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When to Wed? A Closer Examination of the Association Between Age of Marriage and Marital Quality

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ABSTRACT

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With the rising age of marriage and previous research failing to address a more detailed look at more descriptive measures of satisfaction, the current study examined the association between age of first marriage and marital stability, satisfaction, sexual satisfaction and frequency, effective communication, conflict, and problem areas. Results from a sample of 470 participants who completed the RELATE Questionnaire indicated that across the board, those who married from ages 20-24 had better marital outcomes than those who delayed marriage until their thirties and beyond. These results fit a possible theory of explanation that when it comes to age of marriage, a "balanced is better" approach may be more beneficial to couples when it comes to successful marriages.

Keywords: age of marriage, marital stability, marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, effective communication, conflict, problem areas

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Between Age of Marriage and Marital Quality

Until recently, research on the association between age at marriage and later marital

success has focused primarily on two areas of study. First, researchers have concentrated on

how *marriages started during adolescence* differ from older marriages. Over the past three

decades studies have repeatedly shown that marriages where one or both of the spouses are

teenagers at the time of the marriage are at a higher risk for relationship dissolution (Becker,

Landes, & Michael, 1977; Bennett, Blanc, & Bloom, 1988; Lehrer, 2008; Menken, Trussell,

Stempel, & Babkol, 1981; & Murphy, 1985). Second, researchers studying age of marriage have

also focused on *marital survival or stability* as the only measure of marital success. For

example, in his examination of factors contributing to increased marital stability in the United

States, Heaton (2002) found that the rising age of marriage plays a significant role in accounting

for decreased divorce, noting, the "rising age at marriage is the primary force behind lower

dissolution and its impact supersedes the countervailing forces" (p. 404).

This consistent focus by researchers on teenage marriage and divorce outcomes has led to

the commonly held assumption that delaying marriage leads to better marital outcomes.

However, new research in recent years has called into the question the assumption that older is

necessarily better when it comes to marriage success – particularly when it comes to the

happiness and quality of marriage relationships. Studies done in recent years have started to

combine measures of marital *satisfaction* with marital *stability* to assess how age of marriage is

associated with overall marital quality. These studies have shown that later marriages started in

the late 20s and 30s fare very well in terms stability, but do rather poorly in terms of satisfaction

or quality (Glenn, Uecker, & Love, 2010; Hymowitz, Carroll, Wilcox, & Kaye, 2013). Specifically, these new studies have suggested that there is a "marriage satisfaction curve" when it comes to age at marriage. Specifically these studies have shown that there is a curvilinear relationship between age of marriage and marital happiness and that the greatest likelihood of being in an "intact marriage of the highest quality" is among those who marry between the ages of 22 and 25 (Glenn et al., 2010, p. 795).

Although these new studies have identified a curvilinear relationship between age of marriage and marital satisfaction, there is little research that helps explain why this pattern may exist. The purpose of the current study is to deepen our understanding of how later marriages appear to be more stable, but less satisfying than earlier twenty-something marriages. In particular, this study used detailed and more specific measures of marital quality to examine how patterns of effective communication, conflict, problem areas, and sexual satisfaction, differ according to the age at which an individual is first married.

Literature Review

Age of Marriage Trends

In the early1900s, the median age for first marriage in the United States was approximately 26 years of age for men and 22 years old for women (Lehrer, 2008). This age dropped in the 1950s and 1960s, putting the median age at first marriage at 23 for men and 20 for women (Lehrer, 2008; Lehrer, 2013). Since 1950, the median age at first marriage has substantially increased in the United States and is currently at a historic high – 26.6 years for women and 29.0 years for men (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2013). These trends highlight that while much of the age of marriage research to date has focused on teenage marriages, such marriages are now a relatively small portion of the population. In contrast, we are approaching a

time when nearly half of first marriages in the United States are occurring after the age of thirty. As the age of marriage continues to increase, it will be especially important to understand how age at first marriage affects marital quality and success in the under-studied group of couples who are marrying after the age of thirty.

Lehrer and Chen (2013) describe the rising age of first marriage as "one of the most salient demographic trends in the U.S. landscape in recent decades" (p. 522). Much of this rising trend can be explained by the changing opportunities for employment for both men and women, the development of oral contraception, the legalization of abortion, the growing acceptance and trend of cohabitation before or instead of marriage, and the widespread cultural belief that young people should be emotionally, psychologically, and financially stable before getting married (Lehrer, 2008; Lehrer & Chen, 2013). Lehrer and Chen (2013) suggest that there is a sorting period during dating to give individuals a chance to find the best potential mate. The rising age at first marriage has previously been seen as beneficial because it gives individuals more time to make these sorting decisions while allowing time for adult characteristics and trajectories to appear. Lehrer and Chen (2013) stated, however, that there may be a point at which this delay is no longer beneficial due to a ticking biological clock and thinning partner pool.

Previous Research

As noted previously, most of the research to date on the association between age at first marriage and resulting marital success has focused on teenage marriages and the marital stability patterns of couples marrying at different ages. For over thirty years now, studies on age of marriage have shown a positive relationship between age at first marriage and marital stability, suggesting that those who marry at a younger age tend to be at a higher risk for relationship dissolution (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977; Bennet, Blanc, & Bloom, 1988; Glenn et al,

2010; Lehrer, 2008; Menken, Trussell, Stempel, & Babkol, 1981; & Murphy, 1985). In an early study, Bumpass and Sweet (1972) noted that women who marry in their teenage years have higher marital disruption rates than those that marry when they are older, especially compared to those who marry for the first time in their thirties or beyond. This pattern was later confirmed by Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet (1991) who stated, "Disruption rates are two-thirds lower among women who married after the age of 25 than they are among those marrying as teenagers" (p. 32). These and other studies have controlled for potentially confounding variables and still found a significant difference in marital disruption rates between age groups. The replication of these findings by multiple studies has led to a commonly held assumption among scholars and the broader public that delaying marriage leads to better marriages (Hymowitz et al., 2013).

Second, researchers studying age of marriage have primarily focused on marital survival and stability as the single measure of marital success. After noting a significant rise in marital stability, Heaton (2002) examined a number of factors related to marital relationships that underwent changes in past decades in an effort to explain the increased stability. He examined parents' marital stability, premarital sexual experience, premarital parental status, educational attainment, cohabitation, homogamy, and age of marriage. Heaton (2002) found that many of these factors, including coming from a single parent family, premarital sexual experience, premarital parents, cohabitors, heterogamous marriages, and marrying young contribute to higher rates of marital dissolution. However, delaying the age of marriage was the primary force behind lower marital dissolution so much so that it supersedes most of the negative factors (Heaton, 2002). Heaton (2002) noted that the effects of delaying marriage are not strictly linear, but instead level off after the early twenties. Heaton (2002) states that most of decline in marital disruption is a result of delaying marriage from the teen years into the early 20s. Because of this,

we would expect that there would not be much of an effect from delaying marriage from the early 20s to age 30 and beyond.

In a more recent study, Wolfinger (2015) suggests however that even this linear pattern between age of marriage and marital stability may not hold true anymore for current cohorts of couples. After analyzing data collected between 2006 and 2010 from the National Survey of Family Growth, he found that "prior to age 32 or so, each additional year of age at marriage reduces the odds of divorce by 11 percent. However, after that the odds of divorce *increase* by 5 percent per year." Even when controlling for social and demographic variables such as sex, race, family of origin, age, education, religion, and sexual history, this pattern still hold true. This recent research highlights even more so the importance of studying later marriages and challenging previously held assumptions about age at marriage.

Marital Quality vs. Marital Stability

Over the years, scholars and others have simply assumed that the increased stability of older marriages was due to higher quality marriages formed by more mature and better prepared spouses. Until recently, this hypothesis was assumed rather than specifically proven. As noted, scholars have focused almost exclusively on marital stability without examining marital satisfaction and other indicators of relationship quality. By only focusing attention on marital survival and the divorced versus the non-divorced, scholars have neglected those important relationship attributes that separate satisfying marriages from dissatisfying ones. While marital survival is certainly a valuable and meaningful outcome that should not be discounted, Glenn and colleagues (2010) argued that divorce is a potentially better outcome for those who marry young, especially when there are no children involved, rather than to remain in a stable yet "stale, unsatisfying, or destructive marriage" (Glenn et al., 2010). In other words, when there are

fewer constraints to the dissolution of a relationship (such as no children, fewer shared

possessions and assets, etc.), perhaps continuing stability is less important for young people than

marital quality, satisfaction, and happiness.

If a successful marriage is not defined simply as one that remains intact then, the question

scholars must ask is, "What is a good or successful marriage?" Amato, Booth, and Johnson

(2007) describe just how hard answering this question may be by comparing two types of

couples. The first is a couple that has strong feelings of love for each other, but fight frequently

and have a rocky relationship. The second couple no longer shares strong feelings of love and

attraction, yet they have a cooperative and committed relationship to each other and their family,

so they remain together. We thus see the debate over a relationship that runs smoothly, but is

stale and not as personally fulfilling or a rocky relationship with high levels of conflict, but high

levels of passion.

As is illustrated by this example, defining marital quality is a challenging and complex

issue, but a highly important one. Happily married individuals report better physical and mental

health than their counterparts, both unhappily married and single individuals (Amato et al.,

2007). They also have better parental aptitude and provide positive home environments for their

children's development and help to discourage delinquency among youth (Amato et al., 2007).

Knowing how important a happy marriage is to the well-being of the individuals and their

family, it is essential, then, that we make an effort to study how age at marriage is related to a

good and happy marriage at a broader level. One way to do this is to include other measures of

marital success, such as overall satisfaction, conflict levels, communication, sexual satisfaction

and so on.

In a study by Holman and Jarvis (2003), they attempt to bring to light the interactions that hinder and promote marital quality and satisfaction by examining positive and negative behavioral interactions. They state that hostile couples (or couples that have fewer than five positive interactions to every negative interaction) are more likely to resort to negative behavioral processes in their relationship. Gottman (1994) stated that there are four negative processes that are more damaging than others, which he referred to as "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," namely, *criticism, contempt, defensiveness,* and *stonewalling* (p. 110). In another study, Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (1998) stated that not only do successful marriages have fewer negative behavioral processes, but they also have more positive processes, such as active listening (empathy), de-escalation, and positive affect. In Holman and Jarvis's study, they built off of these and used scales from the RELATE instrument to measure these concepts. They found that hostile couples "display the highest frequency and greatest intensity in their conflict interactions, utilizing personal attacks and displaying very little positive affect," (p. 268). These couples were found to have the poorest relationship quality and were lowest on satisfaction, stability, positive communication, and soothing. They were also highest on negative communication, criticism, contempt, withdrawal, and flooding.

The Marital Satisfaction Curve

In an effort to better understand later marriages and how age at marriage impacts marital quality as well as marital stability, Glenn and colleagues (2010) used five American datasets to examine the association between age of marriage and marital satisfaction. This analysis indicated that later marriages entered in the late 20s and 30s fare very well terms of stability, but rather poorly in quality. They found evidence that there is a curvilinear relationship between age of marriage and marital happiness and that the greatest likelihood of being in an "intact marriage

of the highest quality" is among those who marry between the ages of 22 and 25 (p. 787).

Logistic regression results for "intact very happy marriages versus others" and "intact completely

satisfied marriages versus others," were consistent with a curvilinear pattern, suggesting that

marital happiness and satisfaction does increase in later marriages, but only to a point before

leveling off or decreasing again.

Based on these results, Glenn and colleagues (2010) posited that simply looking at

marital stability and survival is greatly misleading. Rather than reflecting that those who wait

until they are older to get married are in better, more satisfying and stable marriages, it suggests

that there is a greater tendency for later marrying couples to remain in a mediocre or poor

marriage. Glenn and colleagues (2010) concluded, "Marital success apparently increases with

age at marriage only up to the early- to mid-twenties, with increases in marital survival beyond

those ages resulting entirely from a greater tendency for persons to remain in mediocre or poor

marriages" (p. 795).

Consistent with these findings, Hymowitz et al. (2013) found that although those who

marry in their late twenties and into their thirties are less likely to divorce and argue less often

and less intensely than their earlier marrying counterparts, they are not necessarily happier. In

fact, in their examination of data from the National Fatherhood Initiative National Marriage

Survey, Hymowitz and colleagues (2013) found that women are most likely to be happy when

they marry in their mid-twenties, and that both women and men who are single throughout their

twenties tend to report more drinking, depression, and lower levels of life satisfaction than do

their married peers (Hymowitz et al., 2013). These findings are supported by other studies that

suggest that compared to couples who marry later couples who marry in their twenties have more

frequent sex and are more likely to hold a common faith and share common memories and family traditions, all factors that foster high marital quality (Riley, 2013; Rotz, 2011).

What Creates the Satisfaction Curve?

While Glenn and colleagues' (2010) moved age of marriage research forward from the traditional study of stability to include marital satisfaction, overall happiness or satisfaction is still a rather inexact measure for understanding marital success. An examination of marital happiness and satisfaction levels more fully *describes* the association between age of marriage and relationship success, but such measures do little to *explain* how couples who marry at different ages are different from each other, thus causing some, on average, to be more or less satisfied with their marriages.

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Competing Theories of Explanation

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Another defining feature of age of marriage research is that it has historically been demographic and descriptive in nature; therefore little attention has been devoted to theory development and explanation. In fact, until the discovery of a possible curvilinear association between age of marriage and marital quality in recent years, there has not been any serious debate about the rising age of marriage. Because of lower divorce rates, older marrying couples have been assumed to be the result of better, more satisfying, marriages and greater maturity and preparation among older spouses. Thus, the "*later-is-better*" theory when it comes to marriage has become the conventional wisdom of the general public and the implicit theory of scholars. However, the possibility of a curvilinear association suggests that maybe an "*earlier-is-better*" explanations need to be re-considered. Another possibility is that the theory that best fits the data is a "*balanced-is-better*" explanation where risks are found in being either too early or too old when it comes to increasing one's chances of marital success. While research literature

provides no systematic theory to explain the pattern of marital outcomes by age at first marriage, it does provide several relevant "theoretical theses" or lines of reasoning that may be helpful in moving toward a theory of explanation for age of marriage and marital outcomes (Glenn et al., 2010).

The "Later is Better" Hypothesis

The prevailing explanation for why delaying marriage until an individual is older can actually be beneficial in terms of marital success is the *maturation thesis*. This is the view that marriages are more likely to succeed if the spouses have reached "a high level of psychological maturity at the time of marriage, if they have had time to develop good relationship skills, and if their standards for a spouse and what they have to offer on the marriage market have stabilized" (Glenn et al., 2010, p. 788). South (1995) furthers this viewpoint by stating that those who marry young are less likely to have the knowledge and skills required for a successful marriage, have sufficient understanding of marital roles and lack the psychological and emotional maturity that is vital for challenges that arise in the relationship. He also contends that teenage marriages lack outside support and approval from members outside the couple (such as support from family, friends, and community members) that would otherwise act as a barrier for marital dissolution (South, 1995).

Further explaining the maturation hypothesis, Lehrer (2008) adds that younger individuals are less likely to understand who they are and the potential for whom they will become, leaving room to seriously misjudge what they are looking for and need in a potential dating and marriage partner. How can a young person know what kind of person they will be compatible with if they do not first have a good understanding of who they really are and an established identity? Individuals who marry younger are also more susceptible to misjudging

characteristics and traits in their prospective partners, having less dating experience to look for

warning signs and potential red flags that experience in the marriage market provides (Lehrer,

2008; Lehrer, 2013). When it comes to sexual satisfaction in marriage, one potential explanation

the maturation thesis offers as to why delaying marriage may be beneficial is that as individuals

leave behind the teenage and young adult years, they also leave behind the hormones and sexual

impulses that accompany them. By doing so, the fog clears, so to speak, allowing individuals to

find true sexual compatibility and understand their more long-term needs and desires in a sexual

partner.

Another possible explanation as to why delaying marriage would be better is discussed

by Glenn et al. (2010) as the *simple length of search thesis,* which states that "the longer a person

searches for a mate and 'circulates' on the marriage market… the greater is the probability of a

good marital match when he/she marries," (p. 789). The simple version of this thesis assumes

that the longer the search, the better because the individual is more aware of their options and

more likely to choose an option that best fits their individual preferences. Thus, the simple

length of search thesis suggests that young adults should date around rather than settling down

with the first person they can partner with.

A variation of the length of search thesis related to sexual satisfaction in relationship

development is what Busby and colleagues (2013) have labeled as the "*sexual compatibility*

model" that may offer a possible explanation for why delaying marriage may be better for later

sexual quality and satisfaction. The *sexual compatibility model* is the idea that individuals need

to "experience and learn from a variety of sexual partners and activities to prepare for a more

stable and lasting marriage" (Busby et al., 2013, p. 4). This model emphasizes "sexual

chemistry" as an important characteristic for people to have in romantic relationships. As

individuals grow older, they are more likely to have more sexual experience with more than one partner. By doing so, it is hypothesized that individuals will gain greater insight into their sexual preferences and be able to look for them in potential marriage partners. Because of this, we would expect individuals who delayed entering into marriage until their late twenties and into their thirties to have better sexual quality and satisfaction than those who marry earlier.

The "Earlier is Better" Hypothesis

While it has become common advice in the dating world to wait to get married and to "enjoy life while you're single," there are some lines of reasoning that suggest that delaying marriage is actually harmful to the relationship and that individuals should not intentionally extend their single years into their late twenties and into their thirties. For example, Glenn et al. (2010) put forth the *coordinated development thesis* which suggests that couples who marry at a younger age are more likely to develop compatible lifestyles and values than those who marry at an older age because they are still flexible in their identity development. This thesis strongly focuses on the concept of identity and stresses that identities are formed and made, not simply discovered. Therefore, the idea of this thesis is that those who are waiting until they have completely developed their personal identity run the risk of becoming rigid and unadapting to the needs and preferences of a partner, including the emotional and sexual needs. Rather than finding ways to develop a mutually satisfying relationship together, delayed relationships run the risk of trying to make two separate, more solidified identities fit together with little room for flexibility and adjustment. In short, rather than simply "finding themselves," individuals who delay marriage are becoming "set in their ways."

On the other hand, those who marry younger and therefore have not had as much time to solidify their individual identities are more likely to develop a *couple* identity. Individuals in

these earlier marriages, because they are still figuring out their likes and dislikes, their interests,

values, and beliefs, are more likely to associate their marriage as a part of their identity. As a

culture that values independence and individualism, some struggle with the idea that a person

would define themselves by their relationship, but it may be this very process that that helps

couples to mold together in ways that build a shared life rather than a parallel one. These

couples are able, through their coordinated development, to develop relationship processes that

build strong, satisfying marriages. Having some understanding of who you are and developing

an individual identity is good, but not to the point that you become unmalleable and rigid in your

sense of self. Happy marriages require at least some level of shared identity. The coordinated

development thesis would also suggest that a couple identity is better for sexual satisfaction.

Rather than focusing on individual sexual needs and desires, if individuals are more couple

focused, they can focus on the needs of each other and have a more rewarding and mutually

satisfying sexual experience. Plus, these couples avoid having extensive sexual histories that act

as comparison points to the current marital sexual relationship.

Another potential explanation as to why earlier marriages may be more satisfying is that

they limit destructive relationship experience prior to getting married. The *destructive

relationship experiences thesis* proposes that those who delay marriage are more likely to have a

"long series of low commitment relationships, most of which end badly, [making] it difficult for

persons to fully commit to marriage," (Glenn et al., 2010, p. 789). A commonly used example of

this theory is cohabitation. Glenn et al. (2010) stated that "the number of premarital

cohabitations is a negative predictor of favorable outcomes and age at marriage is positively

associated with the number of premarital cohabitations," (p. 789). In other words, the later an

individual delays marriage, the more likely they are to have cohabited multiple times, which is predictive of unsatisfying marriages.

Busby and colleagues (2013) have proposed a "sexual restraint theory" of relationship development which offers another possible reason for why earlier marriages might be expected to have better sexual quality and satisfaction, on average, compared to later marriages. In contrast to the sexual compatibility theory noted earlier, the *sexual restraint theory* posits that having sex with multiple partners before marriage may actually be detrimental to satisfaction and stability later in marriage. Busby et al. (2013) state that "uncommitted sexual experience may foster and reinforce sexual attitudes that are not compatible with enduring marriages (e.g., the thrill of first sexual experiences and non-monogamous sexual experiences)," (p. 4).

The "Balanced is Better" Hypothesis

Although many theoretical perspectives are polarized on the best age at which an individual should be married, there are some theoretical theses which suggest a balance between the two extremes of age may be better. These perspectives suggest a "goldilocks effect" - or the idea that an individual should not be too young or too old, but rather should fall somewhere in between where his or her age is "just right." Two theoretical perspectives have been forwarded as possible explanations for why there may be a balanced or "just right" age of marriage: the complex length of search thesis and the changing marriage market thesis.

While the *simple length of search thesis* proposes that the longer the search for a prospective mate the better your chances of finding a good marital match; the *complex length of search thesis* says this is true, but only to a point. After a certain length of time, Glenn et al. (2010) stated that a person "will likely to have already failed to take advantage of most of the opportunities for good matches that he/she will ever have," (p. 789). While an individual's

marriage prospects will increase as they leave high school and enter into college, as they leave college and enter into the work force, opportunities to meet new people are fewer, diminishing the search for mates. If people look too long for a mate, they may pass up the best opportunities. It would presumably be better to be selective in searching, but not pass up good opportunities as they are presented.

Similar to the complex length of search thesis, the *changing marriage market thesis* states that "the favorableness of marriage markets for individuals tends to change as they grow older, often improving as persons move away from the communities in which they grew up and as they circulate in wider social circles, but then deteriorating as the pool of unmarried cohort mates diminishes," (Glenn et al., 2010, p.789). This is the idea that as men and women perceive their chances for a good marriage are declining they are more likely to settle for a spouse that is not a good match. Glenn and colleagues suggest that this is especially strong for women because of the "ticking of the biological clock," which pressures women who wish to have children into marriages before they are unable to bear children.

Current Study

Building off Holman and Jarvis (2003), as well as Glenn et al. (2010) and Wolfinger (2015); the current study aims to examine more closely the relationship between age of marriage and measures of marital quality and satisfaction. The current study will utilize measures of marital quality that closely resemble those used in the Holman and Jarvis (2003) study, namely effective communication and conflict. These items have been created from subscales that measure empathy, soothing, clear sending, love, non-withdrawal, respect, non-critical, and not overwhelmed. In addition, I also measured sexual satisfaction, sexual frequency, and problem areas. I hypothesize that the data will reflect the "Balanced is Better" theoretical approach,

revealing a "sweet spot" for the age of marriage with the best marital stability and satisfaction outcomes on average.

Methods

Participants

The sample used in this study consisted of 470 married individuals who completed the RELATE Questionnaire between the years of 2006 and 2012. Sixty-eight percent of the sample was female and 32% was male. In terms of education, 6% had completed a high school diploma or less, 29% had completed some college, 18% had completed a bachelor's degree, and 47% had completed at least some graduate schooling or higher. Sixty-eight percent of the sample was Caucasian, 11% were African American, 4% were Asian, 7% were Latino, and the remaining 10% were either biracial or marked "other." Twenty percent of the sample was Catholic, 29% were Protestant, 3% were Jewish, 5% were Latter-Day Saints (Mormon), 26% were not affiliated with any religion, and 17% were in "other" religions. In terms of length of their marriages, 41% had been married for one to two years, while the remaining 59% had been married for three to five years.

Measures

All measures in this study will are from the RELATE instrument. The RELATE instrument is an approximately 300-item online questionnaire designed to evaluate the relationship of individuals in a dating, engaged, or married relationship. Participants can be referred to the questionnaire through a number of ways, including by an instructor, therapist, clergy member, friend or family member, and online or in print advertisements. The questions examine several different contexts—individual, cultural, family (of origin), and couple—in order to provide a comprehensive evaluation of challenges and strengths in the individual's

relationships. These measures have been used in previous publications (See Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001).

      Age of Marriage. Age of marriage was calculated by subtracting how long the participants reported they have been in their marriage from their current age at the time of the study. There are some obvious downsides to this method of gathering the age an individual was when they first married. These are mentioned by Rockwell (1978) when he reviewed and critique another age of marriage study in which the age at first marriage was measured in the same manner. Rockwell (1978) argued that it is common practice to measure age at marriage by whole years, but by doing so, we might experience "age-heaping." For example, two people may both put down that they are 25 when answering how old they are, but one may be just a few weeks away from their 26th birthday and the other may have just recently celebrated their 25th. This difference can be a potentially meaningful one, especially when studying the differences between age groups such as those who married when they were 24 to 25 and those who married between the ages of 25-30.

      However, Lee (1978) in a response to Rockwell argued that it is difficult to get measures from secondary data sets, like RELATE in this case, to measure a construct exactly as you would like it to, so it is necessary to do the best with what is given. Lee (1978) states that as long as researchers are explicit and describe the methods used, other scholars can then interpret them with caution and can then make their own judgment. To help address some of the potential problems, participants were limited to 45 years of age and younger and the length of the relationship was restricted to one to five years in length. These restrictions limit possible errors in the estimation of the age of marriage to one year at most. This study then categorized age of marriage into four different groupings, namely, "*adolescent marriage*" for those who married

before the age of 20, "*early marriage*" for those who married between the ages of 20-24,

"*normative marriage*" for those between the ages of 25-30, and "*later marriages*" for those who

married after 30.

Relationship Satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was measured using the RELATE

Relationship Satisfaction scale. The relationship satisfaction scale is a seven item measure using

a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Very Dissatisfied" to "Very Satisfied," where higher scores

indicate greater relationship satisfaction. The items on this scale asked about satisfaction in

physical intimacy, love experienced, how conflicts are resolved, relationship equality, time

together, quality of communication, and the overall relationship with their partner. In order to

understand whether the questions in this scale reliably measure the same latent variable

(relationship satisfaction) a Cronbach's alpha was run. The alpha value was considered excellent

($\alpha = .923$) and therefore the scale was appropriate to use in our analysis.

Relationship Stability. Relationship stability was measured using the RELATE

Relationship Stability scale. The relationship stability scale is a three item measure using a 5-

point Likert scale ranging from "Never" to Very Often," where higher scores indicate greater

relationship stability. The items on the scale ask how often participants thought their

relationship might be in trouble, how often they discussed ending the relationship with their

partner, and how often they have broken up or separated and then gotten back together.

Cronbach's Alpha was considered good ($\alpha = .815$) and therefore appropriate to use in our

analysis.

Sexual Satisfaction. Sexual satisfaction was measured using the RELATE *Sexual*

Satisfaction scale. The sexual satisfaction scale is a six item measure using a 5-point Likert scale

ranging from "Never" to "Very Often." The items for this scale are based on the documented

observation that "there are various degrees of and components to sexual satisfaction. People may be more satisfied with some aspects of their sexual lives than with others," (Young, Luquis, Denny, and Young, 1998, p. 116). The sexual satisfaction scale uses many different aspects of a person's sexual experience to encapsulate this. Scale questions include: "Are you satisfied with the amount of variety in your sex life with your partner?" "Do you find the sexual relationship with your partner satisfactory?" "Do you feel there is love and affection in your sexual relationship?" "Are you satisfied with the amount of time you and your partner spend in foreplay?" "Do you have sexual intercourse as often as you would like?" and "Do you feel satisfied with the amount of time your partner spends on intercourse itself?" Cronbach's Alpha was considered good (α = .861) making this scale appropriate to use in our analysis.

Sexual Frequency. To measure sexual frequency, participants were asked about how often they currently have sex with their partner. Answers included: "More than once a day," "Five to seven times a week," "Two to four times a week," "About once a week," "Once to three times a month," "Less than once a month," and "Never, because of illness, lack of opportunity, or other reasons."

Problem Areas. Problem areas was measured using the RELATE *Problem Areas* scale. The problem areas scale is a sixteen item measure using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Never" to "Very Often," with higher scores indicating fewer problem areas. This scale asked participants how often the following were problem areas in their relationship: financial matters, communication, having and rearing children, intimacy/sexuality, the participant's and their partner's parents, roles, participant's and partner's weight, who's in charge, time spent together, time spent using media, types of media used, substance/chemical use, and religion/spirituality.

Cronbach's Alpha measured the scale's internal reliability as good ($\alpha = .812$) and therefore appropriate to use in the analysis.

Effective Communication. Effective communication was measured using the RELATE *Effective Communication* scale. The effective communication scale uses the mean of four subscales, namely, Empathy, Love, Clear Sending, and Soothing. Higher scores indicate more effective communication. These four subscales are similar to those used by Holman and Jarvis (2003) as well as Gottman et al. (1998), specifically positive affect (love), empathy, and soothing. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was considered acceptable ($\alpha = .757$) and appropriate to use in the analysis.

Conflict. Conflict was measured using the RELATE *Conflict* scale. The conflict scale uses the combined mean of four subscales, namely, Non-critical, Respect, Not Overwhelmed, and Nonwithdrawal. Higher scores indicate less conflict. These subscales are also similar to the measures used by Holman and Jarvis (2003) and Gottman et al. (1998), which are criticism (non-critical), contempt (respect), withdrawal (non-withdrawal), and flooding (not overwhelmed). The items in this study are labeled opposite to those used in the previously mentioned study to reflect that higher scores would indicate less negative behavioral processes. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was considered good ($\alpha = .839$) and therefore appropriate to use in the analysis.

Controls. Because it is known that *religiosity*, *education*, and *gender* can influence age at marriage and may be alternative explanations for the findings in this study, these variables have been controlled for in the analysis. The Religiosity scale consisted of three questions that evaluated how often respondents attended church, how often they prayed, and how often spirituality was an important part of their life. The internal consistency reliability coefficient for the Religiosity scale was .89. Additional research has shown this scale to have test-retest

reliability scores of .86 to .88 (Busby et al, 2001). Education and gender were also used as

control variables and were single item demographic variables.

Analysis Plan

The analyses for this study were conducted in a three-step process. The *first step*

involved calculating age of marriage groups. This study divides age of marriage into four

groups, namely, "*adolescent marriage*" for those who married before the age of 20 (n = 30; 6.4%

of the sample), "*early marriage*" for those who married between the ages of 20-24 (n = 157;

33.4% of the sample), "*normative marriage*" for those between the ages of 25-30 (n = 167;

35.5% of the sample), and "*later marriages*" for those who married after 30 (n = 116, 24.7% of

the sample). The *second step* involved calculating frequency differences on the dependent

variables of sexual satisfaction and emotional closeness between age of marriage groups. These

analyses helped to determine base levels of comparison between the groups and provide context

to later group statistical comparisons. The *third step* of the analyses involved conducting a

multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to compare differences between the Age of

Marriage groups. MANCOVA was the most appropriate statistical technique to utilize in this

study because it allowed group mean comparisons on multiple, correlated dependent variables. In

order to control for Type I error, I included all dependent variables in one analysis, as well as

using the Bonferroni method across pairwise comparisons.

Results

I ran a one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) to determine if there

was a significant difference in Relationship Satisfaction, Relationship Stability, Sexual

Satisfaction, Problem Areas, Effective Communication, Conflict, and Sexual Frequency

variables between Age of Marriage groups, while controlling for education, religious orientation,

and gender. From the multivariate tests, Wilks' Λ showed that age of marriage (Λ = .870, F (21, 1301.322) = 3.079, p = .000) was significant, even after controlling for religiosity, education, and gender.

Because the multivariate test for Age of Marriage was significant, it was appropriate to consider the univariate results. To evaluate the effect sizes of the independent variables on the dependent variables, the partial eta squared statistic (η^2) was used. The univariate F-tests associated with all dependent variables were significant: Relationship Satisfaction (F (3, 459) = 14.278, p = .000, partial η^2 = .085), Relationship Stability (F (3, 459) = 8.679, p = .000, partial η^2 = .054), Sexual Satisfaction (F (3, 459) = 5.405, p = .001, partial η^2 = .034), Effective Communication (F (3, 459) = 8.290, p = .000, partial η^2 = .051), Conflict (F (3, 459) = 6.029, p = .000, partial η^2 = .038), Problem Areas (F (3, 459) = 5.887, p = .001, partial η^2 = .037), and Sexual Frequency (F (3, 459) = 9.038, p = .000, partial η^2 = .056).

With significant multivariate and univariate F-tests, I then explored the specific differences between age of marriage groups and the dependent variables using pairwise comparisons. The estimated means comparison for Age of Marriage groups on the dependent variables is reported in Table 1.

For Relationship Satisfaction, the adolescent marriage group scored significantly better than both the normative and later marriage groups, with 46.7% of the adolescent group reporting they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their relationship, compared to only 31.7% in the normative group and 23.3% in the later group. The early marriage group also fared better than the normative and later groups, with 46.5% reporting they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied". There was no statistically significant difference between the adolescent and early marriage groups.

The adolescent and early marriage groups both reported better outcomes than the later marriage group for Relationship Stability, with 73.7% of the adolescent group and 67.5% of the early group reporting they "rarely" or "never" had issues with stability in their relationship, compared to only 41.4% of the later marriage group. There were no other significant between group differences for Relationship Stability.

For the Sexual Satisfaction variable, the early marriage group fared significantly better than both the normative and later marriage groups, with 34.4% reporting they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their sexual relationship, compared to only 21% and 19.8% of the normative and later marriage groups respectively. There was no significant difference between the adolescent marriage group and any other marriage group for Sexual Satisfaction.

Both the adolescent and early marriage groups reported significantly fewer Relationship Problems than did both the normative and later marriage groups, with 43.3% of the adolescent group and 37.6% of the early group reporting they "rarely" or "never" had relationship problems, compared to 28.7% for the normative group and 25% for the later group. There was no significant difference between the adolescent and early marriage groups, nor was there a significant difference between the normative and later marriage groups.

Additionally, while there was no significant difference between the adolescent group and early marriage group, both scored significantly higher for Effective Communication than did the normative and later marriage groups. These groups scored 46.7% and 43.9% respectively in the "very effective" and "effective" range, compared to only 27.5% for the normative group and 20.7% for the later group.

Finally, the adolescent marriage group and early marriage group reported significantly less conflict than did the later marriage group, with 40% of the adolescent group and 24.2% of

the early group reporting less conflict than the later marriage group at 12.1%. There were no other between group differences.

When asked how often participants are currently having sex, the early marriage groups reported having, on average, sex more frequently statistically than both the normative and later marriage groups. There was no significant difference between the adolescent marriage group and the early marriage group. Figure 1 illustrates how often the participants across the age of marriage groups currently have sex with their partners. About 67% percent of the adolescent marriage group, 45% of the early marriage group, and 45% of the normative marriage group reported having sex once a week or more compared to 41% of the later marriage group. Interestingly, 18.1% of the later marriage group and 20% of the adolescent marriage group reported never having sex because of illness, lack of opportunity, or other reasons compared to only 9.6% of the early marriage group, and 3.6% of the normative marriage group.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine more closely how relationship satisfaction, relationship quality, sexuality satisfaction and frequency, problem areas, effective communication, and conflict differs according to the age at which a person marries. Building off of previous research, we hypothesized that the data would fit the "Balanced is Better" theoretical approach, namely that those who wait until after their adolescent years to marry but don't wait too long will have better outcomes. Our findings did indeed support our hypothesis. Across the board, those in earlier marriages fared better in all outcomes than did those who married into their thirties and beyond. Interestingly, we also found that in many instances, those who married earlier also fared better than those who were in the normative age of marriage group, thus ruling out the "Later is Better" theoretical approach. There were no significant differences between the

adolescent and early marriage groups, which we would expect to find if the "Earlier is Better"

theory were to hold true, therefore we can safely say that the "Balanced is Better" theoretical

approach better fits the data. However, it is interesting to note that while those in the adolescent

marriage group may not be significantly better than the earlier marriage group, they were also

not significantly worse. This alone is an important finding, and many of the theoretical

explanations from the "Earlier is Better" approach may still be relevant. *Coordinated*

development theory, for example, would state that if individuals wait until they are out of the

adolescent years and marry in their early twenties, they may still be malleable enough to have a

coordinated development with their partner and develop a couple identity, but they are not so

fluid in that identity that as individuals they are without substance. As with the *destructive*

relationship experience theory, those who marry in their early twenties may be avoiding a long

history of destructive relationships but they still gain enough relationship experience in dating

other people to find what characteristics they do and do not desire in a potential spouse.

Although the current study is valuable in its more in-depth assessment of marital quality

and marital stability measures across age of marriage groups, it does have some limitations. The

main limitation is that our study is not longitudinal. Longitudinal data is needed to determine if

later marriages start off less satisfied than earlier marriages or if they progress to less satisfied

over time. Because our data is cross sectional, it may be that we are capturing data from

different stages of relationships, though the current study aimed to avoid that as much as possible

by capping the length of marriage to five years. Longitudinal data would give a better picture of

the relationship over the course of the relationship rather than at one moment in time.

Another limitation in the current study is that some of the adolescent and earlier

marriages may have had more time for those with poor relationships to drop out of the sample

due to divorce. The adolescent marriage group should be seen as stable teenage marriages since it is likely that adolescent marriages which ended in divorce are not included in the sample. The higher scores for adolescent marriages should be seen as selective and the reader should interpret these scores with some skepticism. It is interesting to note, however, that Glenn et al. (2010) suggested that it may be better for individuals to marry young and potentially divorce while there are fewer obstacles to divorce rather than end up in an unsatisfying marriage. Our data would support this because those who marry during their adolescent years and stay together have more satisfying marriages than those who prolong marriage.

Implications and Future Research

The implications of this study are far spread. First and foremost, if we want to encourage better marital relationship and outcomes, it is important to know that delaying marriage does not guarantee a higher marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, more effective communication, fewer problems, or less conflict. In fact, this study even suggests that older marriages can no longer depend on simply less likely to end in divorce, as we found that even marital stability is greater for those who marry at an earlier age. If we as a society want to promote better marital outcomes, we must shift our current way of thinking from "later is better" to a "just right" or "earlier is better" mentality. This study also suggests that it would be beneficial for us to offer more social and cultural support for those who choose to enter into marriage at an earlier age to encourage these better outcomes.

Future research should further explore whether marrying at a later age *cause* couples to have less marital satisfaction and stability, or if it a certain *type of personality* that marries later and subsequently has poorer relationship skills. As Wolfinger (2015) hypothesized, the reason we see that later marriages are less satisfied may be due to a selection effect, namely, that those

who are more suited to marriage and make better spouses partner up early on while those who are less suited to marriage marry later. In other words, it may be that a certain *type* of individual is more likely to delay marriage than others, and those who delay marriage until they are into their thirties and beyond may have fewer desirable marital qualities. In order to broaden our understanding of the impact of age of marriage on marital satisfaction, future research should also examine other aspects of the couple relationship, such as finances, similar values, co-parenting, relationship history, etc. By examining different areas of a couple's relationship, we get a bigger picture of what is really happening within the couple relationship. Future research may find that while those who marry later may fare worse in terms of sexual satisfaction and the behavioral processes examined here, they may actually be faring better in areas such as financial stability and child rearing practices, both of which are known to contribute to marital outcomes.

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Table 1

Estimated Means Comparison for Age of Marriage on Marital Stability and Marital Satisfaction Variables

	Adolescent Marriage (>20) a	Early Marriage (20-24) b	Normative Marriage (25-29) c	Later Marriage (30<) d
Relationship Satisfaction	$3.57^{c*,\ d**}$	$3.70^{c***,\ d***}$	$3.21^{a*,\ b***}$	$2.99^{a**,\ b*}$
Relationship Stability	4.06^{d**}	4.03^{d***}	3.85	$3.53^{a**,\ b***}$
Sexual Satisfaction	3.49	$3.49^{c*,\ d**}$	3.17^{b*}	2.99^{b**}
Sexual Frequency	4.80	$5.04^{c**,\ d***}$	4.39^{b**}	4.11^{b***}
Problem Areas	$3.84^{c*,\ d**}$	$3.77^{c*,\ d**}$	$3.63^{a*,\ b*}$	$3.56^{a**,\ b**}$
Effective Communication	$3.95^{c**,\ d**}$	$3.87^{c**,\ d***}$	$3.69^{a**,\ b**}$	$3.61^{a**,\ b***}$
Conflict	3.45^{d*}	3.45^{d***}	3.33	$3.10^{a*,\ b***}$

Note: $*p < .05.$ $**p < .01.$ $***p < .001$

Figure 1

How often do you currently have sex with your partner?