



2010-04-01

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Poulsen, Franklin O. and Busby, Dean, "Marriage: Sooner or Later" (2010). *FHSS Mentored Research Conference*. 83.

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/fhssconference_studentpub/83

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Marriage: “Sooner or Later”

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Introduction

An interesting social phenomenon exists in America today, one which has gained a great deal of attention from researchers. Several studies have corroborated the fact that most Americans still look at marriage as an essential part of the good life (Axinn & Thornton, 2000), yet at the same time the average age of first marriage has risen consistently for the last 30 years (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Unfortunately there are no clear cut predictors of this increase in age at first marriage, a few trends though inconsistent have emerged that may help explain this phenomenon; namely, (1) since the 1980's there has been an increase in the percentage of people who believe that there are fewer good marriages today than in times past. (2) There has been a decrease in the number of people who believe that married people are happier. And (3) there has been an increase in the percentage of people who think it is better to remain single than get married. The one consistent finding is that compared to the 1980's more of today's teenagers feel that the ideal age for marriage is at least 5 years post secondary school (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

The major purpose of this study is to explore whether there are concrete relationship factors, family factors or attitudes that explain why individuals put off getting married till later and later even though they generally view it as desirable. In order to test this we use two variables (Desire to be Married and Readiness for a Close Relationship) as indicators of marriage imminence and then utilize predictors to see if our conceptual framework accurately predicts these indicators. Our predictors follow an ecological approach (Larson & Holman, 1994) to dating and marriage that assumes a variety of contexts (family, dating, culture etc.) influence our dating attitudes and behaviors. We recognize from the outset that without longitudinal data that includes both dating and marriage, what we term imminence is not an accurate reflection of marital timing, though it does distinguish between people who want to be married “now” and those who do not.

Methods

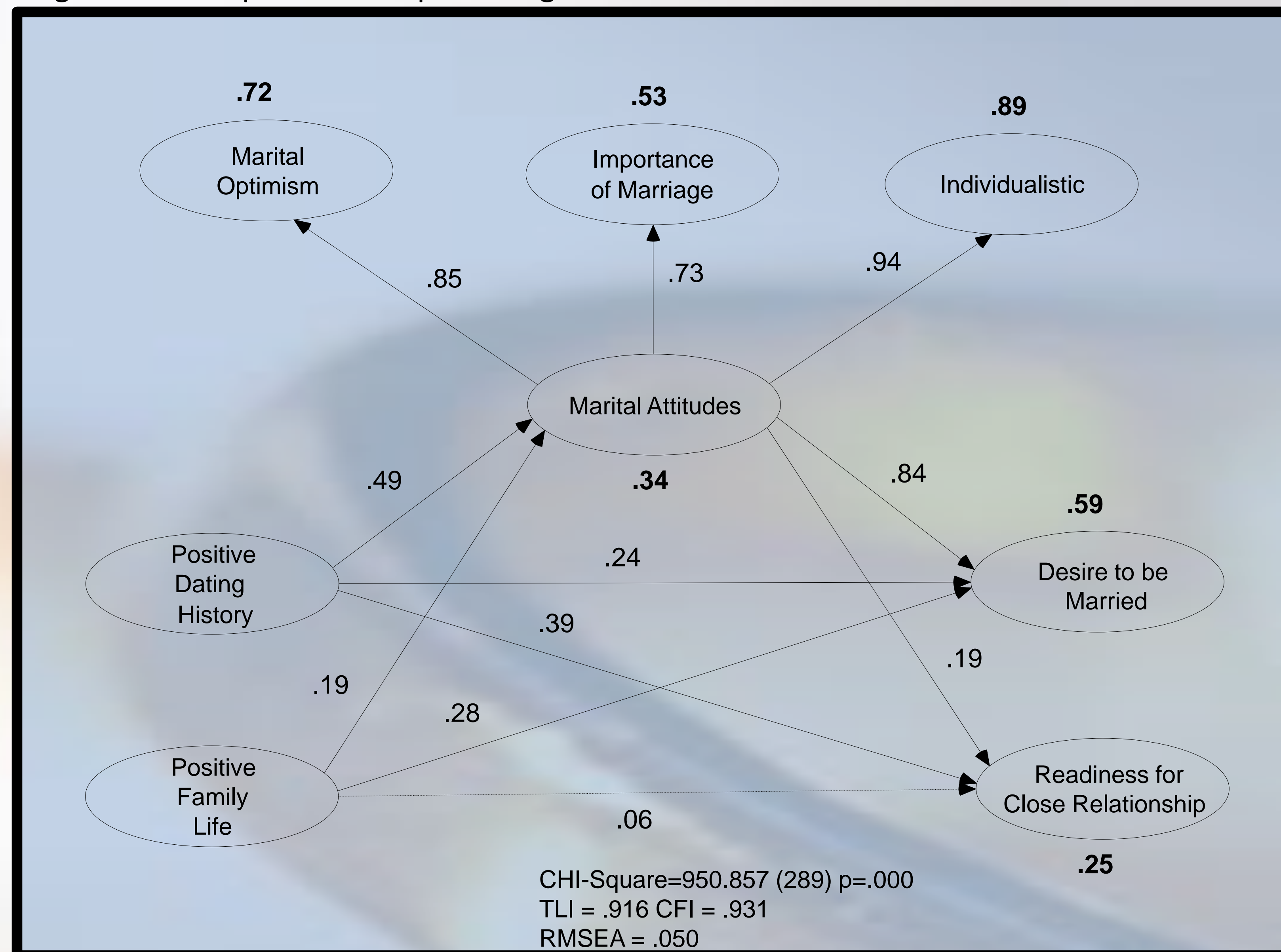
Sample

The sample was pulled from the READY data set gathered in 2009. Participants were 1036 single adults between the ages of 18 and 30. The sample identified themselves as predominately White (83%) 6% Black, 4% Asian 3% Latino and 4% other. Most (81%) had completed at least some college or were enrolled at the time, 16% had a college degree. About 3% had a high school education or less.

Measures

This study used measures from the READY Evaluation. Each participant completed a questionnaire of 300+ items. The questionnaire solicits responses on several areas such as background information, family-of-origin experiences, self-perceptions, personality traits, values, and dating behaviors. Specific measures utilized in this study are as follows; Positive Family Life, Positive Dating History, Marital Optimism, The Importance of Marriage, Individualism, Desire to be Married and Readiness for a Close Relationship. See Figure 1. for a model of how we hypothesizes these variables will interact.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model predicting marital imminence



Results

Analysis Strategy

We used a Structural Equation Model (SEM) to outline the hypothesized framework for how we felt the outcome variables would be best predicted. We theorized that marital attitudes and indeed marriage itself is best predicted by developmental contexts such as family and past romantic relationships and that these attitudes and developmental contexts provide the best prediction for marital imminence.

Results

The X^2 with 402 degrees of freedom was 950.857 and was significant at ($p < .000$), the TLI was .916, the CFI was .931, and the RMSEA was .050. These statistics indicate satisfactory model fit. Squared multiple correlations (in bold) indicate that our independent measures are strong prediction of Desire to be Married ($R^2 = .59$) and moderate predictors of Readiness for a Close Relationship ($R^2 = .25$). As shown in the model a second order analysis was used to combine several constructs that together represent an individuals attitudes about marriage. The strongest overall predictor for marital attitudes is positive dating history (.49). Together with Positive Family life these variables account for 34% ($R^2 = .34$) of the variance in marital attitudes. Positive Dating History also accounted for the bulk of the variance explained in Readiness for marriage, with a structural coefficient of .39. Marital attitudes was the strongest predictor of Desire to Marry with a structural coefficient of .84. The only path in the model that was not significant was the one between Positive Family Life and Readiness for a Close Relationship, thus this path is represented by a dotted line in Figure 1. Overall this conceptual model explains most of what makes up ones desire to be married, but only about a quarter of what makes somebody ready for marriage.

Discussion

As indicated in the introduction researchers know very little about why people are waiting later and later to get married when at the same time marriage seems so important. Although a more rigorous methodology is necessary to prove out our model, the results of this study are a foundation for explaining the social phenomenon of late marriage.

The first question for us the researchers is why there is strong prediction for Desire to Marry but relatively weak prediction for Readiness for a Close Relationship. Although at face value we might interpret this to mean that we have not fully tapped into what predicts marital imminence (which is probably true), it may also be the case that individuals never really feel ready for marriage and that readiness comes during the process of commitment such as during an engagement. The state of wanting to be married however is predicted well by our model and therefore shows that given a positive home life, positive dating history and positive attitudes about marriage, an individuals desire to be married will not likely increase. The absence of these factors may then be a basis for waiting later to marry or not marry at all. Thus much of how we view marriage comes from how positive vs. negative our dating relationships and home life are.

It is also interesting to note that in our model Positive Family Life is not the strongest predictor of any of the outcome variables. This result in many ways reflects ecological models of dating (Huston, 2000) that show how distal variables though important to development of attitudes as well as behaviors, tend to lose their predictive efficacy over time. Thus one's dating history has more of an effect because experiences associated with dating are likely to have occurred more recently and are more connected to ones desire to marry and readiness to be romantically close to someone else.

In summary, the present study shows that a positive family life, positive dating history and positive attitudes toward marriage strongly predict an imminent desire to be married and moderately predict readiness to be in a close relationship. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that given these predictors one would marry sooner than later and that later marriage is the result of a lack or total absence of these conditions.

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