Most in the United States value marriage (McLanahan, Garfinkel, & Mincy, 2001; Pew Research Staff, 2010). Getting married remains one of the most important events in people’s lives (Owen, Lawton, & Vartanian, 2005). Sociologists acknowledge the significance of becoming married, yet know little about how relationships are transitioned into marriage. Relationship models tend to portray relationship transformation in fixed, universalistic, and static terms. This study, using a constructionist approach, offers an original process model that illuminates how engagement is socially constructed and seeks to understand the meanings engagement has in the lives of heterosexual couples. The model focuses on interpretive practice, “the constellation of procedures, conditions and resources through which reality is apprehended, understood and conveyed in everyday life” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2007, p. 10). From this angle, the social context and reflexive interaction required to become engaged are considered. Thus, sociologists are armed with a more complex and contextualized understanding of how relationships progress toward marriage.

The Literature on Coupling

Traditional research on coupling identifies social behaviors that contribute to increasing levels of intimacy. Close romantic relationships are linked to factors such as an increase in self-disclosure in breadth and depth (Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, & Rovine, 2005; Lippert & Prager, 2001), increased shared experiences (Aron, Norman, Aron, & Lewandowski, 2002; Werner & Haggard, 1985), shared intimate physical spaces (Levinger, 1980), greater likelihood to discuss the relationship, and more attempts to change the partner’s behavior (Argyle & Henderson, 1985; Haunani & Knobloch, 2001).

Traditional research makes inferences based on close-ended surveys or behavioral data. This poses several problems. One, the researcher relies on a priori explanations for relationship commitment and the researcher’s definition of commitment. These research methods do not take into account how the couples themselves understand and interpret their own relationship. Imposing preconceived notions of commitment has proven problematic. Manning and Smock (2005), for example, find that couple’s interpretations of what it means to cohabit differ from researcher’s that has led to significant underestimation of cohabitation rates. By examining couple’s own understanding of relationships, sociologists are in a position to ascertain not only a more accurate picture of the state of the relationship but also how these understandings affect the relationship. Participant’s definitions of the relationship are powerful influences on commitment (Johnson, 1991; Orbuch, Veroff, & Holmberg, 1993).

Second, quantitative studies tend to portray relationship progression as fixed and bounded events. Yet, qualitative

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**Abstract**

Based on data from qualitative interviews with 40 engaged heterosexual couples, this paper examines how couples transform their relationship from “serious” to being “engaged to be married.” Social Scientists have developed relationship models designed to explain the transformation, but these models fail to adequately capture how couples transform their relationship and the context in which this behavior occurs. Using a constructionist framework, an alternative process model is offered. The five-process model captures the ongoing and fluid work couples perform to negotiate a redefinition of the relationship. Couples reflexively use a host of complex symbolic interaction including talk, rituals, relationships with others, testing, and use of time to construct their relationship in a new way. By examining the underlying reality construction process, rather than merely looking at the outcome, the social processes and human actions that shape relationships are revealed.

**Keywords**
coupling, dating, engagement, intimacy, relationship

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**Negotiating Marriage: A Process Model of Heterosexual Engagement**

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studies show that these processes are gradual and boundaries often blurry. Cohabiting couples rarely define a concrete starting point for cohabitation and that progressing into cohabitation is fluid and gradual (Macklin, 1978; Manning & Smock, 2005). Qualitative studies of transitions out of relationships (“break-ups”) also find the process gradual and fluid (see Vaughan, 1986, also noted in Manning & Smock, 2005).

Third, the social context in which relationship transitions occur are not adequately examined in quantitative studies. For example, traditional research assumes couples live and operate independently. Yet, couples often reside with other adults, with children, and other roommates and these relationships greatly influence their relationship (Manning & Smock, 2005).

Finally, traditional research relies on cross-sectional survey and behavioral data ignoring how relationships ebb and flow over time. Relationship stage models, on the other hand, attempt to address how coupling evolves. These models typically characterize relationships as developing through a series of stages that become increasingly intimate and committed. In the Knox and Wilson (1981) model, engagement follows three stages of dating: casual dating, regular dating, and steady dating. The stage before engagement, steady dating, for example, is a period of serious dyadic exclusiveness. Expectations that the relationship is exclusive are clear, if not explicit. It is common to have tangible symbols of commitment, such as living together or owning joint property. Engagement differs from the “steady couple” in that there is a public acknowledgment of their intentions to marry and orientation toward wedding. Relationship exclusiveness is surrounded by norms that are almost as strong as fidelity in marriage.

The stage models, while useful, have limitations. Stage models assume a clear-cut, unproblematic existence of a shared definition of the relationship and engagement, ignoring the process through which engagement is defined and the relationship transformation recognized. Likewise, stage models assume there is a linear progression from one set of predictable behaviors to the next. The models do not describe the process through which change occurs interactionally. For example, how does the couple go from not having an orientation toward marriage to having one?

Recent research has begun to offer an insider perspective of relationship changes and the social context of the relationship that has led to a richer understanding of couple intimacy and commitment. Couples weigh complex social factors and social context when making decisions about and interpreting their relationship. These factors have been documented and categorized. Surra and Hughes (1987) identify four different reasons commitment increases; intrapersonal-normative reasons in which the relationship is evaluated by what they think ought to occur in “normal” relationships, dyadic reasons that reference interaction between partners, social network reasons that reference interaction with family, coworkers, friends, and so on, and circumstantial reasons that reference “timing.” Similarly Orbuch et al. (1993) finds similar diversity and contextual accounts for couple intimacy that include positive romantic themes, positive nonromantic themes and pragmatic reasons.

Qualitative analysis has uncovered situational social factors that shape the development of the relationship. According to Richardson (1988), the social conditions surrounding the secret affairs between married men and single women produce intense intimacy. The man’s marital status, for instance, is structurally conducive to idealization of the relationship and the secrecy of the relationship means it is not socially tested and thereby longer lasting. The importance of structural factors and particularly the role of economic resources are revealed in several recent qualitative studies. Low income participant’s understandings of socially acceptable levels of financial security heavily shape their decisions about marrying their partner (Gibson-Davies, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Reed, 2006, Sassler & Cunningham, 2008; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). Geography shapes the orientation and length of time one becomes married. Rural couples move more quickly into marriage and spend less time preparing for adulthood than urban couples. Urban couples spend more time attempting to achieve economic stability, emotional maturity, and thoroughly testing a relationship (Kefalas, Furstenberg, Carr, & Napolitano, 2011). Gender shapes expectations about who should propose marriage and the meanings of cohabitation (Sassler & Miller, 2011). Women are more likely to feel that cohabitation expresses relationship commitment and is leading to marriage (Huang, Smock, Manning, & Bergstrom-Lynch, 2011).

A Natural History Approach to Engagement

Qualitative research has widened Sociologist’s understanding of the social context and meanings of intimacy and commitment. What is distinctly missing from the literature is a natural history approach, whereby the researcher examines the coupling processes and how it unfolds over time, especially as it relates to becoming engaged. Sociology’s use of a natural history method dates back to the early ethnographies of the Chicago School (see Shaw’s, 1931, classic The Natural History of a Delinquent Career). A natural history approach attempts to uncover the full set of unfolding events and their critical social context. Chicago School’s Robert E. Park’s (1923) natural history of the newspaper, for example, examines the social processes over time that gave rise to the modern newspaper. Stage models offer an examination of the unfolding relationship, but are missing the critical contextual process. For example, how are couples progressing from one stage to another? What are the circumstances that trigger a change and what are the processes they use to make the change? These critical social processes behind relationship transitions are missing from longitudinal studies. Natural history analysis of coupling is sparse and focused on
psychological drives. Goldsmith (1990) describes the natural history of coupling as a series of ongoing dialectical tensions between partner’s needs for autonomy and connection. In the beginning of a relationship, for example, tensions arise concerning whether to become involved in a relationship and weighing the relationship in terms of meeting needs for connection versus needs for autonomy. Goldsmith’s concentration on the two opposing psychological needs oversimplifies the complex range of factors operating on the couple. The needs of the couple appear to drive and direct the coupling rather than the participants actively creating it.

Ironically, there is more extensive natural history research related to uncoupling, that is how couples make transitions out of intimate relationships. Vaughan (1986) finds that uncoupling is a definitional process that occurs gradually and fluidly, beginning in private and becoming increasingly public. Does coupling unfold similarly, but in reverse?

This study offers an original contribution to the literature on marriage and intimacy by examining the social construction of engagement. Engagement is typically conceptualized as an isolated moment in which a formal promise of marriage is offered. Few, if any, studies have examined engagement as a fluid and ongoing process. I offer an original approach to engagement, wherein engagement is viewed as a definitional process that participants use to collaboratively construct a new identity and intertwined social worlds. The process requires a myriad of actions by participants, with each other and with outsiders over an extended period. I have developed a natural history process model of the engagement process. This model, unlike the previous models of relationships, does not assume the participants engage in a predictable set of behaviors with each new process. By focusing on the process, rather than the product, this model appreciates the variation and context in which a variety of behaviors occur. For example, a couple may define themselves as engaged through elaborate rituals that include presenting a ring on bended knee. Yet, another couple defines themselves as engaged only when they complete social markers such as obtaining their college degree or acquiring a particular job. Yet some couples are engaged after a discussion about the relationship. Stage models identify patterns of linear behaviors, making assumptions that couples pass through each stage in a particular order and displaying behavior particular to that stage. A process model does not focus on the behaviors unique to a particular marriage path. Instead, it looks at various ways transformations are accomplished. The model does not automatically assume a linear progression from one process to another. While in the ideal form, couples progress from one process to another, at any point in time the couple relationship can come to a halt, can revert to a previous process, or skip ahead to an entirely new process. This model appreciates and examines how these contingencies get attended to and are meaningfully understood. Whether a couple is one process or another may be unclear. This presents a problem for the stage model of relationships as it is difficult to categorize the participants’ behavior into the proper stages. However, in the process model, behavior that is unclear is the very sorts of behavior that this model examines. For example, in the early stages of engagement it is often unclear if the desire to become engaged is mutually held. The stage model would likely gloss over this because it focuses on the behaviors that lead to intimacy and the order in which those behaviors occur. The process model would hone in on those moments when the behaviors that lead to intimacy are vague and complex. How the participants make sense of and interpret behaviors from their partners that are usually indirect, unclear, and even contradictory have to be sorted out by the participants themselves. This model examines such work shedding light on how couples make sense of and navigate their way through complex and often fuzzy relationship changes. Stage models categorize and group behavior commonalities, rather than examining the varied and contextual work required.

The study asks, how do couples come to understand that they want to be engaged, become engaged, and be engaged? When and how do thoughts and/or talk of marriage arise in couple’s relationship and how does the prospect of engagement and being engaged evolve over time? These questions are answered by analyzing the development of such thinking and talk, seeking initially to identify the moments and occasions when the first hints of marriage arise between the partners and subsequently, following the couple’s social path to engagement. A priori definitions of engagement are avoided and instead participants are asked how and when marriage becomes an important and relevant phenomenon in the ongoing relationship. In this way an understanding of how marriage is meaningfully invoked by, and relevant to, the couple themselves is achieved. Drawing on Charmaz’ (2000) grounded theory approach, an emphasis on keeping the participant’s words and meanings intact in the process of analysis (i.e., their wording is abundant in memos/analysis) is attempted, therefore maintaining the participants’ presence throughout, with the goal to communicate how participants construct their worlds.

**Data and Method**

This article is based on data gathered as part of a larger study on weddings. The wedding study initially focused on wedding planning and ceremonies. In gathering background data on the couple’s relationship, a few interview questions were included regarding the couple’s dating and engagement experience. The initial interview data were so promising that the study was expanded to explore the engagement process more fully. This article is based on the expanded interview data on engagement.

The research was originally a dissertation study that included qualitative interviews with a snowball sample of 20 heterosexual couples marrying for the first time. These were collected 1998 through 2001. The first 4 participants were recruited at a southern California University through mutual
acquaintances. Referrals were requested from these participants and led to 16 additional participants from other areas of the southern California region and beyond the university. The dissertation research was expanded to include an additional 20 couple interviews, 10 added 2003-2005 from central California. The first 6 interviews were initially recruited from a popular local wedding venue. Those participants were asked for referrals that led to an additional 4 interviews with couples using other wedding sites. Another 10 interviews were added recently from central California in 2011 for a total of 40 couples. The initial 2011 couples were recruited from a local university. They provided referrals that broadened the diversity of the sample. Thirty-seven of the couples were drawn from a snowball sample of recently engaged couples that initially were people known to the researcher or by someone who knew the researcher. It should be noted that 3 couples were referred from a professional wedding planner. In the course of conducting wedding research, a southern California wedding planner became known to the researcher and a source that referred 3 of her clients.

Criteria for inclusion in the study were those couples who were getting married for the first time, childless, heterosexual, and their engagement was successful meaning they did get married (as opposed to calling the engagement permanently off). In many ways, the couples in this sample are the stereotypical “engaged couple” celebrated in popular culture. The study was intentionally built on the fairly homogenous and “typical” couple first to lay out the foundations of the coupling process. It is acknowledged, however, that more diverse groups, such as second-time marriages or gay couples, which are increasingly common, would complicate, enhance, and perhaps challenge the model. Thus, the model serves as a foundational starting point that is meant to be refined with future research.

There is a wide time gap between the initial interviews and the expanded interviews, providing the opportunity to create a model that fits couple’s experience from different time periods. A process model was created after the first 20 interviews, but refined with the addition of each subsequent interview until theoretical saturation (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was achieved. Couple’s engagement experiences differed little between time periods. Two differences were noted. There were four couples who met through online dating services in the 2011 sample and only one in the 2005 and none in 1998. Likewise, the 2011 couples mentioned watching television programs about weddings (i.e., Bridezilla or Say Yes to the Dress) that earlier participants did not mention. These differences, however, did not inherently change the intimacy model.

A natural history method of interviewing was used to uncover the social construction process. Questions began with the earliest moments in their relationship (“When did you meet and how?”) and how the relationship progressed from there (“When did you see a change in the relationship and how did that happen?”). A natural history approach provided contextualized data on how engagement unfolded and progressed.

Two types of interviews were performed. Ten couples participated in what was referred to as extensive longitudinal interviews. These included an initial interview conducted as early in the engagement process as possible, follow-interviews in regular intervals during wedding planning, about every 2 months until the wedding, field interviews at the wedding ceremony and celebration and, at least, one postwedding interview. These couples participated in as many as six interviews. The wedding and postwedding data were part of the larger study on weddings and was, in part, to explore other wedding-related themes. However, wedding and postwedding interviews were an opportunity to ask how “being married” was different from “being engaged” and how, yet again, their relationship was transformed by this new stage. Of the remaining 30 couples all were interviewed, at minimum, 2 times, once before the wedding and once after. In all, 19 couples were interviewed 2 times and 11 couples were interviewed 3 times. While much of the data on engagement were gathered in the initial interviews, subsequent interviews allowed follow-up questions and explored themes that emerged during ongoing data coding. During engagement up until the wedding, couples were interviewed as many times as could be arranged. However, interviews were extensive and time-consuming (2-3 hr long). Thus, it was not always possible to interview each couple more than once during the engagement period. But, additional interviews were attempted when possible. There was no attrition as all of the couples maintained their participation in the study.

Couples were interviewed together, most often, in the first interview and in the postwedding follow-up. In follow-up interviews partners were interviewed separately where possible. Separate interviews provide the opportunity to understand engagement from each of the partner’s viewpoint. Likewise, answering questions outside the partner’s presence may reveal information about couple differences, perspectives, and tensions that might not arise if interviewed jointly. Conversely, interviewing the couple together made possible the revelation of joint perspectives. Often during the interview the couple sorted through and negotiated joint perspectives. Thus, the joint interview afforded a firsthand look at couple’s joint reality production. The inclusion of separate and joint interviews provided a variety of information and perspectives. When couple interview data on a given topic differed from individual interview data, it was noted and analyzed. It was discovered that couples displayed sensitivity toward staying in synch with their partner’s views and perspectives and actively worked to produce similar accounts whether they were interviewed together.

**Sample Description**

The study consisted of 5 African Americans, 8 Asians, 21 Latinos, and 46 Whites (80 individuals total/40 couples). The
median age of the men was 27.1 and women 26.2 (this closely matches national-level statistics of first-time marriage; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The education level of the sample was fairly high. Three of the subjects were in graduate school and 30 others had achieved, at least, a bachelor’s degree. The remaining 27 had a high school diploma. Every individual was employed in the paid workforce and most of the sample worked full-time. Five participants, 1 male and 4 females, were employed part-time. A substantial portion of the sample were cohabiting before marriage, nearly 65%. (This also is very close to national practice as current research suggests approximately 70% of first marriages are preceded by cohabitation; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008.) The sample had a fairly equal proportion of working and middle class. There were no participants that would be considered poor or upper class (“the 1%”). The sample is not statistically representative, but useful for uncovering processes. The researcher is making insights into particular social and familial processes within a specific location and context. Sampling for this study followed the principles of saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) whereby the sample size was adequate when the collection of new data did not shed any further light on the issue under investigation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data collection was maintained simultaneously with the analysis phases of research. Early in the collection of interviews, open coding (see Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) of transcripts was undertaken to uncover emerging themes and questions. With regard to coupling, for example, initial coding revealed what appeared to be patterns regarding the progression of the relationship. Interviews were tailored to explore these emerging patterns. In early interviews that did not include explicit questions related to emerging themes, follow-up interviews were designed to make this information explicit. As data collection continued, focused coding, “fine-grained, line-by-line analysis of the notes building up and elaborating analytically interesting themes” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 160) was undertaken. Eventually, interviews and field note analysis progressed to linking coded data and analytical themes together. This analysis was written up in what Emerson et al. (1995) refer to as integrative memos. This article is based on several integrative memos on the engagement process. Couples are referred to by pseudonyms and any information identifying them has been modified to protect their identity.

Findings

One couple defines themselves as engaged through a series of ongoing mundane conversations, while another is engaged through a highly ritualized and public proclamation. At first glance, the process appears idiosyncratic. Efforts were made to disentangle couple’s experiences looking for underlying patterns across cases.

In general, couples approach marriage delicately and indirectly. Assessing the marriage potential and introducing the prospect of marriage to one’s partner is a difficult and uncertain process. Hinting, testing, joking, and scrutinizing the partner’s behavior are commonplace. Furthermore, the process is characterized by ongoing negotiation. Participants work together for months, sometimes years, to coordinate joint definitions of the relationship and transition themselves into being an engaged couple. The following is a model that illuminates these processes and how they unfold over time. The model consists of a series of five processes that grow increasingly public. The processes are not fixed stages. Couples may be in more than one process at a time, may fail to progress in a linear fashion and jump back to a previous process and/or widely vary in the length of time in any one process.

Process One: Assessing the Relational Future

According to Morton, Alexander, and Altman (1976), couples in romantic relationships, in all levels of intimacy, continually assess their ongoing relationship. Each party asks, what is the nature of our current relationship? What is the future of our relationship? Stage models confirm that assessment happens in the early stages of engagement but stage models give no sense of how participants decide if the relationship is “the one.” Alternatively, the process model describes what the assessment process looks like and how it is made. The partners make an assessment about whether the partner is a desirable person to marry and whether the desire to marry is mutually held. Participants use verbal and non-verbal cues gleaned from the partner and the social world around them to make sense of and understand the marriage potential of the relationship.

The marriage assessment process begins in recognizing the partner as “the one”—the person one desires to marry. For some this is a long and difficult process and for others it is quite short and simple. Compare the following two accounts:

I mean we knew right away. We had been close friends for—before we got together. And almost immediately (within 1 week) it was like this is it. We both knew. (Randy)

So I wasn’t sure if I was ready to settle down and I didn’t want to regret not ever dating other people later on. So, I—when I went to study abroad I said let’s just date other people. I need to be sure . . . When I came back (1 year later) things—we got back together and I felt okay I’m ready. (Betty)

Betty’s case exemplifies how difficult recognizing the marriageability of the partner may be. Participants rely on vague internal cues to guide them. Betty comes to understand the problem of “knowing” occurring because she lacks
including thoughts, talk, actions, and interaction that went
present research explores a wider range of social behavior
processes. But, unlike the Surra and Hughes analysis, the
pants in Surra and Hughes (1987)’s study of commitment
highly resemble the four major reasons given by the partici
later, after direct verbal conversations and/or continual
this conclusion. Their feelings remain unclear. It is not until
want to marry the partner or that, at the very least, they would
partner is “the one,” quickly reach the conclusion that they
honest person I’ve ever met”) are a few of the ways partici
a great deal of desirable traits (“He’s so honest. The most
commonalities with the partner (“I just thought that we had
so much in common”), and seeing the partner as possessing
a great deal of desirable traits (“He’s so honest. The most
honest person I’ve ever met”) are a few of the ways particip-
recount having come to assess the partner as marriage
desirable.
In addition to internal factors (feelings, commonalities,
etc.), life circumstances are important. Moving in together,
graduating from college, reaching a certain age, and the
amount of time dating the partner are used to make sense of
the marriage potential of the relationship. For Maggie, a
combination of internal factors and life circumstances help
her make sense of her desire to marry her partner.
I just thought that we had so much in common, we really liked
each other. And I think it’s an age thing for me, where I feel like
I’m working full-time now you know, I like my boyfriend; you
what else is there to do? I know that doesn’t sound romantic, but
I think that happens a lot. (Maggie)

Some participants, after a struggle to determine if their
partner is “the one,” quickly reach the conclusion that they
want to marry the partner or that, at the very least, they would
like marriage with this partner to occur sometime in their
future. However, other participants do not immediately reach
this conclusion. Their feelings remain unclear. It is not until
later, after direct verbal conversations and/or continual
assessment of their relationship occurs, that the feelings
become increasingly specified and clarified.
The participant’s accounts, internal and external factors,
highly resemble the four major reasons given by the partici-
pants in Surra and Hughes (1987)’s study of commitment
processes. But, unlike the Surra and Hughes analysis, the
present research explores a wider range of social behavior
including thoughts, talk, actions, and interaction that went
into the process. The “reasons” for deciding on commitment
were accompanied by and shaped by testing, hinting, talking,
negotiating, and a host of other interactional tools. Fur-
thermore, the reasons participants give would ebb and
flow as the relationship evolved. The process of relationship
transition is uncertain as the signs and signals they are rely-
ing on are vague and indirect. Efforts must be made to render
vague signs “seeable” and “knowable.”

Women participants report being the first to make attempts
to interpret and assess the ongoing relationship. Of the 40
women, 38 in the sample reported being the first to assess the
marriage possibility of the relationship and 36 men reported
that their thoughts of marriage occur after the issue is first
raised by their female partner. Sassler and Miller (2011) find
that men are more likely to initiate the decision to date and men
and women equally likely to initiate cohabitation. My find-
ings, interpreted in light of Sassler and Miller’s findings, show that
as commitment increases and veers toward marriage, women
become more active in the initiation process. This reflects
social and cultural norms that encourage women’s energies and
desires to be toward marriage. In contrast, early dating and
cohabitation, where sanctioned commitment is less required,
men are socially allowed more involvement.
The first partner to assess the marriage relationship must
interpret what their partner’s feelings and intentions regard-
ing marriage might be. Participants assess whether the part-
ners’ view of the relationship is in synch with theirs in
primarily two ways. One, they rely on reading verbal and
nonverbal cues from the partner and others in their social
world. Two, the participants may work to make the informa-
tion “seeable” by testing the partner’s feelings for them. This
work is often subtle and behind the scenes. Sassler and Miller
(2011) find that in deciding to date and move in together
strategies are also indirect. However, they find the indirect
attempts are almost entirely used by women. In this study,
men also use indirect approaches. The process of initiating a
change in the relationship is risky for both men and women.
Rejection in and of itself may be painful, but it also leaves
the couple out of synch in their definitions of the relation-
ship, potentially threatening the relationship. Thus, the initia-
tor has, most assuredly, done work to determine that marriage
is mutually agreeable before they propose a change. Engage-
ment is merely the final step after a long series of small
redefinitions of the relationship that advance and con-
firm the marriage potential. By the time engagement occurs,
many discussions about marriage have already taken place in
addition to the numerous indirect attempts to assess the
relationship.
Katie examines her partner Dave’s behavior in interacting
with his parents to help her assess the state of his feelings
toward her:
But I remember him telling his mom about me. His mom said he
never talked about his girlfriends to them. I thought that was
pretty significant. Also, I was the first girl he took to meet his
mom and dad, so I knew he was pretty serious about me. (Katie)
Interaction with Dave’s family is used as evidence of Dave’s feelings about the relationship. Yet, Katie remains still somewhat unsure whether he is ready to get engaged. Her uncertainty is similar to Michelle’s as she struggles to read her partner’s joking about marriage.

What happened was he started joking a couple months ago. It was right here in our kitchen. I just was really tired one night and I made like some slop to eat, maybe it was breakfast I don’t know, but like I put it down on his plate and I’m like “prison food.” And he said “Um gee and we’re not even married yet.” And that was like the first joke. It stuck in my mind. (Michelle)

Partners can, in addition to evaluating the partner’s behaviors and social arrangements, test the partner’s feelings for them. Jose is able to confirm his partner’s willingness to marry him through a discussion he initiated about religion.

One day we started talking about religion and I didn’t really plan this but I said would your beliefs keep you from being serious or even marrying someone who did not have the same religious beliefs? It was like this big turning point for me because I knew however she answered that would determine whether our relationship had any chance. She hesitated but said no, it wouldn’t. (Jose)

Jose is able to determine the marriage potential without directly talking about marriage, but more generally using a hypothetical scenario. Her response would make “evident” how she felt about potentially marrying him. Wilma also uses hypothetical discussion through which she is able to determine that her partner is “open” to the idea of marriage.

He always, from the beginning, talked about how he’d like a family and would jokingly say he wanted ten kids. I think I just started getting more specific you know I want two kids, a boy and a girl, and I want these names and I want to live here and a husband who respects my career and stuff like that. (Wilma)

Assessment is also accomplished mutually through conversation that is full of vague and nonspecific plans.

We talked about long term and the future. We never actually used the word [marriage]. But there was this implicit understanding I think. It started the same day we moved in together and it was like I see us together for the long term. (Tina)

The ongoing conversations, with vague references to their future together, help to confirm and harden their beliefs about the current state of and future of their relationship together.

In the process of assessing the marriage potential, we also see that coupling takes on an increasing focus on the future. The participants, in their discourse and actions, begin to shape a common future together, whether it be “we might someday marry” or elaborating specifics of their hypothetical family together. Crafting a joint future is not exclusive to engaged couples. Sassler and Miller (2011) note that unspoken references to a future life together are typical of cohabitating couples.

**Process Two: The Relational Conversation**

During the relational assessment process the partner(s) may secretly evaluate the marriage potential of the relationship for days, months, or years. The length of time in this process highly varies. Eventually though, the participant undergoes the second process whereby they make the new definition of the relationship an explicit topic of conversation with the partner. Through dialogue between the partners, the marriage potential is made “real” as outlined by Berger and Kellner (1964). Through talk, the marriage future ultimately comes to be defined, shaped, and negotiated with the partner.

In the first process, any type of redefinition of the relationship that brings the couple closer to marriage, be it defining themselves as “possibly marrying,” “engaged,” or “the one I want to marry someday” may occur. When a partner initiates a discussion about this new relationship definition it typically unfolds through indirect or direct conversation about the marriage potential of the relationship. Participants do not typically initiate a redefinition of the relationship via a formal proposal of marriage. While this is a common portrayal of engagement in popular media, in the lives of ordinary people it appears quite rare. There was only one case that potentially fit this model. In all cases, the initiator has performed work to determine that marriage is mutually agreeable before they propose. Engagement is merely the final step after a long series of small redefinitions of the relationship that advance and confirm the marriage potential. By the time engagement occurs, many discussions about marriage have already taken place in addition to the numerous indirect attempts to assess the relationship.

Women are more likely to initiate the relational conversation. Women do this through indirect discussion of the potential for marriage. No woman in the sample offers a formal marriage proposal to initiate the marital conversation. The pattern that appears over and over is that the female partner initiates a discussion of marriage that ultimately leads to her male partner offering a proposal of marriage.

Initiating a discussion of the marital potential is usually approached cautiously. Candy raises the issue in the following way;

We talked about getting married. (And did he or you bring that up?). I think I did. Yeah it’s like, “so what are you thinking? Where is this relationship heading?” (Candy)

Candy’s question does not ask about marriage specifically, rather “Where is this relationship heading?” Participants frequently used indirect language including: “Are we moving
forward?” “Is this a permanent thing?” and “Will we settle down?”

In two cases, the marital conversation is even more subtly raised through humor. Darrell describes his use of humor:

I wanted to ask her to marry me but, not being from this country, I didn’t know exactly how you do things here. Do I ask her parents? Should I buy a ring? I wanted to find out but I didn’t know really how to bring it up. I joked about it mostly.

Darrell’s jokes do not successfully lead to an open discussion of marriage. Participants may continue additional indirect approaches. Alternatively, they may resort to a more direct approach. “One day I just finally came out and said ‘we’ve been together for 4 years now. Do you see us moving forward?’” (Rebecca).

Initiators frequently point to a particular event or significant social marker that fuels the change in the relationship.

So, after we decided to move in together I said “I just want to make sure that you know that moving in is serious to me and that I see our relationship as a permanent thing.” (Jackie)

Social factors are highlighted that make marriage a “natural” “normal” direction for the relationship. Graduating from college, moving in together and being together for many years craft marriage as part of the direction their lives should be heading in. These accounts may also serve as a way to address potential rejection of their redefinition of the relationship and gain leverage in the negotiation process. The initiation of a redefinition of the relationship, as is revealed in the next section, is a social construction that can be adopted, rejected, delayed, altered, or renegotiated.

**Process Three: Negotiating Joint Definitions of the Relationship**

What happens after the relational conversation has been attempted? The participants undergo a process through which they create a joint definition of the relationship. The process may be as simple as the partner immediately and directly accepting the proposed redefinition of the relationship.

Yeah it’s like, what are you thinking? And it turns out he was thinking the same thing. He was like you know I love you a lot. I want to be with you forever. (Song)

The direct acceptance of the new relationship definition was not always common. More often there is a negotiated quality to the interaction that follows. All of the participants in the study ultimately get married; hence, there are many redefinitions that are successful. However, this does not mean that each redefinition attempt was successful. Furthermore, the road to redefining the relationship may be filled with a range of contingencies.

In some cases, the redefinition is put on hold or delayed. Maggie’s partner is willing to adopt her redefinition of the relationship, but at a later point in time.

He said, “Let me think about it.” And you know he’s very slow to come to any decision. Even minor decisions so it's very typical of him. But he decided—he’s the one that decided well we’ll get engaged and he picked a certain month. (Maggie)

Maggie agrees to delay the redefinition of the relationship. Indeed, on the month her partner selects, they define themselves as engaged. The delay of the redefinition is not characterized as problematic for Maggie. It is constructed as evidence of her partner’s typical style. But, according to Clark and Labeff (1986), differing definitions of the relationship are a source of strain among intimate couples that frequently spark doubts about continuing the relationship. Thus, mismatched definitions may be oriented to as a potential threat to the relationship. In Sandy’s case, her partner’s resistance to becoming engaged is interpreted as problematic in the context of what she claims is a preexisting agreement that if they lived together they will get engaged.

When he asked me to move in with him, I told him I felt uncomfortable living with someone and not being married—a moral issue for me. So we talked about it at that time and he knew that it was a problem for me.

Sandy and Juan report that the subject is a source of tension and ongoing arguments for a period of several months. The matter is resolved when Juan finally agrees to become engaged.

I can’t honestly say that I proposed and she agreed. It was rather that we were having another discussion about marriage and then we finally found an agreement. (Juan)

A partner can ignore or avoid the marital conversation. When Elley initiated jokes regarding marriage “Are you the kind of person to wait until he gets his PhD to get married?” her partner Matt merely laughs and changes the subject. Matt reports that he knew she was hinting about engagement but was not ready to redefine the relationship. In these cases, the partner is willing to define the relationship as “we will marry someday” but is not willing to define themselves as engaged nor take more finalized steps (proposal or public actions) toward engagement. This type of response may leave the couple out of synch in their desired definitions of the relationship and a struggle sometimes ensues.

Avoiding becomes harder as the conversation is more direct. Elley eventually asks Matt directly when he feels ready for the “next step.” This receives a response from Matt:

I said, “I don’t know exactly when I’ll feel ready. It has nothing to do with you. I know I want to marry you. I just don’t feel like I am a person who is old enough to get married.”
Matt’s response is similar to nine other cases in which the male partner agrees he has the desire to marry the partner, but is not yet “ready” to get married. A struggle ensues to establish matching definitions.

When the redefinition is rejected, accepted in part, avoided, or delayed there are several responses partners give. The proposed definition can be abandoned or delayed, a new modified definition can be adopted or attempts can be made to negotiate, persuade, or pressure the partner to adopt the definition. In any case, several of these responses may occur.

Attempts to persuade the partner can be a delicate and tension-filled matter. Chris reminds her partner Dave that they agreed to get engaged after she graduates from medical training. Chris becomes frustrated at Dave’s response:

He was just sort of making a joke about it—blowing it off. (How would he do that?). Just laugh and say silly stuff like oh you know “You’re already my ball and chain.” I go “I’m serious.”

According to Dave, he had already decided to propose but wanted to wait for their anniversary to surprise her with a formal proposal. Hence, he is merely pretending to avoid the new definition. Nonetheless, it is a considerable source of tension for Chris, who continues to struggle advancing the engagement.

When a partner continues to resist the new definition of the relationship, partners may take stronger measures such as delivering ultimatums or enlisting the help of third parties. Jackie makes reference to a third party to get leverage in bargaining for the redefinition of the relationship.

So, after we decided to move in together, I just said, “My mom’s not too happy that we’re moving in together because she thinks I’m going to get hurt again. But I told her that I know you’re committed to me. But I just want to make sure that you know that moving in is serious to me and that I see our relationship as a permanent thing.” (Jackie)

In the struggle to redefine the relationship there are practices that, in some way, give the participant a measure of control over how the relationship proceeds. After mutual agreement is made to someday marry, the next step is for the partner (in every case the male partner) to propose marriage. Being in the position to give the formal proposal allows this partner a measure of control. For example, Jackie anticipates a proposal as they have previously agreed they will someday marry. However, she does not know when it will occur. Jackie attempts to influence the timing of the proposal through hints.

I was hoping you know maybe I would get it [proposal] during the holidays. But I’m sure—I can’t remember exactly but I’m sure I hinted. We would go by a jewelry store and I would say, hey should we look inside?

Women’s attempt to expedite a proposal was noted in research on cohabitating couples (Sassler & Miller, 2011). In addition to gaining a measure of control through initiating the formal proposal, the partner who keeps a level of secrecy regarding when and how he will propose also receives some control of the process. Dave, for example, by secretly adopting the redefinition and planning a surprise proposal transforms himself into the initiator of the process and retains control of its timing.

**Process Four: Formalizing the New Definition of the Relationship**

Engagement is not fully real until formalized practices are invoked. Many participants, for example, do not define themselves as engaged without a formal proposal. Formal practices however are not fixed. Formal practices range from the purchase of rings, setting a wedding date, formal announcements to family and friends to holding engagement celebrations. These practices make the redefinition of the relationship increasingly public and hardened. While formality and tradition are evident in the engagement process, they, by no means, dictate the interaction. The participants, to some degree, pick and choose formal practices, negotiate between themselves how and when they invoke the rituals, or leave various rituals out all together. The participants themselves frequently recognized the contingent and fluid nature of the rituals as they struggle to define for themselves and others the meanings of the formalized practices.

A formal proposal is the defining moment of engagement for many couples. However, in several cases, the couple defines themselves as engaged through ongoing mundane conversation. Recall, Sandy and Juan are engaged after their ongoing discussion resulted in an agreement. Nonetheless, Sandy and Juan enact practices that formalize the engagement. In fact these practices, while not the defining moment of engagement, are still important in making the engagement fully real. Sandy describes the importance of buying her ring.

I was more excited about the ring than I thought I would be. I was walking out of the store with this shiny ring ongoing “Wow this is it. I’m getting married.”

What is defined as the necessary formal practices may vary between couples or the partners themselves. Eli and Min define themselves as engaged when they will tell their family and friends about their intentions to marry. Hence, the formal proposal and ring are not immediately important.

Eventually outsiders interpret the couple’s relationship based on rituals and symbols. Mark and Kay, for example, work quickly to have a formal proposal with a ring before their engagement party. “There’s no way you can go to the engagement party without a proposal and a ring. Like that would be crazy” (Mark). The proposal and ring are acquired in anticipation of the reaction they expect from others. Others might question the seriousness of their new relationship status without the accompanying ritual work.
Rings and other symbols are also interpreted by the couple as a sign of the partner’s serious investment in the new definition of the relationship. This becomes apparent when the absence of these rituals or symbols are noted and used to interpret the relationship.

So, when we were finally able to pick up the ring and I go “Hey we can pick up the ring today” fully expecting her to be excited. She says “Oh we can just get it tomorrow.” I was like “Whoa, what’s going on here. Are you having doubts?” (Yoshi)

The performance of the rituals is a resource for interpreting the commitment of the partner. A male partner’s surprise proposal would be considered unsatisfactory, or less “real” if the performance showed no creativity or sensitivity to the importance of the occasion (Schweingruber, Anahita, & Berns, 2004).

There is a significant degree of variation regarding the presence or absence of formalized practices, so much so that it creates the possibility that partners have differing definitions of when engagement occurs and/or differing notions of appropriate formal practices. Martin believes engagement occurs more formally while Gloria believes it happens in mundane conversation.

One day I was hugging her and I said something like I can see us getting married some day. Well, the next day she said “I told my parents we were engaged.” I was taken aback. I mean I guess I’m lucky because like most guys I didn’t have to sweat it out doing the whole ring and asking permission and all that. (Did you intend to get engaged when you said that when you were hugging her?) Well, no not—I didn’t mean that to be—you know like most people think of getting engaged. But, I was happy none the less. I mean I loved her a lot and I was like well it just happened a little sooner and saved me all the stress anyway.

While Martin’s intention is not to become engaged, he readily accepts and adopts Gloria’s definition of the situation.

The engagement rituals can be negotiated in ongoing interaction. After Darrell reveals his intention to propose at the couple’s favorite restaurant, his partner, Annette suggests he propose by the beautiful bridge at the restaurant. Darrell says he prefers to wait until they have Champagne after dinner. When Annette says she is too excited to wait, Darrel agrees to propose at both the bridge and later, with Champagne. When they are at the bridge he asks “Do I get down on one knee? To which Annette response “No, we’re equals here.” Together, on a moment to moment basis, they choose and negotiate the rituals that transform their relationship.

Formality and tradition clearly play an important part of the engagement process. Formal practices can construct, harden, and amplify the new definition of the relationship. Yet, rather than dictating behavior, the formal practices are an interactional resource the couple and others can reflexively use in making sense of and constructing the relationship.

**Process Five: Publicizing the New Definition**

Revealing the marriage decision to others is a necessary and important part of the engagement process. Notifying other people can be done through formal practices such as engagement parties, rings, and public formal proposals. Conversely, couples may inform family and friends informally, through conversation. In the fifth process, the couple makes the engagement public, especially informally to family and friends.

The act of telling others about the engagement helps to confirm and harden the reality of the decision. Engagement may not feel fully real without telling others. Rhonda’s engagement experience, for example, is hindered when she cannot reach her family and friends.

Here I have this earth shattering news and no one’s at home. I mean it’s hard for it to be a big deal when you don’t have anyone to share it with. I became so desperate to get just anyone I was calling down the list.

Rhonda’s experience of sharing the engagement with others prevents her from experiencing the engagement in a dramatic way—“to be a big deal.”

All of the participants in the sample make their engagement public, most of which are immediate (usually during the moment to a week later). A notable exception is the male participants who ask their partner’s father’s (or parents’) permission to marry their daughter before the formal proposal. According to Schweingruber et al. (2004), asking parental consent not only serves to involve family but is a way to confirm the partner’s serious commitment to marriage.

Timing of public announcements is important. Matt waits 6 months before he announces the news of his engagement to his friends and coworkers. His partner Salima clearly orients to this as a signal of his potential lack of commitment to the redefinition of the relationship.

Matt: So it took me a while to get around to it (announcing the engagement) because I was doing this impersonal thing.

Salima: You didn’t tell anybody in your department here either because you said you were into your project and didn’t want to distract attention.

Matt: But you know . . .

Salima: We didn’t quite understand why (sarcastic tone).

Matt: So, anyway, I was uh—I didn’t do that very well. I dropped some balls (laughs).

Public involvement in the engagement triggers changes in the couple’s and their family’s social relationships. Couples who have not previously met their fiancé’s family (especially parents) often do so on engagement. More time and activities are frequently spent with the partner’s families. Engagement parties or family dinners, for example, may be arranged to bring the participants and others...
together. Even when family interaction does not increase because the families were previously highly involved, the family dynamics begin to change. The families begin to focus their discussions and activities toward planning the wedding.

Meetings, conversations, and planning between families cement the new definition of the relationship. The greater the involvement of others, the more the relationship is established. The relationship becomes so entrenched, that it may be difficult for brides and grooms, who no longer wish to marry the partner, to back out of the engagement. As partners and families invest financially and large amounts of time in planning the wedding, others now have a stake in the new definition.

Families do not always cooperate in creating the new definition of the relationship, although the expectation to do so is ever present. When families do not appear to support the new definition, couples react with disappointment and anxiety. In the extreme case, the family can try to prevent the redefinition from happening and try to break up the couple. While none of the participants in the sample report any such direct behavior, they did report instances in which the family indicated they were unhappy with the partner or were not fully accepting of the new definition of the relationship. Carmen’s brother relays to her that her fiancé is “not the right person” for her and refuses to go to the wedding. The efforts by the family to alter the direction of the relationship can be ignored, negotiated, or adopted. In Carmen’s case, her brother is ignored.

Participants most frequently noted family’s influence in directing the nature of the engagement. In two cases, the partners report feeling immediate pressure to adopt the family’s religious beliefs.

After we told them we were engaged, that was the first question his mother asked. Are you going to have a Jewish wedding? I’m like we’re having it at the temple. That was the point where she was the happiest. Then, the next question was “Are you converting?” (Laura)

Family pressures may result in a direct behavior change. However, couples are not passive recipients of the family pressures. In the two cases in which the partners felt immediate pressure to convert to the family’s religion, neither converted. Nonetheless these experiences may alter the relationship with the family. In Carmen’s case, her brother’s insistence she was marrying the wrong man ultimately, in her words “drove us [Carmen and her brother] apart.” Family responses, whether positive or negative, serve to reinforce the gravity and importance of the new definition of the relationship.

Couples can anticipate family responses and engage in what Goffman (1959) refers to as preventive practices wherein couples construct an interactional situation that favors a positive reaction and minimizes a negative one. Candy and Dan delay the engagement announcement to minimize a potential negative response.

Dan: We wanted to wait until we had a ring and I wanted to make sure I had this job, otherwise . . .
Candy: I mean my parents would want to know he had a stable job.

Some of the influence others have on the engagement process is more subtle and built up over time. For instance, couples find that when they tell others about their engagement, they are often asked about the “story” of the engagement and the details of their wedding planning. In fact, this is often how proper engagement behavior is communicated to the couple. Jennifer is so frequently asked by others the date of her wedding, she feels she must come up with one.

Sort of like at first we enjoyed the engagement, but then it sort of happened by itself because everybody kind of asks you “So when are you getting married?” So you sort of realize we’ve got to pick a date.

Furthermore, telling and retelling the story of engagement and discussing the details of the wedding hardens and makes real the definition of the relationship.

Discussion and Conclusion
The media portrayal of becoming engaged is typically of a man on bended knee formally proposing marriage to a woman. It is shown as one isolated moment. Many of the couples in this study experience similar rituals, but these moments make up only a very small part of their engagement. If researchers focus on the ritual and formal acts, the rich and diverse ways participants meaningfully understand and invoke marriage in their relationship are ignored. Likewise, using stage models in which behaviors are analytically grouped into predictable, fixed stages ignores the context in which engagement unfolds in ongoing interaction and the interactional work required to define and construct the reality of the relationship. The process model offered in this study allows sociologists to see the numerous processes that take place long before and after the public rituals are enacted. The formal marriage proposal is merely one step in a long series of small redefinitions of the relationship that advance and confirm the marriage potential. By the time formal engagement occurs, many discussions and/or actions moving the relationship forward have already taken place.

The process model is not designed to mimic a stage model whereby couples follow predictable behaviors over time. In the process model, couples can be in more than one stage, couples widely vary in how long they remain in a stage—from seconds, days, to years and may avoid a linear progression going back and forth in and out of processes. These issues present a problem for the stage model as it is difficult
to categorize the participants’ varied behaviors. However, in the process model, behaviors that are unclear are the very sorts of behaviors this model examines. How the participants make sense of and interpret behaviors from their partners, that are usually indirect, unclear, and even contradictory, have to be sorted out by the participants themselves. The model sheds light on this very process—the messy work of reality construction.

The engagement process occurs through talk and actions that construct a new definition of the relationship. There is no formula that describes specific behaviors couples enact. Instead, the road is paved by a myriad of actions and reactions by the couple and others that are continuously negotiated. This study finds that the processes, nonetheless, are characterized by some common features.

First, definitions of the relationship are tenuous and must be actively created. New definitions of the relationship do not “just happen.” Initiators take steps to bring them about. Attempts to alter relationships are usually performed cautiously and, initially, subtly through indirect processes. Because much is at stake, care is taken to ensure the new definition of the relationship is one that will be well received by the partner and others.

There is a negotiated quality to the interaction in each of the processes. At any point in time, the new definition can be abandoned, delayed, modified, or adopted. Even in the very earliest stages, when a partner is assessing whether the relationship or the partner is marriage worthy, these assessments can be influenced by others or tested and changed in interaction. Moreover, the partner or family can negotiate and influence the redefinition of the relationship at various points throughout the process.

There are a variety of interactional tools couples can draw on to construct the new definition of the relationship. Hinting, testing, rearranging social circles, and formal rituals are only a few examples participants use to construct and harden the new definition of the relationship. The practices, rather than dictating behavior, are resources the couple and others can reflexively use in making sense of and constructing the relationship.

The work of becoming engaged takes cooperation with others. Goffman’s (1959) notion of teamwork is useful here. Not only do the couples have to work to be synch with each other, they must work with family and friends to make it fully real. Recall that engagement was subject to change throughout the process.

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Finally, socioeconomic variables such as race, class, religion, occupation, age, and gender can play a role in the coupling process. Couples, for example, follow some stereotypical gender norms in the engagement process. Women were far more likely to initiate the marital conversation while men were much likely to offer the formal marriage proposal. Religion was noted by several participants as being potentially problematic in the coupling process both in assessing if engagement was possible and in family support of the engagement. Other socioeconomic variables, such as race, class, and age were not directly analyzed in this study because they were not made the topic of relevance by the participants in interviews. However, this is a promising area of future research that a larger pool of participants and focused interviewing on these topics would likely reveal their sociological relevance.

Limitations of the Research

The research relies on a fairly homogeneous sample of first-time married, heterosexual, childless, and somewhat educated sample from California. Thus, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results. Likewise, because all of the participants were “successful” in getting married, in other words, did not have a permanent relationship breakup prior to marriage, the findings are relevant only to those couples who achieve marriage. Future research would include unsuccessfully engaged couples to identify what parts of the process break down and how. This would ultimately clarify the relationship model.

Directions for Future Research

The process model provides sociologists with a long overdue understanding about how intimate heterosexual relationships are transformed into being formally engaged to be married. Steps needed to refine the model include: drawing on more diverse samples, focusing interview questions around specific socioeconomic variables, and providing a comparative analysis of unsuccessful engagements. The model’s usefulness will likely extend to relationships beyond engagement and/or heterosexual couples. Perhaps the cohabiting couple with no intentions to marry or the committed homosexual couple draws on similar reality-producing practices as they become serious. Future research can confirm these questions. The model can also potentially be useful in examining relationships that are not romantic. Friendships or business relationships may also use a similar reality-producing process. These and other types of intimate relationships are promising areas of future research.

Despite the limited sample, the model is an important first step in developing a picture of relationships that goes beyond stages and incorporates participant’s analysis and understanding of their social worlds in making decisions about and operating in their relationship. The alternative process model avoids the static model and fixed behaviors for each stage of the relationship. In the new model, behaviors vary based on the context of their social world. Participants actively assess and make decisions about their complex and frequently unclear relationship using interactional tools. That is why the process will not look the same for any couple. Ultimately, the model appreciates the creativity, hard work, and complexity of the lived experience.
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