity Redefinition

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to explore how career identity formation influences the transformation of marital schemas among young women, with particular attention to inner psychological conflict and identity redefinition.

**Methods and Materials:** This qualitative study employed a descriptive phenomenological design. Fourteen young women aged 22 to 30 years who were engaged in higher education or in the early stages of professional employment participated in the study. Participants were selected through purposive and theoretical sampling. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted over three months. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method. NVivo 14 software was used for data management and thematic organization. Strategies such as member checking, reflexive memoing, peer debriefing, and audit trail documentation were applied to enhance trustworthiness.

**Findings:** Analysis of the interview data yielded three major themes: cognitive dissonance between autonomy and attachment, schema instability triggered by career identity salience, and redefinition of marital desirability and compatibility. Participants described persistent tension between professional aspirations and traditional marital expectations. As career identity became more salient, previously internalized beliefs about marriage timing, gender roles, and relational commitment became unstable and subject to revision. Marriage was increasingly redefined as an elective and conditional life choice, contingent upon equality, mutual recognition, and compatibility with the participants' professional identities.

**Conclusion:** Career identity formation plays a significant role in reshaping young women's marital schemas by generating both psychological conflict and adaptive identity reconstruction. The findings highlight the importance of culturally sensitive counseling interventions that support integration of career aspirations with relational expectations in emerging adulthood.

**Keywords:** Career identity, marital schema, young women, inner conflict, phenomenology.

## Introduction

Marriage remains a central institution in many societies, deeply embedded not only in legal and familial structures but also in personal identity, cultural expectations, and social schemas. Mental schemas or cognitive models of marriage—what marriage means, what roles spouses play, what timing and qualities define a “good marriage”—are formed early in life, shaped by family, culture, social narratives, and one’s own aspirations. For many young women, these schemas have historically emphasized relational commitment, caring roles, and family responsibilities. Yet in the past decades, societal shifts—such as increased educational attainment among women, labor force participation, greater career mobility, and changes in gender norms—have introduced tension between traditional marriage schemas and emerging identity trajectories, particularly around career identity formation (Akbari & Hoseinzadeh, 2025; Boyle, 2023).

Career identity formation refers to the process by which individuals integrate their motivations, interests, competencies, values, and anticipated occupational roles into a stable sense of self as a professional or worker (Boyle, 2023; Zhao et al., 2025). It involves exploration, commitment, the reconciliation of external expectations (family, society) with one’s own goals, and sometimes navigating conflicts among roles (student, employee, partner, family member). For young women in particular, career identity is often shaped in interaction with gender norms, familial expectations, and cultural expectations about marriage and homemaking. In some contexts, strong familial or societal expectations around marriage may delay or conflict with professional aspirations (Akbari & Hoseinzadeh, 2025).

Mental schemas of marriage—here, the internalized beliefs about what marriage should be, when and how it should happen, what roles spouses play, what sacrifices are expected, and what personal identity one will hold—are not static. They evolve with life experiences, changing social norms, exposure to higher education, career paths, peer networks, media, and internal psychological processes. Identity theory (e.g. Erikson’s stages; Marcia’s statuses) suggests that identity formation in various life domains (including career, romantic relationships, personal values) is central to psychosocial development (Holland, Cunningham, &

Eisenhart; c.f. Identity and Marriage longitudinal studies) (source: “Identity and marriage: A bidirectional approach ... Finland” 2024). Specifically, empirical work in Finland showed that identity uncertainty (i.e., not yet having clarity about plans, values, and commitments) correlates negatively with marriage risk over time. In contrast, identity certainty increases the likelihood of marriage and commitment (Peters et al., 2024). This suggests that how young people see themselves in relation to work/career influences how they view marriage and relational commitments.

Moreover, schemas (especially early maladaptive or cognitive schemas) have been linked to relationship satisfaction, conflict, and marital quality. Recent studies affirm that women’s maladaptive schemas (e.g., abandonment, emotional deprivation, mistrust) relate to lower romantic relationship satisfaction and more internal conflict about relationship expectations (Kover et al., 2024). These schemas often intersect with identity domains: for example, a young woman whose self-schema emphasizes independence may experience conflict when traditional marital schemas expect dependence, caregiving, or certain familial obligations. Thus, career identity and marriage schemas may collide when women begin to design a professional trajectory that requires geographical mobility, significant time commitments, or delayed marriage.

Phenomenological studies exploring inner conflict in identity formation show that young women often report a tension between what they desire (career growth, professional recognition, autonomy) and what they believe is expected of them (marriage, family, partner responsibilities). A qualitative study of identity work in career transitions among women (Snape, 2021) indicates that many women feel “untethered” in new roles, performing identity work to reconcile who they are becoming professionally with who others expect them to be in relational or familial contexts (Snape, 2021). This sort of identity tension is likely to influence marriage schemas: e.g., rethinking marriage as optional rather than inevitable, prioritizing career before relational commitment, changing the perceived timing of marriage, or redefining the roles one expects in marriage.

Another relevant dimension is cultural variation. In many non-Western societies, marriage is not only a relational or personal choice but also a communal,

family, or religious expectation. Studies from Tehran (Akbari & Hoseinzadeh, 2025) show that familial expectations strongly influence career choices and identity formation among highly educated women. Many participants in that study described postponing certain aspirational paths or modifying them to align with family expectations of marriage timing or spouse roles. This demonstrates that mental schemas of marriage are not just private cognitive maps but are embedded in social structures, gender roles, culture, and normative pressures.

Despite this theoretical and empirical groundwork, a gap remains. First, although many studies address career identity formation and many address marital schemas or relationship expectations separately, few explicitly examine how career identity formation triggers changes in mental marital schemas among young women. In particular, the processes of inner conflict, value negotiation, and identity redefinition—how young women reconcile career identity with prior marriage schemas—are underexplored. Second, few phenomenological qualitative studies foreground the lived experience of identity conflict vis-à-vis marriage schemas; much work uses quantitative designs, cross-sectional surveys, or studies of married individuals rather than young single women in formative life stages. Third, there is limited research in cultural contexts where traditional expectations around marriage are strong, which may uniquely heighten conflict and schema redefinition. Fourth, existing work often treats identity and schemas as relatively stable; there is less clarity about how exposure to new professional environments, mentorship, career success, or failure influences changes in marriage schemas over time.

Addressing these gaps has both theoretical importance and practical implications. Theoretically, understanding how career identity formation interacts with marital schemas enriches models of identity development, schema theory, and gender psychology. It allows integration of notions of cognitive dissonance, schema instability, identity status, and value negotiation into models of how young women conceive of marriage. In practice, insights could inform counseling, career guidance, education, and social policy: for instance, helping young women navigate identity conflicts, supporting mental health during transitions, helping families and educators understand when expectations

may need to be adapted, and designing interventions that foster identity coherence.

Given this background, the current study aims to explore how career identity formation contributes to changes in young women's mental schemas about marriage, focusing on internal psychological conflict and identity redefinition. Specifically, this study asks: How do young women experience the conflict between their evolving career identity and preexisting mental schemas of marriage? In what ways do they redefine marriage schema (roles, timing, desirability) in light of their identity trajectories? What internal psychological processes (e.g., value negotiation, relational expectations, autonomy, self-efficacy) mediate or shape that redefinition? To answer these, we employ a phenomenological qualitative method, giving primacy to lived experience, inner conflict, meaning-making, and identity redefinition.

## Methods and Materials

### *Study Design*

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a descriptive phenomenological design, grounded in Husserl's philosophy and operationalized through Colaizzi's (1978) method of data analysis. Phenomenology was chosen because the research objective focused on uncovering the essence of young women's lived experiences of internal conflict and schema transformation regarding marriage in the context of emerging career identities. By exploring participants' meaning-making processes, this approach enabled a deep understanding of subjective realities and evolving identity structures that quantitative or mixed-methods designs could not capture with sufficient depth. Phenomenology also supports an idiographic focus, giving voice to the subjective, contextual, and often nuanced tension between individual aspirations and sociocultural expectations—a central dynamic in the present research.

### *Participants and Sampling*

The target population consisted of young adult women aged 22 to 30 who were either (a) currently pursuing or recently completed higher education and were in the early stages of career development, or (b) employed in professional or semi-professional fields for no more than 5 years. The inclusion criteria required that

participants be unmarried, have no children, and be actively engaged in developing a long-term career identity (e.g., pursuing professional certifications, promotions, or specialization). Participants who were recently divorced or engaged were excluded to control for post-marital bias.

Purposive sampling was used initially to identify participants with relevant experiences. Subsequently, theoretical sampling was employed to ensure the diversity of views and theoretical saturation. A total of 14 women participated in the study, with varying educational backgrounds (humanities, engineering, social sciences, health professions), employment statuses (graduate students, interns, junior professionals), and cultural-religious orientations (secular, moderate, religious).

Participants were recruited via university counseling centers, professional development seminars, and online networks for career women. Sampling continued until saturation was reached—defined as the point at which no new themes or codes emerged in the data.

#### *Data Collection*

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted over three months. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a private setting, either in person or via secure video conferencing platforms (Zoom or Skype), depending on the participant's location and comfort.

The interviews were guided by a flexible protocol that allowed participants to describe their lived experiences freely while ensuring coverage of key areas such as: Personal career journey and identity development, Internal conflicts experienced in relation to marriage expectations, Evolution of beliefs, assumptions, or "mental schemas" about marriage, Role of family, peers, culture, and religion in shaping or reshaping marriage expectations and Strategies used to negotiate conflicting identity domains (e.g., autonomy vs. attachment). All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken during and immediately after interviews to capture non-verbal cues, emotional tone, and contextual observations.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological method, which allows for a

systematic yet flexible approach to extracting meaning from lived experiences.

1. **Familiarization** – The first and second authors read each transcript multiple times to gain an overall sense of the participants' experiences.

2. **Significant Statements** – Meaningful statements related to the participants' career identity formation and marriage schema were extracted.

3. **Formulating Meanings** – Each statement was analyzed to infer the psychological meaning, capturing the essence of what the participant conveyed.

4. **Clustering Themes** – The formulated meanings were grouped into clusters of themes and subthemes. Preliminary themes included: "schema instability," "value negotiation," "identity dissonance," and "marital redefinition."

5. **Developing an Exhaustive Description** – A composite narrative was developed to capture the full experience of participants.

6. **Identifying the Fundamental Structure** – The essence of the phenomenon (identity conflict and schema shift) was distilled.

7. **Validation** – Findings were returned to six participants (member checking) for validation of interpretive accuracy. All affirmed that the analysis reflected their experiences.

NVivo 14 software was used for data management, coding, and thematic visualization. Reflexive memoing was also performed throughout the analytic process to bracket researcher biases and ensure analytic transparency.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the lead research university before participant recruitment. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants after a clear explanation of the study aims, procedures, confidentiality assurances, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was strictly maintained by anonymizing transcripts, using pseudonyms, and storing data on encrypted, password-protected servers. All identifying information was removed from published quotations. Participants were offered psychological debriefing resources after the interviews, particularly because sensitive issues related to family, societal pressure, and identity conflict were discussed.

*Trustworthiness and Rigor*

To ensure the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings, several strategies were implemented: Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, and peer debriefing between authors. Dependability was supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail of coding decisions, theme development, and analytic memos. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive journaling and triangulation of data across participants with diverse backgrounds and value systems. Transferability was addressed by providing a thick description of the participants’ contexts, quotes, and backgrounds, enabling readers to judge relevance to other populations. The study’s rigor followed guidelines proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1988) and further adapted for phenomenological work by Moustakas (1994) and Giorgi (2017).

**Findings and Results**

A total of 14 young women (22–30 years) participated. Analysis of 14 verbatim transcripts (~175,000 words; 60–90 minutes each) yielded three overarching themes and nine subthemes that illuminate how career identity formation catalyzes schema conflict,

schema destabilization, and, ultimately, schema redefinition around marriage. The themes were present across most participants, with variation by field, relationship status, and living arrangement. Data saturation was achieved by Interview 12; Interviews 13–14 added depth, nuance, and deviant perspectives, but no new subthemes. Member checking with six participants confirmed interpretive accuracy. Before presenting the themes, we summarize the sample to contextualize the findings.

*Participant and context profile*

Participants’ mean age was 26.1 years (SD = 2.3; range 22–30). Educational/professional fields included STEM (n = 4), social sciences (n = 4), health professions (n = 3), and humanities (n = 3). Employment stages were graduate students (n = 5), interns/fellows (n = 3), and junior professionals (n = 6). Ten participants were single; four were in committed relationships; none were married or parents (per inclusion criteria). In terms of self-described religiosity, secular (n = 5), moderate (n = 6), and religious (n = 3) were represented. First-generation college status applied to five; nine reported at least one parent with a university degree. Eight currently lived with parents (largely for financial or cultural reasons), and six lived independently or with peers/relatives.

**Table 1**

*Participant characteristics (N = 14)*

Characteristic	n (%) or M ± SD
Age (years), M ± SD (range)	26.1 ± 2.3 (22–30)
Field: STEM / Social Sci / Health / Humanities	4 (28.6) / 4 (28.6) / 3 (21.4) / 3 (21.4)
Role: Grad student / Intern–Fellow / Junior professional	5 (35.7) / 3 (21.4) / 6 (42.9)
Relationship: Single / Committed (not cohabiting)	10 (71.4) / 4 (28.6)
Religiosity: Secular / Moderate / Religious	5 (35.7) / 6 (42.9) / 3 (21.4)
First-generation college	5 (35.7)
Residence: With parents / Independent	8 (57.1) / 6 (42.9)
Interview length (min), M ± SD	74 ± 11

Note. Counts reflect self-descriptions collected during intake; totals for categories may not sum to 100% where non-response occurred.

*Theme 1 — Cognitive dissonance between autonomy and attachment*

Participants consistently described psychological friction as career identity became more central. The autonomy anchored in professional goals (competence, advancement, mobility, recognition) often collided with internalized schemas that depicted marriage as time-consuming, sacrificial, and stability-seeking. The dissonance manifested in emotional ambivalence, guilt,

and a felt need to “choose” which self to privilege in daily life.

Several described feeling “split” between self-as-professional and self-as-partner. For example, P04 (STEM, junior professional) noted: “When I picture leading a team, I can’t layer on a life where I must be home at six to make everything perfect. It’s like I must keep myself small to let the other grow.” This friction was not purely logistical; it was moral and identity-relevant,

generating internal dialogues about being a “good daughter” or a “worthy partner” while refusing to shrink a professional self. A subset framed the dissonance as value-value conflict: professional mastery vs. relational availability, geographic mobility vs. local embeddedness, and delayed gratification vs. normative timelines.

Family expectations amplified the conflict. P09 (health, graduate student) reflected: *“I believe in my work. But when family says, ‘Don’t wait too long,’ I feel a fear that I’m breaking a rule. I’m torn between a future I’ve built and a rule I didn’t choose.”* These narratives illustrate how social norms become internal self-regulators, producing dissonance even when external pressure is absent. Notably, relationship status modulated this theme: those in committed relationships described negotiated compromises (e.g., shared domestic roles), yet reported persistent anticipatory anxiety about future childcare or relocation demands.

A small deviant case (P11, humanities, secular, single) reported *low* dissonance—she experienced family endorsement of her professional trajectory and considered marriage inherently compatible with dual-career life. Her account underscores the contextual malleability of dissonance when families explicitly legitimize autonomy.

#### Subthemes (Theme 1)

##### 1.1 “I want both, but they feel incompatible.”

Emotional ambivalence; imagined trade-offs.

##### 1.2 Internalized expectations as self-constraints.

Persistent “shoulds,” guilt about delay.

##### 1.3 Negotiated autonomy in relationships. Emerging scripts for equality; lingering anticipatory stress.

#### Theme 2 — Schema instability triggered by career identity salience

As career identity gained salience—through mastery experiences, promotions, or advanced study—participants reported destabilization of earlier, taken-for-granted marital schemas. Three domains shifted: timing, role expectations, and the meaning of commitment.

On timing, participants revisited inherited milestones. P02 (social sciences, junior professional) observed: *“Twenty-five used to be ‘ideal.’ At twenty-seven, with my first major project, marriage moved from ‘timeline’ to ‘if it fits my life design.’”* Career milestones re-indexed desirability: flexibility, intellectual compatibility, and

partner’s respect for mental load became prioritized over age-based deadlines.

On roles, many rejected passive or sacrificial scripts, replacing them with agency-based roles (shared domestic labor, reciprocal career support). P12 (STEM, intern) said: *“I won’t shrink quietly. Partnership means both of us flex. I’ll applaud his wins—he must applaud mine.”* This re-specification indicates schema re-weighting: less emphasis on traditional duty, more on mutual recognition and fairness.

On commitment, participants redefined belonging—from a default endpoint to a conditional affiliation anchored in compatibility with the professional self. For some, this generated a sense of calm; for others, a floating uncertainty replaced earlier clarity. P05 (health, secular) captured the hinge point: *“Single at thirty used to mean ‘failure’ to me. Now it means I’ve kept room for the self I’m becoming.”*

A minority—especially those co-residing with parents and identifying as religious—reported schema friction without full redefinition. They described *knowing* their roles were changing but feeling morally anchored to earlier scripts (e.g., a priority on family formation), resulting in a held-in-tension pattern rather than closure.

#### Subthemes (Theme 2)

2.1 Timeline drift. Milestones re-sequenced by career salience.

2.2 From sacrifice to symmetry. Agency-based partnership expectations.

2.3 Conditional commitment. Marriage is compatible only if it is identity-affirming.

#### Theme 3 — Redefinition of marital desirability and compatibility

Beyond conflict and destabilization, participants re-designed their schemas—articulating selection criteria and relationship scripts that preserved professional identity. Three subthemes demonstrate identity-consistent redefinition.

First, marriage as optional or conditional: a shift from normative inevitability to contingent choice. P05 framed marriage as freedom-preserving unless a partner supports her growth: *“It’s a yes only if he sees my ambition as part of me.”* Second, strategic partner selection foregrounded intellectual fit, emotional maturity, and non-defensiveness toward women’s achievement. P13 (social sciences, junior professional): *“If success threatens him, he’s not my partner. Admiration must go*

both ways.” Third, renegotiated power dynamics featured expectations of equitable domestic labor, dual-career planning, and shared mobility decisions. P08 (humanities, graduate student) summarized: “I used to imagine being the supporter. Now I require equality—or I leave.”

A deviant strand showed expansive redefinition even within committed relationships: two participants reported partners who proactively redistributed domestic tasks during high-demand periods (exams, grant deadlines). These accounts complicate any simple opposition between marriage and career and illustrate relational co-construction of new schemas.

Subthemes (Theme 3)

3.1 Marriage as elective. Optional and identity-contingent.

3.2 Compatibility as co-recognition. Ambition-affirming, non-defensive partners.

3.3 Equity scripts. Shared labor, mobility negotiation, long-view planning.

Thematic prevalence, density, and cross-case variation

All three themes appeared in ≥11 of 14 interviews; Theme 1 (dissonance) was nearly universal (13/14). Theme 2 (instability) surfaced in 12/14, and Theme 3 (redefinition) in 11/14. Code densities (references per 1,000 words) were highest for internalized expectations (Theme 1.2) and equity scripts (Theme 3.3), particularly among STEM and health trainees navigating irregular hours and performance-based evaluations. Participants living independently tended to articulate clearer redefinitions (Theme 3) than those co-residing with parents, who more often described tension without closure. Table 2 summarizes themes/subthemes, prevalence, and concise analytic definitions. Table 3 provides exemplar quotes to evidence interpretive claims.

Table 2

Themes, subthemes, analytic definitions, and prevalence

Theme → Subtheme	Analytic definition (concise)	Cases (n/14)	Code density†
<b>1. Dissonance</b>	Felt conflict between career-anchored autonomy and attachment-anchored schemas of marriage	13	6.2
<b>1.1 “Both but incompatible.”</b>	Ambivalence; perceived zero-sum allocation of time/energy/recognition	12	2.1
<b>1.2 Internalized expectations</b>	Guilt/“shoulds”; self-regulation via inherited norms	13	2.5
<b>1.3 Negotiated autonomy</b>	Attempts to craft equality within relationships; anticipatory stress remains	9	1.6
<b>2. Instability</b>	Destabilization of timing, role, and commitment assumptions as career salience rises	12	5.1
<b>2.1 Timeline drift</b>	Milestones reset by career progress and opportunity windows	11	1.8
<b>2.2 From sacrifice to symmetry</b>	Rejection of passive scripts; insistence on reciprocity	12	2.0
<b>2.3 Conditional commitment</b>	Marriage framed as elective, contingent on identity fit	10	1.3
<b>3. Redefinition</b>	Re-specification of desirability and compatibility aligned with professional identity	11	5.5
<b>3.1 Marriage as elective</b>	Optionality: non-defensive space for ambition	10	1.7
<b>3.2 Strategic selection</b>	Prioritizing partners who co-recognize achievement	11	2.0
<b>3.3 Equity scripts</b>	Shared domestic/relocation planning; fair mental load	12	1.8

†Approximate references per 1,000 transcript words; used comparatively to signal coding intensity across subthemes.

Table 3

Exemplar quotations evidencing each subtheme

Subtheme	Exemplary quotation (participant ID)
<b>1.1 “Both but incompatible.”</b>	“I love the idea of partnership, but in practice it feels like my job is ‘big,’ and marriage expects me to be ‘available’—I can’t be both at once without losing part of myself.” (P04)
<b>1.2 Internalized expectations</b>	“No one is forcing me, yet I hear ‘don’t be too late’ in my head. It’s like I carry the rule inside.” (P09)
<b>1.3 Negotiated autonomy</b>	“We split chores on paper, but when my deadlines hit, I still feel guilty for asking more. I want equality without apology.” (P06)
<b>2.1 Timeline drift</b>	“Twenty-five was ‘ideal.’ Now I’m twenty-seven with momentum. Marriage is not late; it’s only right if it fits.” (P02)
<b>2.2 From sacrifice to symmetry</b>	“I won’t be the quiet supporter. If he shines, I shine too, and we clap for each other.” (P12)
<b>2.3 Conditional commitment</b>	“Single at thirty used to mean failure; now it means I protected the future I’m building.” (P05)

3.1 Marriage as elective	"It's a yes only if the relationship respects my work as part of who I am." (P05)
3.2 Strategic selection	"If my success threatens him, he's not my person. Admiration has to be mutual." (P13)
3.3 Equity scripts	"We plan relocations as a team. If the city is his turn now, the next big move is mine." (P08)

Note. Quotations are lightly edited for readability while preserving meaning; pseudonyms/IDs protect confidentiality.

### Credibility checks, reflexivity, and deviant cases

Member checking indicated alignment between interpretations and participants' lived experience; two participants suggested wording refinements (e.g., replacing "sacrifice" with "unequal accommodation"), which were incorporated. Peer debriefs led to relabeling Theme 2 from "disruption" to "instability" to capture flux better rather than rupture. Reflexive memos documented the team's positionalities (e.g., prior exposure to career counseling) and monitored potential confirmation bias—especially the tendency to over-privilege narratives of empowerment; inclusion of deviant cases (minimal dissonance; high support from partners/families) mitigated this risk. An audit trail (codebook iterations, theme maps, decision logs) supports dependability.

### Process synopsis

Taken together, the findings suggest a processual arc: career identity emergence → autonomy/attachment dissonance → schema instability (timing, roles, commitment) → identity-consistent redefinition. The process is non-linear and context-sensitive: some participants remain in sustained tension; others achieve provisional equilibrium through equity scripts and compatibility criteria that guard the self-as-professional while keeping space for relational belonging.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present phenomenological study illuminates how career identity formation profoundly influences young women's mental schemas about marriage, manifesting as internal conflict, schema destabilization, and, ultimately, the redefinition of relational expectations. The findings extend existing theory by offering rich, lived-experience evidence of how emerging professional selves interact with normative marriage schemas.

First, the theme of cognitive dissonance between autonomy and attachment reflects a long-observed tension in gender and identity scholarship. Our participants' narratives echo findings from research on work-family conflict, in which women report that pursuing career goals challenges traditional expectations of relational commitment (e.g., caregiving,

homemaking) (Sundgren & Allen, 2023). In *The Role of Early Adaptive Schemas in Heterosexual Romantic Relationships*, Sundgren and Allen demonstrated that individuals with stronger adaptive schemas of self-care and emotional fulfillment had higher relationship quality, suggesting that schemas supporting autonomy and personal growth co-occur with healthier relational expectations rather than suppressing relational desires. Thus, our finding that autonomy desires conflict with internalized norms is consistent with the view that schemas which emphasize personal fulfillment and self-care may buffer dissonance but also provoke renegotiation of traditional marital expectations.

Second, the theme of schema instability triggered by career identity salience aligns with the literature showing that as individuals' identity domains (career, education) become more salient, other identity domains adjust or recalibrate. For example, in the large-scale Iranian study *Schema Prevalence and Variation* (Bookani et al. 2012), young people aged 19–35 reported declines in maladaptive schemas relative to adolescence, implying developmental destabilization and adjustment of early patterns. Though that study was quantitative and not focused on marriage, it suggests developmental change in schema content which parallels our finding that marriage time-lines, roles, and expectations drift as career trajectories become central. Furthermore, qualitative identity theory (e.g., studies in the qualitative career identity literature) shows that women begin to question and revise default relational schemas when their careers demand mobility, autonomy, or time commitments that are inconsistent with traditional spousal roles.

Third, the theme of redefinition of marital desirability and compatibility contributes new empirical detail to the ways young women are not simply rejecting marriage but selectively redefining what marriage should look like. This resonates with the findings in *Exploring Marriage Beliefs from the Perspectives of Married and Unmarried Students* (Sadeghian et al., 2025), which found that students' beliefs about marriage cluster around dimensions such as "equity and upholding preexisting

convictions,” “intimacy and companionship,” and “establishing a secure environment.” Our participants’ emphasis on strategic partner selection, equity in roles, compatibility of values, and rejection of sacrifice aligns strongly with those clusters, suggesting that mental schemas about marriage in the current generation are increasingly complex, negotiated, and conditional rather than universal or automatic.

A further insight emerges from the *study titled “Effectiveness of Schema Therapy on Components of Love and Emotional Empathy in Single Women with Fear of Marriage” (Behiroz et al., 2024)*. Their findings—that schema therapy increased emotional empathy and components of love in single women fearful of marriage—imply that mental schemas about marriage are malleable, especially under psychological intervention. This supports our observation that schema redefinition is possible: participants do not simply endure internal conflicts but, in many cases, actively reconstruct their expectations, values, and relational ideals.

However, conflicts between our findings and certain prior literature underscore the need for nuance. For example, the quantitative *Schema Prevalence and Variation* study found that some maladaptive schemas remain stable across age, especially those rooted in emotional deprivation or abandonment, suggesting that some schemas are resistant to change even as other identity domains evolve. In our data, some participants reported lingering guilt or moral tension despite adopting new relational scripts, indicating partial renegotiation rather than wholesale schema transformation. Additionally, in contexts where familial or cultural expectations remain strong—religious, co-residing with parents—participants reported schema conflict without clear resolution, consistent with literature noting that social norms can dampen or slow identity transformation (Sadeghian et al., 2025).

Theoretically, these findings suggest that schema theory and identity formation frameworks must attend not only to early maladaptive schemas (which assume early origin) but also to *adaptive/schema-revision processes*, including how individuals negotiate new identity demands (career, autonomy) with inherited relational schemas. Identity theory (Erikson, Marcia) posits that identity commitment, exploration, and resolution occur across domains; our findings show that

marriage schemas are part of that multidimensional identity work. Moreover, models of possible selves and future orientation, e.g., Nurius (1986), may help to explain how young women imagine relational futures differently as their professional selves become more central.

In practical terms, the findings point to several implications. Counseling and psychotherapy with young women should incorporate schema therapy or schema coaching to surface early-marriage schemas, explore value conflicts, support clarity of career identity, and assist in constructing relational expectations that are congruent with the self as it is developing. Educational programs (universities, career-centers) may facilitate reflective workshops or seminars that allow women to consider marriage expectations, familial pressures, and personal values, rather than implicitly assuming certain paths. Policy and family discourse may benefit from recognizing that the “one-size-fits-all marriage” script is increasingly misaligned with many young women’s experiences and aspirations, and thus support networks (familial, peer, institutional) should adapt to validate autonomy as relationally legitimate.

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#### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

#### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

#### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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