Predictors of Met and Unmet Marital Timing Desires

THESIS

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Abstract

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, intentions drive actions to meet desires. Even with the recent changes in the marital landscape most adolescents and emerging adults desire to marry, and many already have an ideal marriage age in mind. However, barriers, both actual and psychological, may lead individuals to marry earlier or later than they had originally desired, and off-time marriage could have consequences for subsequent relationship stability and mental health. This study examined possibly barriers in three categories—socioeconomic, family background and formation, and minority status—to meeting marital timing desires using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 cohort (NLSY79). Maximum-likelihood discrete-time event history analysis models revealed that family background and formation and minority status were indeed associated with off-time marriage. Lower socioeconomic status did not predict off-time marriage, but rather predicted remaining unmarried.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior (1991) suggests that desires and intentions towards a specific behavior drive us to achieve it. However, perceived and real psychological and physical barriers can foil even the “best-laid plans.” There are few desires that are near universal, but the desire to marry is pervasive in the United States. In 1979, when our data were collected, more than 97% of U.S. adolescents desired to eventually marry; more recently, in 2006, about 81% of high school seniors expected to marry one day (Wood, Avellar, & Goesling, 2008). Most adolescents also have a specific age at which they want to wed (Carroll et al., 2007). Yet 60% of individuals marry at a different time than they originally desired (Carlson, 2012). Further, some individuals who do not desire to marry may go on to do so, and others who desire to marry never do. The barriers to achieving marital desires are unknown in the U.S., but the consequences are potentially serious. Marrying off-time, either earlier or later than desired, is associated with increased depressive symptoms and marital instability, and never marrying when one aspired to is associated with the most serious mental health consequences (Carlson, 2012).

We use data from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth 1979 cohort to first establish the predictors of initial marital timing desires, and then to identify significant barriers to marrying on or off-time of these desires. We test three groups of barriers:
socioeconomic, family background and formation, and minority status. Those who are disadvantaged socioeconomically may feel unprepared for the standard of living they would like as married people and thus delay a wedding, even if they would like to be married soon (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLaughlin, 2005). Individuals who cohabit with a partner who does not want to transition to marriage might avoid break-up due to their investment in the relationship but end up marrying later than they want (Huang, Smock, Manning, and Bergstrom-Lynch, 2011). And racial or ethnic minorities might face additional challenges to realizing their marriage desires, as they face structural and cultural pressures that might delay their plans (Cherlin, 1998).
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Even with the recent changes in the marital landscape (Cherlin, 2010a), when asked, most adolescents and emerging adults say they hope to marry (Plotnick, 2007; Wood et al., 2008). Not only do many youth believe that they will marry, but most have an idea of when they want to marry (Carroll et al., 2007; Plotnick, 2007). When these marital timing desires are combined with the actual age at marriage, on and off-time marriages can be examined. However, little research has examined the predictors of marital timing desires. Understanding these predictors is the first step in understanding why individuals marry on or off-time.

Marital timing desires may be associated with a variety of factors. Crissey (2005) found that Black adolescents were less confident in their chances of marriage before age 25 than were either White or Mexican-American adolescents. Children from single mother households expect to delay marriage while children from stepfamilies expect to marry at a more normative age (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1989). Additionally, youth from more religious families may expect earlier marriage, as many mainstream American religions stress family formation and are disapproving of premarital sex (Goldscheider & Goldscheider). Those who already have children of their own may also desire to marry soon, or might be pressured by society and family to “legitimize” their child’s birth through marriage (Akerlof, Yellen, & Katz, 1996).
**Barriers to Fulfilling Desires**

Not all youth will meet their desires. Carlson (2012), using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, found that by age 40, less than half of respondents had married at the time they originally desired to. But why? According to Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior (1991), desires and intentions predict completion of said behavior. However, fulfillment of desires may be foiled by lack of control, both actual and perceived, over the intended behavior. Unfulfilled marital desires have been associated with negative outcomes such as decreased mental health and increased relationship stability in later life (Carlson, 2012). Practitioners need to know who are most and least likely to meet desires to better support individuals and couples in their relational pursuits and aspirations. In this study, we consider three groups of characteristics that might be associated with successfully or unsuccessfully fulfilling marital timing desires.

**Socioeconomic Considerations.** Previous work in the educational literature has found that social and economically underprivileged groups are likely to have high desires for educational attainment but don’t meet these at the same rates as more advantaged groups (Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987; Eccles, Vida, & Barber, 2004; Hossler & Stage, 1992); social and economic disadvantage may also play a role in marriage desires and timing. Recently, marriage rates in the United States have varied more by socioeconomic status (SES) than ever before (Cherlin, 2010b), such that those with less education or who are living in poverty might not marry when desired, if they marry at all. SES is a broad measure of social and economic standing and is indicated by parental education, poverty status, and personal educational attainment (Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997). More
recently, individuals with a lack of economic resources may not feel personally “ready” for marriage unless they fulfill a personal marker of achievement first, like owning a vehicle or holding a certain amount in savings (Carroll et al., 2007). Others feel that they need to be financially secure to marry because the social norms surrounding the institution of marriage emphasize financial readiness as a prerequisite for marriage (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Others want a married lifestyle that may not be congruent with their current financial situation (Gibson-Davis et al.). However, three decades ago, when many of the NLSY79 expected to marry, marriage was the most common initial pathway out of the parental home, so individuals from less advantaged homes were likely to marry young in an effort to more quickly leave a potentially stressful situation or because remaining single (to pursue education, for instance) was less appealing than being married for individuals with lower educational prospects (McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997; Michael & Tuma, 1985). In a sample of individuals marrying in the early 1980s, those from homes with either higher parental education or more financial resources married later than those from lower SES backgrounds (Axinn & Thornton, 1992), possibly because parents with greater resources had the resources to support their unmarried offspring. Therefore, those from families with lower SES might encounter barriers to staying single such as a lack of resources to live on one’s own, which may then drive them to marry earlier than originally desired. Those with more parental resources may encounter parental pressure to delay marriage past when they would like to wed, also ultimately not fulfilling their stated desires.

Because of the longitudinal nature of our study, we also consider personal
educational attainment. Education has become increasingly important for marriageability (Cherlin, 2010a) in recent decades, with more educated spouses looking to marry others with similar levels of schooling and those with the least education marrying at the lowest rates. A lack of personal education could be a barrier to marriage at the desired time, or at all, as those with less education may be unattractive on the marriage market and unable to find a suitable partner.

**Family background and formation.** Family structure may have significant bearing on the timing of marriage, as those from stepfamilies or who live with neither parent marry earlier than the norm, possibly because of pressure from family to establish their own household or to avoid a conflictual stepparent relationship (Michael & Tuma, 1985; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1989). Additionally, youth from more religious backgrounds may experience pressure to wed at times that they do not desire to. Religious youth may feel like they have to get married in order to have sex (Goldscheider & Goldscheider). Overall, these family background experiences might serve as barriers to remaining unmarried much as low background SES is hypothesized to, possibly through family and environmental pressures.

Premarital cohabitation might delay marriage beyond one’s desired time. This could be especially true from the perspective of women, who may enter a cohabiting relationship with desires to transition to marriage within a certain timeframe, while men may see the current situation as ideal and resist transitioning to marriage (Huang et al., 2011). Huang and colleagues’ (2011) qualitative work found that women were more likely than men to see cohabitation as a step towards marriage and to be worried by the
delay cohabitation may place on eventual marriage and Sassler and Miller (2011) found in their qualitative work that cohabiting women were “waiting to be asked” to marry. Further, those who enter a cohabiting relationship may transition to a marriage they did not originally plan on as time goes on and more investments are made into the relationship, making it more difficult to leave (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).

Having a child from a previous relationship may limit one’s marital prospects and lead to a greater risk of cohabitation, thus delaying marriage (Qian, Lichter, & Mellott, 2005). Lichter, Batson and Brown (2004) found that single mothers were less likely than childless women to realize marital desires in the short term. However, rather than delay marriage, premarital childbearing in past decades may have driven marriage earlier than desired in an effort to “legitimize” the birth (Akerlof et al., 1996). So-called “shotgun marriages”, marriages initiated after an unmarried couple becomes pregnant or shortly after the birth of a child, were more prevalent in the period in which this cohort was aging into adulthood (Akerlof et al.). This cultural or familial pressure towards marriage may be seen as a barrier to later marriage by encouraging individuals to marry earlier than desired.

**Minority Status.** Brown (2000) found that Black couples were less likely to realize their expectations for marriage than were White couples. Minority individuals, particularly racial minorities, face structural disadvantages and cultural pressures that may dictate their practice of marriage and access to marriageable partners (Cherlin, 1998). Additionally, while interracial marriage has become more common in recent times, it is still not a practice for the majority of any major racial groups in the United
States (Qian & Lichter, 2011). Because this study concerns a sample coming of age and forming marriages in the 1980s and 90s, we expect that racial and ethnic marriage market constraints will be a salient barrier in our older sample. Both structural and economic considerations associated with minority status as well as marriage market limitations could serve as barriers that delay or preclude marriage.

**Unexpected Marriage**

For those who do not desire to marry, the Theory of Planned Behavior would suggest that they might have other plans or goals driving their behavior. In this case, eventually entering marriage may be a sign that their desires changed, possibly because of cultural pressure towards marriage, or might even support an innate need for partnership and intimacy, as would be suggested by Erikson’s theory of Psychosocial development (Erikson, 1980). The factors that predict unfulfilled desires in those who originally desired to marry might also predict “unexpected” marriage (thus unfulfilled desires) in those who did not include marriage in their stated life plans. Some cohabiting individuals may see cohabitation as an alternative to marriage and never plan to transition to a wedded state (Sassler & Miller, 2011), but find themselves being pressured to marry by family, friends, and even their partner (Sassler & Miller; Stanley et al., 2006). For those who are not fundamentally against marriage, marriage may be the next “natural” step after cohabitation, so that those who originally did not see marriage in their future might “slide” into marriage as relationship momentum propels them forward with a partner they have invested in (Stanley et al.). For those who are unwilling to transition to marriage, dissolution is likely (Brown, 2000), so serial cohabitation may be associated
with remaining unmarried. Having a child may also drive some to decide to marry after all (Manning & Smock, 1995), possibly in response to the stigma of single parenthood or stemming from a desire to have a two-parent family for their child (Akerlof et al., 1996).

**Hypotheses**

Hypothesis 1: Those with lower SES or from nonintact families will report earlier desires for marriage, as will more religious youth and those who are currently cohabiting or have children. Youth of minority racial or ethnic status will report later desired marriage than nonBlack/nonHispanic youth.

Hypothesis 2: Those from disadvantaged backgrounds or currently in poverty will marry earlier than originally stated, as will those from more religious family backgrounds or from nonintact families. Those currently cohabiting or who have experienced multiple cohabiting relationships will marry later than desired, and those with children will marry earlier than originally stated. Finally, racial and ethnic minorities will marry later than desired.

Hypothesis 3: Many who say they never desire to marry will eventually marry. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds will be more likely to unexpectedly marry, but those who are currently economically disadvantaged will be less likely to unexpectedly marry. Those who are currently cohabiting and those with children will be more likely to unexpectedly marry, but those with more dissolved cohabitations will be less likely to unexpectedly marry. Blacks will be less likely to unexpectedly marry than nonBlack/nonHispanics.
Chapter 3: Design and Methodology

Data were drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 cohort (NLSY79). The NLSY79 was conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The respondents were first interviewed in 1979 when they were 14-22 years old, then re-interviewed annually until 1994 and biannually thereafter until 2012 (Center for Human Resource Research, 2013). Respondents were 47-56 years old when the latest data were collected. There were a total of 12,686 original respondents, and the sample was nationally representative of the U.S. civilian population that age in 1979 when weighted with an oversample of Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged nonBlack/nonHispanic individuals and a subsample of military personnel.

Sample Sizes and Missing Data

Because the NLSY79 went to a biennial schedule in 1994, all explanatory variables were forward filled 1 year from that point on. In most cases of missing data, multiple imputation is considered best practice (Johnson & Young, 2011). However, in a recent paper, Young and Johnson (2015) suggested that in cases of longitudinal data analysis for event history modeling such as the discrete-time event history analyses used in this study, multiple imputation should be conducted with data in wide form, that is, in a dataset in which each person has a single line of data. After the data are imputed, data are then transformed to long form for event history analyses whereby each person has a line of data for each year they are at risk of the event. We attempted this strategy, but the
multiple imputation would not converge in wide form. Johnson and Young’s recommendations were based on a dataset using only four waves of data and estimating missing data on few variables. In our case, the multiple imputation algorithm would not complete likely because of the high number of waves (33) and variables requiring estimation (8). Therefore, rather than multiple imputation in long form, which Young and Johnson showed increased risk of both Type I and Type II error, we elected to use list-wise deletion, also called complete-case analysis, which they recommend over multiple imputation in long form for event history modeling. Thus observations with missing data were deleted according to rules of list-wise deletion.

Three analytic samples were specified for this study, one for each hypothesis tested. The final analytic sample of 8348 for Hypothesis 1 excluded respondents who were missing data on 1) desires, either because they were already married or did not provide data ($n = 1658$), and 2) exploratory variables ($n = 2680$). For Hypothesis 2, the predictors of met and unmet desires were modeled using an analytic sample of 3760 individuals who contributed 52,474 person years. Respondents were removed from the analytic sample if they 1) were missing data on marital desires ($n = 1658$), 2) were missing on marriage year or month ($n = 220$), 3) answered that they never desired to marry because this analysis focused on meeting desires to marry ($n = 371$), 4) were age 20 or older when asked about marital timing desires as the earliest desired age of marriage was less than 20 ($n = 2568$), and 5) were missing data on exploratory variables ($n = 4109$). Finally, the sample for Hypothesis 3 included 140 individuals who contributed 2800 person-years to the model. Respondents were included in this sample if
they 1) said they “never” desired to marry \((n = 371)\) and 2) were not missing data on exploratory variables \((n = 231)\).

**Measures**

**Desired age of marriage.** In 1979, respondents who were not already married were asked, “At what age would you like to marry?” Responses were given in age periods rather than specific years: 1 = less than 20, 2 = 20-24, 3 = 25-29, 4 = 30 or older, and 5 = never. Desires and expectations for marriage timing may be closely associated—indeed, when Plotnick (2007) surveyed youth about both constructs, he found that the mean expected and desired marital age were less than a year apart. However, the two may still be formulated differently. Due to the wording of the question, we consider desires or aspiration for marriage timing in this study, rather than expectations or plans.

**Fulfilled desires.** Age at first marriage was calculated using birth month and year and month and year of first marriage. Age at first marriage was then grouped into the same categories as desired marital age (less than 20, 20-24, 25-29, 30 or older, and never married). Four categories were then generated using desired age of marriage and actual age at first marriage. These categories were: 0 = unmarried, 1 = early (marrying in an age category ahead of desires), 2 = on-time, and 3 = late (married past desired age period). For example, someone who desired to marry between ages 20 and 24 but married at age 18 was coded as early marriage, while someone who desired to marry between ages 20 and 24 and married at age 24 was coded as on-time marriage. For “unexpected” marriage, the outcome was 1 = married, 0 = unmarried.

**Socioeconomic considerations.** *Parent’s education* was measured by averaging
the highest level of education completed by both parents at the time of the initial interview (1979). If the education level of either parent was missing, the nonmissing parent’s education only constituted the variable. For each year of the longitudinal analyses, the respondent was noted as in poverty or not in the previous calendar year according to self-reported income and the Poverty Income Guidelines provided yearly by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Center for Human Resource Research, 2013). Respondents’ education was measured as years of schooling completed each year.

**Family background and formation.** Nonintact family was coded as 1 if respondents had lived with both biological parents from until age 18 (asked retrospectively in 1988). To measure religious background, in 1979 respondents were asked how often they attended religious services. Answers range from 1 to 6 with 1 being “not at all” and 6 being “more than once a week.”

**Prior Cohabitation** was measured as living with an unmarried romantic partner in the interview prior (except in Model 1, predicting desires, in which only cohabitation in 1979 was included). **Serial Cohabitation** was measured as a count of cohabiting partners prior to marriage, excluding premarital cohabitation that led to marriage. Month and year of the respondent’s first child’s birth was used to generate an indicator of having a child each year.

**Minority status.** Race/ethnicity consisted of three race/ethnic categories: Hispanic, Black, and NonBlack/NonHispanic (reference category).

**Control variables.** Gender was coded as a dichotomous variable (1 = male, 0 =
female). *Adolescent Age* was used to model the developmental period each youth was in when asked about marital timing desires. Age was calculated from the month and year of birth to the month and year of the 1979 interview, and then coded as adolescent (14-17 years old) or young adult (18 and older). Finally, for the longitudinal analysis, a measure of *time* was the number of years from 1979 to the last year in which each respondent was measured. This controlled for time-dependency (Allison, 2006).

**Interaction of poverty and family structure.** As poverty has pervasive theoretical and empirical associations with rates and timing of marriage (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Carroll et al., 2007; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997; Michael & Tuma, 1985), and childhood family structure also has been found to have lasting associations with offspring’s marital outcomes (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1989; Michael & Tuma), these variables were interacted in the models predicting timing for those who expected to marry and predicting marriage for those who did not desire it originally. This interaction was found to be an insignificant predictor, however, and was left out of the final models presented below.

**Analytic Plan**

Marital timing desires expressed in 1979 were examined with a multinominal logistic regression model. This was appropriate for categorical, non-ordered outcomes, as there were five categories that each individual might have selected as their desired marital age: before age 20, between 20 and 24, between 25 and 29, age 30 or older, or never. Results from this model were transformed into Relative Risk Ratios (RRR) for ease of interpretation. RRR should be interpreted as an increased or decreased risk
(similar to odds) of belonging to each category. RRR above 1 indicates an increased risk relative to that of the base category, and RRR below 1 indicates decreased relative risk.

A maximum-likelihood discrete-time multinomial logistic event history regression analysis (Allison, 1982; 2010) was used to predict the likelihood of falling into four categories: married early, on time, late, or unmarried. This was appropriate as the data were measured on an annual basis and the categories were nonordinal. Using event history analysis allowed for the time-varying nature of the context variables to be modeled. For this analysis, each person-year was treated as one observation and individuals were censored at last interview or removed after experiencing marriage. For those years in which one was unmarried, the outcome variable was 0 (unmarried). For those who married, the outcome variable took on values 1-3 (early, on-time, and late, respectively) at the year of marriage. For those who were never observed married, they were censored with 0 at the last interview they completed. “On-time marriage” was used as the base category for the interpretation of regression results. Results from this model were also transformed into Relative Risk Ratios for ease of interpretation.

A discrete-time logistic event history analysis was used to model the probability of marriage for those who indicated no desire to marry (Allison, 1982; 2010). Again, each person-year was treated as an observation and respondents were observed either until the year of marriage or the last interview year they participated in. The outcome was dichotomous, with 1 indicating marriage and 0 indicating unmarried in that year; unmarried individuals were censored at 0 at the last interview they participated in. The outcome of this model was transformed into Odds Ratios (OR) to aid interpretation. Odds
ratios are interpreted in similar fashion to RRR, in that OR above 1 indicates increased odds of that outcome compared to the base or reference category, while OR less than 1 indicates decreased odds.
Chapter 4: Findings

Initial Marital Timing Desires

Descriptive statistics for the sample used to test Hypothesis 1 are reported in Table 1. The majority of respondents, 97%, desired to marry at some point. About 5% desired to marry before age 20, 48% between 20 and 24 years old, 36% between 25 and 29, 8% at age 30 or older, and 3% “never.” Respondents’ parents had averaged 11 years of education, and respondents themselves had completed about 10 years of education on average. Thirty percent of respondents were in poverty in 1979, and respondents averaged a midrange score of religiosity. Sixty-two percent of respondents lived with both parents until age 18. Only 1% of respondents were cohabiting and 7% had a child at the time of the 1979 interview. The sample was 16% Hispanic and 27% Black, with the rest nonBlack/nonHispanic.

A total of 8348 respondents were included in the multinomial logistic regression model predicting desired marital timing desires and testing Hypothesis 1. Results for this model are displayed in Table 2. As desiring to marry between ages 20 and 24 was the most popular selection, it was used as the base category.

Socioeconomic considerations. Those with higher parental education were less likely to desire early or never marriage, such that one additional year of parental education was associated with 0.93 relative risk of desiring marriage before age 20 versus
between the ages of 20 and 24, and 0.94 times the risk of desiring to never marry compared to the risk of those with less-educated parents. Children of more highly-educated parents were more likely to desire marriage slightly later than the base, between ages 25 and 29, with one additional year of parental education associated with an increase of 1.03 in risk of later desires. Those currently in poverty were less likely to desire later marriage either between ages 25 and 29 or after age 30 (RRR 0.87 and 0.77) compared to those who were not in poverty in 1979. Those with more education were less likely to desire to marry before age 20 or never marry, as a one-year increase in education corresponded to a relative risk to desire to marry early 0.85 and to never marry 0.92 times that of less educated. However, more education was associated with an increased risk of later desires, with each additional year of education associated with 1.13 and 1.07 times the risk of those with less education to desire to marry between ages 25 and 29 or after age 30, respectively.

**Family background and formation.** Those from two-parent homes were more likely to desire to marry early, before age 20 rather than between ages 20 and 24, than those who did not live with both parents until age 18 (RRR 1.27). Those who were more religious were less likely to desire to marry later, either between age 25-29 or after age 30, or never; each unit increase in religiosity was associated with RRR 0.93, 0.80, and 0.81, respectively.

Those who were currently cohabiting were less likely to desire to marry between 25-29 or after 30. Relative to those not cohabiting, cohabiters had a risk of desiring to marry between 25 and 29 that was 0.42 times that of noncohabiters and risk of desiring to
marry after age 30 that was only 0.29 times that of noncohabiters. Finally, those who already had children were more likely to desire to marry before age 20 or never and less likely to desire marriage between ages 25-29, with relative risk 2.64 times that of childless respondents to desire to marry before age 20 and 2.27 times that of the childless to desire to never marry, but only 0.77 times the risk of the childless to desire marriage between ages 25 and 29.

**Minority status.** Racial and ethnic minority youth were less likely to desire to marry before age 20 and more likely to desire to marry between ages 25-29 than nonBlack/nonHispanic respondents. Both Hispanic and Black youth had risks 0.54 and 0.56 times those of nonBlack/nonHispanics to desire to marry before age 20, and risks 1.31 and 1.80 times those of the reference category to desire to marry between 25 and 29, respectively. Additionally, Blacks were more likely to desire to marry after age 30 or never (relative risk 3.56 and 2.59 times that of nonBlack/nonHispanics, respectively).

**Meeting Desires**

There were 3760 persons who contributed a total of 52,474 person-years to the model predicting met desires. Descriptive statistics of this sample can be found in Table 1. At the time of marriage or censoring (either 2012 or after dropping out of the survey), 27% of respondents were unmarried, 4% had married earlier than originally desired, 31% had married “on-time,” and 39% had married later than desired. Respondents’ parents had averaged about 11 years of education, and approximately 65% of respondents had lived with two biological parents at age 18. This sample again averaged a mid-range score on religiosity. At the time of censoring, 17% of respondents were in poverty, they
averaged 13 years of completed education, 14% had cohabitated during the interview before, and 27% had a child. They had an average of 0.12 past cohabitations, ranging from none to 5, with 90% respondents having no dissolved cohabitations.

**Socioeconomic consideration.** Results from this model are reported in Table 3. Higher parental education predicted decreased risk of early marriage but increased risk of remaining unmarried versus marrying on-time with desires, such that each additional year of parental education was associated with 0.98 times the risk of those with less parental education to marry early and 1.04 times the risk to be unmarried. Being in poverty was associated with decreased risk of marrying late but increased risk of being unmarried, such that those in poverty had risk of marrying late only 0.69 times that of those not in poverty and risk 1.41 times the risk of those not in poverty of being unmarried. Finally, education was not associated with early or late marriage, but was associated with increased risk of marrying at all, such that each additional year of education was associated with 0.83 times the risk of those with less education of remaining unmarried.

**Family background and formation.** Family structure was not significantly associated with meeting marriage desires. More religious individuals had 1.08 times the risk of being married later than originally desired versus on-time with desires for each additional unit of religiosity. Those who were cohabiting in the interview prior were less likely to marry early and more likely to marry later than desired, but not likely to be unmarried. The risk of marrying early for cohabiters was 0.64 times that of noncohabiters, while the risk of marrying late was 1.69 times that of noncohabiters, and the risk of being unmarried was only 0.39 times that of noncohabiters. Those who
experienced serial cohabitation were more likely to marry late or be unmarried than those with fewer cohabitation dissolutions. Each additional dissolved cohabitation was associated with 1.72 times the risk of marrying late and 1.63 times the risk of being unmarried compared to the risk of those with fewer past cohabitations. Finally, those with children were more likely to marry early and less likely to marry later or be unmarried, such that the risk of early marriage was 1.48 times the risk of the childless, while the risk of marrying late was 0.70 and the risk of being unmarried was 0.42 times that of the childless.

**Minority status.** Hispanic individuals had a lower risk of marrying late versus on-time with desires than did nonBlack/nonHispanic respondents (0.68 times the risk), while Black respondents were more likely to marry early (1.31 times the risk). Both minority groups were more likely to remain unmarried than those who were not minorities, with Hispanics having 1.31 times the risk of nonBlack/nonHispanics and Blacks having 2.59 times the risk of being unmarried.

**Unexpected Marriage**

This analysis included 140 individuals who selected “never” when asked at what age they would like to marry, and they contributed 2800 person-years to the analyses. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for this sample. Approximately 85% of this sample did go on to marry during the time of the survey. Respondents’ parents had averaged about 10 years of education, 53% of the sample had lived with both parents until age 18, and this subsample averaged a mid-to-low score on religious involvement background. At the time of censoring, 31% were in poverty and they had completed an average of 12
years of education. Forty-four percent of respondents had a child at the time of censoring and 16% percent were cohabiting the interview before. They had experienced an average of 0.11 cohabitation dissolutions, ranging from 0 to 2. About 90% of respondents had no dissolved cohabitations in their history at the time of censoring. Eleven percent of the sample was Hispanic and 36% was Black.

**Socioeconomic considerations.** Results for this model are shown in Table 4. Parental education and poverty were not significantly associated with unexpected marriage. Education was associated with increased risk of marriage unexpectedly such that each additional year of education a respondent attained was associated with 1.12 times the odds to marry relative to the odds of those with less education.

**Family background and formation.** Family structure and religious background were not significantly associated with the odds of unexpected marriage. Those who cohabitated in the interview prior were more likely to marry, as were those with children, such that the odds of marriage for cohabiters were 2.52 times the odds of noncohabiters, and the odds of marriage for parents were 2.31 times that of childless respondents. Serial cohabitation was associated with lower odds of marriage, such that each additional dissolved cohabitation was associated with risk of unexpected marriage 0.56 times that of those with fewer cohabitations.

**Minority status.** Hispanics were not significantly more or less likely to marry unexpectedly than those who were not minorities, but Black respondents were less likely than nonBlack/nonHispanics to marry, with odds only 0.36 times that of nonminority respondents.
Chapter 5: Discussion

When thinking about their futures, adolescents and young adults often form desires for their possible relationships, marriage, and children (Carroll et al., 2007; Plotnick, 2007). Their life circumstances, both past and present, may pose barriers to the fulfillment of such desires. Whether or not these desires are met may then be associated with their health and happiness in later life and the success of their eventual marriage (Carlson, 2012). This study tested three sets of possible barriers—socioeconomic, family background and formation, and minority status—to determine the situations in which one might face barriers to the fulfillment of desires.

First, we estimated the probability of youth choosing from five possible marital timing desires. We found that those with worse economic situations desired earlier marriage, which supported our hypothesis that those with fewer resources would have less incentive or resources to remain single (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997). Based on Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1989), we hypothesized that more religious youth would desire early marriage due to religious pressure to abstain from sex before marriage. We found that they were not likely to desire later marriage, though they were not significantly more likely to desire to marry earlier than the norm. Those from nonintact families were likely to desire earlier marriage. Michael and Tuma (1985) found this association previously, but it was nonsignificant in their analysis.
Goldscheider and Goldscheider suggested that adolescents in stepfamilies were likely to leave the house early, but marry at a more normative age. Our analysis suggests that youth from nonintact families may desire to both leave the household and be married young, perhaps to avoid conflictual relationships with a stepparent (Goldscheider & Goldscheider).

As hypothesized, those who were cohabiting and those who had a child were likely to desire to marry soon, probably because they were being pressured to formalize their families (Akerlof et al., 1996; Sassler & Miller, 2011). Finally, as hypothesized, Black youth were indeed more likely to desire to marry later than nonBlack/nonHispanic youth, similar to the findings of Crissey (2005), who found that both White and Hispanic youth were more likely to believe they would marry before age 25 than were Black youth. This could have been cultural or a reflection of structural barriers youth were aware of (Cherlin, 1998). We also found that Hispanic youth were more likely to desire earlier marriage than nonBlack/nonHispanic youth. This may have been due to cultural expectations to form a family (Vega, 1990).

We then examined predictors that might serve as barriers to fulfilled desires such as would be predicted by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). We predicted that low socioeconomic status would be associated with marriage earlier than desired. We did not find support for our hypothesis. Rather, those in poverty were actually less likely to marry late but more likely to remain unmarried, while those with more highly educated parents or more education themselves were less likely to marry early but more likely to be unmarried. It appears, then, that low socioeconomic status did not encourage off-time
marriage for those who were able to marry, but did make it more likely that those from low SES backgrounds would never marry. Perhaps these findings are due to the fact that those with low SES were already more likely to desire earlier marriage. In this case, those experiencing low SES were indeed marrying earlier than the rest of the sample but actually held desires for it (McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997), suggesting that low SES did not serve as a barrier so much as it drove the original desire. In the case of remaining unmarried, low SES may have made individuals unattractive on the marriage market, as marriage became progressively more selective in the time these individuals were marrying (Cherlin, 2010b).

Personal education had no significant association with marriage either earlier or later than originally desired, but did predict lower odds of remaining unmarried. This was true even if respondents originally did not desire to marry: those with more education were more likely to “unexpectedly” marry. Perhaps gaining more education helped individuals be more attractive to a marriage partner (Cherlin, 2010a). Economic or educational resources can also give partners increased influence in a relationship (Sassler & Miller, 2011), so those with more education may have had more influence over partners in choosing if and when to transition to marriage.

We found that those who cohabitated in the interview prior were more likely to marry later than desired. This supported Huang and colleagues’ (2011) findings that cohabitation delayed marriage even when one partner may have wanted to transition earlier. Those who had experienced multiple cohabiting relationships were also likely to marry late or remain unmarried, perhaps for similar reasons, or because cohabiting
relationships in which partners do not have marital aspirations or plans are likely to dissolve (Brown, 2000); serial cohabiters are less likely to have marital intentions (Vespa, 2014). In the case of desires to remain unmarried, those who had cohabitated in the prior interview were more likely to eventually “unexpectedly” marry than those who did not live with a partner. This supported the contention that those who cohabit might slide into marriage because of pressure to wed or investments in the relationship (Sassler & Miller, 2011; Stanley et al., 2006). Those who had experienced serial cohabitations were less likely to marry, possibly experiencing multiple cohabiting relationships because of an unwillingness to marry, which may have contributed to the dissolution of their cohabiting union (Brown, 2000). Finally, those with a premarital birth were more likely to marry earlier than desired and less likely to marry late or remain unmarried, even when they originally stated that they desired to never marry. Again, pressure to “legitimize” the birth likely contributed to the decision to marry (Akerlof et al., 1996; Manning & Smock, 1995). Perhaps parents would also marry in an effort to encourage parental involvement in the child’s life (Hohmann-Marriott, 2009).

Regarding minority status, we predicted that racial and ethnic minorities would marry late, but did not find support for this. Both Hispanic and Black individuals were more likely to remain unmarried, but Hispanics were more likely to meet their timing desires and Blacks were actually more likely to marry earlier than desired. In the case of remaining unmarried, these findings supported our hypothesis that minority status would serve as a barrier to marriage, possibly through the structural challenges faced by these individuals (Cherlin, 1998). Regarding timing, Black individuals were found in the
previous model to desire later marriage; in marrying earlier than desired, they beat their personal desires which could have been inflated due to perceived constraints to marriage (Cherlin, 1998). Hispanics may have had increased familial support that helped them to marry at the time they desired (Vega, 1990).

Overall, we found support for our idea that the best-laid plans may not be met depending on the circumstances that one encounters. Both physical barriers, such as low socioeconomic status, and potential perceived barriers, such as pressure to marry by a cohabiting partner, appeared to contribute to unfulfilled desires in this study.

Consequences of Unfulfilled Desires

There are a variety of reasons why marrying either earlier or later than originally desired might be detrimental. Those who are unable to marry by the time they desire might feel that they must “settle” on less-than-ideal partner (according to their own standards) to allow them to begin building the family they want when they want to (Lehrer, 2008). Alternatively, as marriage at a young age predicts an increased risk of divorce, those who marry earlier than expected may put themselves at increased risk for relationship dissolution simply as a function of young age at marriage (Lehrer). Those who marry later than desired or even remain unmarried may also miss out on potent advantages associated with marriage. These benefits might include health boons, both physical and mental (Waite & Gallagher, 2000); financial and employment advantages (particularly for men; Cohen, 2002); and overall life satisfaction gains experience by those in committed, high quality relationship, particularly marriages (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). Carlson (2012) indeed found that those who married off-time were more
likely to have depressive symptoms in middle age, which he then attributed to their increased likelihood to have dissolved their first marriage.

However, the picture may not be entirely dire. In some cases, marriage off-time of desires could even be positive. Those who desired to marry young may actually experience better outcomes if they marry later because they are more mature and ready for marriage than they would have been otherwise (Lehrer). Conversely, those who marry earlier than desired may gain from additional years experiencing the benefits of marriage (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Further work should explore the ways in which off-time marriage could be associated with positive outcomes so we may more readily support individuals in their marriage desires and realities throughout the life course and encourage those who might not experience their plans exactly as they had hoped.

**Limitations**

Marital age desires were only measured at one time point; however, previous longitudinal work on marital desires has shown that marital desires change over adolescence (Willoughby, 2010). Future work examining fulfilled and unfulfilled desires should include measures of marital timing desires over different ages and stages of development to see which times are most salient in predicting outcomes. Additionally, no other dimension of marital desires was addressed specifically, such as importance of marriage relative to other adult roles or personal perceptions of readiness for marriage, both of which are important components of Marital Horizons in addition to timing considerations (Carroll et al., 2007).

Individuals and couples may either marry earlier or postpone marriage for reasons
other than those considered here. Fear of divorce or specific relationship characteristics such as low quality or conflict have been identified as delaying marriage for low-income couples (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005), but these constructs could not be measured in the current data. And since the desires of both partners are important in the decision to marry (Waller & McLanahan, 2005), it is unfortunate that these data only took into account the perspective of one partner. This limitation has been addressed in some studies (for example, Gibson-Davis et al., 2005), but studies should continue to incorporate partner-level data when possible and appropriate.

Because of the structure of the data and the high number of waves and variables included in the analysis, listwise deletion was deemed the most feasible solution to dealing with missing data in this study. Further work should examine these results in datasets with less missing data or with better opportunities to handle missing data.

Finally, these results may not be applicable to a modern sample of youth. For instance, interracial marriage has become more common than in the past, opening up marriage markets for ethnic minorities that may not have been considered before (Qian & Lichter, 2011). Also, attitudes towards marriage and its place in the life course have shifted, and the stigma around remaining unmarried, even while living with a partner or after having children, has weakened (Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton, & Garrett-Peters, 2008). In fact, in more recent samples, having a child may actually limit the marriage prospects of women (Qian, Lichter, & Mellott, 2005), predicting unfulfilled desires through later-than-desired marriage rather than earlier-than-desired. Overall, these data offered the unique opportunity to examine the rates of fulfilled timing desires over a large
portion of these respondent’s lives, thus providing important insight into a least one component of Marital Horizon Theory.

Conclusion

There is still much to be discovered regarding the fulfillment of marital timing desires. However, this project contributed to existing knowledge by providing a long-term picture of met and unmet desires and identified those most at risk for unfulfilled desires. As prior research has suggested that off-time marriage relative to desires is a risk factor for less stable unions or decreased mental health (Carlson, 2012), but did not specify who was most at risk of off-time marriage, this study contributes to our ability to target those most at risk of poor outcomes and provide support in an effort to buffer against them.
References


University, Columbus, OH.


Huang, P. M., Smock, P. J., Manning, W. D., & Bergstrom-Lynch, C. A. (2011). He says,


Appendix A: Results Tables
Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of 3 Samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Predicting Desires Mean</th>
<th>Meeting Desires Mean</th>
<th>Unexpected Marriage Mean</th>
</tr>
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<td>% (SD) Missing</td>
<td>% (SD) Missing</td>
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<td>&lt; 20</td>
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<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
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<td>25-29</td>
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<td>&lt;= 30</td>
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<td>On-time</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>11.81 (2.47)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>11 (0.0)</td>
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<td>36 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>50 (0.0)</td>
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<td>59 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Time</td>
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<td>9.66 (6.12)</td>
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Note: *Percentage missing from total sample eligible for each analysis.
Table 2
Results from Multinomial Logistic Regression Model Predicting Marital Timing Desire from 1979 Characteristics, Heteroskedastic Robust Standard Errors are Reported

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<thead>
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<th>Predictor</th>
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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( b )</td>
<td>( SE )</td>
<td>RRR</td>
<td>( b )</td>
<td>( SE )</td>
<td>RRR</td>
<td>( b )</td>
<td>( SE )</td>
<td>RRR</td>
<td>( b )</td>
<td>( SE )</td>
<td>RRR</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.03***</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
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<td>1.02</td>
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<td>0.82</td>
<td>-0.14**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>-0.26**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonintact Family(^a)</td>
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<td>( \text{Wald } \chi^2 )</td>
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</table>

\textit{Note:} \(^a\)Lived with both parents until age 18 is the reference group. \(^b\)NonBlack/NonHispanic is the reference group. Model controls for gender and adolescent age. RRR = Relative Risk Ratio.

\(*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.\)
Table 3
Results from Discrete-time Event History Multinomial Logistic Model Predicting Marriage Timing According to Desires,
Heteroskedastic Robust Standard Errors are Reported

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Early b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>RRR</th>
<th>Late b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>RRR</th>
<th>Unmarried b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>RRR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>0.99</td>
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<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>-0.37**</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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<td>1.02</td>
<td>-0.18***</td>
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<td>0.99</td>
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<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.52***</td>
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<td>-0.94***</td>
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<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.54***</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>0.49***</td>
<td>0.10</td>
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<td>0.13</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>-0.36**</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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<td>-0.87***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>-0.39**</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
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<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.04</td>
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</table>

Note: *Lived with both parents until age 18 is the reference group. bNonBlack/NonHispanic is the reference group. Model controls for gender, adolescent age when asked about desires, and time. RRR = Relative Risk Ratio.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Table 4

Results from Discrete-time Event History Logistic Model Predicting “Unexpected” Marriage, Heteroskedastic Robust Standard Errors are Reported

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>OR</th>
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<tr>
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<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.12 *</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>1.12</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family Background and Formation</strong></td>
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<td>Nonintact Family(^a)</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cohabiting Interview Prior</td>
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<td>2.52</td>
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<td>Serial Cohabitation</td>
<td>-0.58 *</td>
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<td>0.56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>0.84 **</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>2.31</td>
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<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
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<td>0.36</td>
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<td>Pseudo (R^2)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* \(^a\)Lived with both parents until age 18 is the reference group. \(^b\)NonBlack/NonHispanic is the reference group. Model controls for gender, adolescent age when asked about desires, and time. OR = Odds Ratio.

\(^*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.\)