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# Not Even if You Were the Last Person on Earth!

## How Marital Search Constraints Affect the Likelihood of Marriage

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Using the 1987-1988 and 1992-1994 waves of the National Survey of Families and Households, the authors measure the association between Wave 1 responses to 12 questions on whom respondents would be "most willing to marry" and the likelihood of marriage by Wave 2. Preliminary analysis indicated that some questions about partner preferences are more predictive of marriage than others. Two hypotheses are developed to explain the pattern of effects. One is that being more willing to marry someone with characteristics that are less desirable to one's same-sex peers increases the likelihood of marriage. The second hypothesis takes into account the preferences of the opposite sex. Both men and women are most willing to marry someone with more education or who earns more than they. Supporting the second hypothesis, analyses show that men who are willing to marry women with less education or who earn less are more likely to marry.

**Keywords:** *marriage; mate selection; attitudes*

The median age at marriage has climbed steadily and steeply since the early 1970s. In 1970, the median age for women was 20.8 and for men 23.2. By 1995, both men's and women's median age at marriage had increased 3.7 years to 26.9 and 24.5, respectively (Fields & Casper, 2001). Some of this increase was due to increases in the age at school leaving (Mare & Winship, 1991). However, the age at marriage has continued to increase well past the age when the large majority of young adults are no longer in school. Economic stagnation also contributed to delayed mar-

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riages, but this is also unlikely to be a complete explanation for marriage trends inasmuch as during the late 1990s we experienced considerable economic expansion, as age at marriage continued to increase, at least for women (Fields & Casper, 2001). Although life course and economic factors are clearly major contributors to trends and differentials in marriage, other factors, which have received much less attention, are also likely to be at work. In particular, the mate selection process might have changed in ways that makes it difficult for young adults to find a good match, especially during their early 20s. One reason it might now take longer to make a good match is that women's employment has a stronger effect on a couple's financial well-being than it once did. Economic potential takes longer to establish than personality traits and physical attractiveness (Oppenheimer, 1988). Another could be that men increasingly prefer women with at least as much or more education than themselves. South (1991) shows that both men and women are most willing to marry someone with more education or who earns much more. If both sexes are looking to marry hypergamously, there is a mismatch between the preferences of men and women. Whether this is a factor in trends in marriage depends on the effects of mate selection criteria on marriage. This research uses longitudinal data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to investigate how mate selection processes influence the timing of marriage.

## BACKGROUND

The majority of the empirical studies on mate selection has focused on patterns of homogamy. For example, most married couples involve two people of the same race and religion. In 1990, 94% of all marriages were racially and ethnically homogamous (Blackwell & Lichter, 2000). Married couples also tend to have similar levels of education. Data from the 1990 Census show that 49% of married couples involve two people with the same level of education (Blackwell & Lichter, 2000). Expanding the measure of homogamy to include couples with no more than one education level difference, Mare (1991) finds that 88% of marriages in the late 1980s were educationally homogamous. Married couples also tend to involve two people of similar age, with husbands an average of 3 years older than wives (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987.)

Casual readers of these descriptions might infer that these patterns arise because individuals prefer to marry someone of the same race, religion, and level of education. However, as is well established in the theoret-

ical literature, preferences are just one factor influencing mate selection patterns. The composition of available partners is also important (Blau, Blum, & Schwartz, 1982). For example, the tendency of men to marry women with lower earnings might indicate that men prefer women with lower earnings or it might be because most of the women men encounter have lower earnings. Observed patterns of assortative mating reflect (a) the characteristics of the pool of available spouses (i.e., the "marriage market"), (b) the influence of third parties, and (c) the preferences of both men and women (Kalmijn, 1998). Thus, it is impossible to determine what individuals' preferences are and how they affect mate selection from marriage patterns alone. If one could adequately control for marriage market characteristics and third-party influences, one could infer preferences, but marriage markets are imprecise, and even more so, measures of marriage markets are imprecise.

Those who are in a marriage market that does not easily accommodate their preferences might respond by altering their preferences or they might delay marriage and continue to search. Thus, mate selection processes affect not only whom one marries but can also affect the timing of marriage. Numerous studies have investigated the impact of imbalanced sex ratios and other indicators of marriage market conditions on the likelihood of marriage (e.g., Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Schoen, Wooldredge, & Thomas, 1989). One study by Lichter, Anderson, and Hayward (1995) goes one step further and investigates the impact of marriage market characteristics on marriage timing and patterns of homogamy. They find that market conditions affect marriage timing but not whom one marries. Lewis and Oppenheimer (2000) expand on this finding by showing that poor marriage market conditions actually do affect mate choice but that the effects are strong only as one ages.

Almost no research looks directly at the influence of preferences on marriage timing or patterns of homogamy. Previous research shows that women are least willing to marry men who cannot hold a steady job, who are a different race, or who are younger by 5 or more years and most willing to marry men with more education and higher earnings. Interestingly, men are also most willing to marry women who have more education or who earn more than themselves (South, 1991). We do not know how or even whether these preferences influence marriage timing.

#### **THE HYPOTHESIZED EFFECTS OF PREFERENCES ON MARRIAGE TIMING**

Many commonly assume that people who are more selective in the marriage market have a more difficult time finding a spouse, much like a

person with a high "reservation wage" has a difficult time finding employment. However, our preliminary analysis indicated that reality is much more complex; correlations among our measures of mate selection preferences are weak. Apparently men and women cannot be neatly divided into selective and nonselective searchers. Because selectiveness is not unidimensional and we wanted to understand why some preferences have larger effects than others on the likelihood of marriage, we formed and empirically investigated two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that not being restrictive on some characteristic will increase one's likelihood of marriage more if many same-sex "competitors" are unwilling to marry people with this characteristic. This argument notes that there are some traits that many will prefer, such as being employed or having a certain level of income. Those who do not require or prefer spouses with these highly desirable traits have less competition in the marriage market. The second hypothesis, "complementary preferences," derives from the recognition that the potential spouses are not passive on the marriage market; their preferences matter, too. According to the complementary preferences hypothesis, having relaxed preferences increases marriage likelihood when one's preferences complement those of the opposite sex. As we will show in the first analysis, men are generally willing to marry women with less education; however, they are much less willing to marry women 5 years older (see also South, 1991). In other words, the supply of men looking for women with less education is larger than the supply of men looking for older women. Women who favor men with more education should be more likely to marry than women who favor younger men.

## METHOD

### DATA AND MEASURES

We use data from the NSFH, a multipurpose survey of American family life. The NSFH interviewed 13,017 primary respondents in 1987-1988 and reinterviewed 10,008 of these respondents in 1992-1994. For this study, we are interested in the 1,483 young adults (age 19-34) who were never married at the time of the first interview and who were reinterviewed in 1992-1994. These data provide a unique opportunity to examine the effects of individual preferences on marriage. Such an analysis requires longitudinal data, and the NSFH is the only nationally representative, longitudinal data, set to have detail on respondents' attitudes and preferences regarding marriage.

Our interest is in the effects of the partner preference variables on the likelihood of marriage between the two interviews. We construct preference variables using the respondents' answers to a series of questions in the first wave of the NSFH that begins "Listed below are considerations that are important to some people in thinking about WHETHER TO MARRY someone. Please circle how willing you would be to marry someone who . . ." Twelve different characteristics were listed: (a) was older than you by 5 or more years, (b) was younger than you by 5 or more years, (c) had been married before, (d) already had children, (e) was not likely to hold a steady job, (f) was of a different religion, (g) was of a different race, (h) would earn much less than you, (i) would earn much more than you, (j) was not "good looking," (k) had more education than you, and (l) had less education than you. Responses range from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating *not willing to marry at all* and 7 indicating *very willing*. Although low values are easily construed to mean a low willingness to marry someone with the stated characteristic, the interpretation of high values is less straightforward. On one hand, it might simply mean the respondent is willing to marry someone with this characteristic. On the other, it might mean that women *prefer* men with that characteristic. Supported by some of the results discussed later in the article, we use the latter interpretation, that high values indicate a preference for a spouse with that characteristic.

The models control for other factors that affect marriage and are correlated with preferences. These controls include measures of socioeconomic status, life course stage, parent's education, region of residence, church attendance, and relationship status and the desire to marry at the time of the first interview. South (1991) demonstrates that men and women with favorable socioeconomic profiles tend to have a more restrictive preference set with respect to family status (having had a previous marriage or a child), appearance, and earning potential. We control for socioeconomic status to isolate the influence of preferences. These controls include time-varying measures of age, school enrollment, educational attainment, and a fixed (Wave 1) measure of mother's education. Previous research shows that paternal education affects patterns of mate selection, possibly because individuals prefer to marry someone of a similar social status and cultural background (Blackwell, 1998). Mother's education is another possible indicator of social status but has the advantage of fewer missing values. Respondents more often do not know their father's education, and this is especially true when their parents divorced. Additionally, because of the potential for marriage rates and preferences to vary by region and religious attendance, we also control for these factors, measured in the first interview.

Although we restricted the sample to include only those who were never married at the time of the first interview, some respondents were already in a relationship with a person who would become their spouse. Because being in a relationship might affect respondents' responses to the preference variables and the likelihood of marriage before the first interview, we control for relationship status with two dummy variables. The first indicates whether the respondent is in a "steady" relationship. The second dummy variable indicates whether the respondent was cohabiting at the time of the first interview. The reference category includes those not in any steady relationship.

We also investigate whether our findings are robust when we include a control for desire to marry, measured by respondent's level of agreement with the statement that "It is better to marry than to go through life single." This measure of the desire to marry affects marriage chances (Sassler & Schoen, 1999), and those who do not want to marry might respond with low willingness on all the "preference variables." We believe that the preference variables measure more than simply the desire to marry, as evidenced by the fact that there is low correlation among the preference variables. As our primary interest focuses on how mate selection processes affect marriage timing, to reduce the likelihood that the effects of the preference variables are due to the desire to marry and not mate selection, we include a variable indicating desire to marry at Time 1.

#### ANALYSIS

The multivariate analyses employ discrete-time proportional hazard models (Allison, 1984). The dependent variable is whether or not the respondent married, and the models are estimated using the logit procedure in SAS. The unit of analysis is the person-month. We estimate a separate model for each preference variable and conduct separate analyses for men and women.

Because we must restrict our analysis of the effects of attitudes on marriage to those not married at the first interview, we do not observe those people who are most likely to marry. Because those who marry early might be especially flexible in their requirements for a spouse, a model that does not take into account selection bias will underestimate the effect of preferences/constraints on the likelihood of marriage. Put another way, the people who are not very restrictive in their requirements of a marriage partner but are not married at the first interview are different from the total population due to unmeasured characteristics that decrease their marriage likelihood (Berk, 1983). Unfortunately, selection models are designed to

adjust for the case where the dependent variable is unavailable, but the independent variable is measured. In this case, we have complete information on the dependent variable (marriage), but restricted information on spouse preferences. So, instead, to test the robustness of our results, we restrict the sample to those younger than age 25 at the first interview and compare the results to the full sample.

## RESULTS

To begin, in Table 1 we present a ranking of the means on the preference variables for men and women. This is a similar analysis to the one presented by South (1991) with two important differences. First, we use the sample of respondents unmarried at the first interview and who were reinterviewed. This analysis provides a useful baseline and offers evidence that sample attrition between the two interviews is not associated with our primary independent variables measuring preferences. Second, the analyses are not conducted separately by race. Preferences do vary by race (see also Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1993), but our sample is not large enough to sustain separate analysis by race. In our sample, fewer than 50 Blacks married between the two interviews. Small sample sizes similarly prevent us from examining the effects of premarital preferences on the characteristics of one's spouse.

Table 1 shows that both men and women find earning power an attractive characteristic. Both are most willing to marry someone with more education or who earns more money. At the bottom of the list, both are least willing to marry someone who cannot hold a steady job. Between these extremes, the pattern of mate preference more closely follows conventional patterns of assortative mating (Kalmijn, 1998). Men are more willing than women to marry someone who earns less, who has less education, or who is 5 or more years younger. Women are more willing than men to marry someone 5 or more years older or someone unattractive. Among this population of never-married young adults, willingness to marry someone previously married or with a child is relatively low, as is the willingness to marry someone of a different race. Providing some support that sample attrition does not bias our analysis, these results are very similar to South's (1991) analysis of preferences by ethnicity and gender, which used only the first wave of the NSFH.

Table 2 shows the results of our exploration of the "less competition" hypothesis, which predicts that people who are willing to marry someone with characteristics that are not preferred will have the highest marriage

**TABLE 1**  
**Ranking of Characteristics "Preferred" in a Spouse by Sex**

<i>Men</i>	M	n	<i>Women</i>	M	n
More education	5.12	797	Earns more money	5.87	816
Earns more money	5.11	795	More education	5.70	812
Earns less money	4.61	794	5 years older	5.20	820
Less education	4.61	796	Unattractive	4.25	816
5 years younger	4.52	797	Different religion	4.20	813
Different religion	4.21	792	Less education	4.07	816
5 years older	4.15	797	Less money	3.67	814
Unattractive	3.50	794	Previously married	3.55	816
Previously married	3.48	794	Has child	3.42	816
Different race	3.39	793	Different race	3.11	816
Has child	2.92	795	5 years younger	2.78	814
Cannot hold steady job	2.77	795	Cannot hold steady job	1.70	815

NOTE: Higher values indicate more willingness; responses range from 1 to 7.

rates. The first column of numbers is the exponentiated coefficient (or "relative risk") from a proportional hazard model predicting marriage. A relative risk of 1.00 indicates that the variable had no effect, whereas values higher than 1 indicate that a higher willingness to marry someone with that characteristic is associated with an increased rate of marriage. Values less than 1 indicate a negative association.

Men are least willing to marry someone who cannot hold a job and most willing to marry someone who earns more money. Therefore, we would expect men willing to marry women who cannot hold a job to face the least competition and thus have the highest marriage rates. Furthermore, for men the association between willingness to marry a woman who earns more money should have the least positive effects on the marriage likelihood. In fact, this effect may be negative if a high willingness indicates a preference for higher earning women. Contrary to the predictions of the less competition hypothesis, these variables have the same, non-significant effect on marriage. For women, although few of the effects are significant, the pattern of effects is exactly the opposite of what one expects by the less competition hypothesis. Net of their own socioeconomic status, women who are more willing to marry men with less desirable characteristics have lower marriage likelihoods. For example, having a higher preference for men who were previously married significantly decreases women's marriage rates. Providing slight support for the less competition hypothesis, men willing to marry women who have a child or

**TABLE 2**  
**The Effects of Preferences on the Likelihood of Marriage**

<i>Ranked Preferences From Lowest to Highest</i>	<i>Age 19-34 at Time 1</i>		<i>Age 19-25 at Time 1</i>	
	<i>Relative Risk</i>	<i>p Value</i>	<i>Relative Risk</i>	<i>p Value</i>
<b>Men</b>				
Cannot hold steady job	1.03	.44	1.01	.84
Has child	1.14	.00	1.11	.05
Different race	0.93	.07	0.92	.11
Previously married	1.03	.43	1.01	.90
Unattractive	1.10	.02	1.11	.06
5 years older	0.98	.57	0.97	.53
Different religion	0.98	.68	0.99	.85
5 years younger	0.95	.18	0.93	.15
Less education	1.15	.00	1.16	.01
Earns less money	1.16	.00	1.18	.00
Earns more money	1.04	.38	1.03	.55
More education	1.06	.18	1.11	.09
<b>Women</b>				
Cannot hold steady job	0.95	.29	0.96	.54
5 years younger	0.92	.04	0.96	.39
Different race	0.95	.18	0.95	.28
Has child	0.99	.80	1.01	.83
Previously married	0.93	.05	0.96	.40
Less money	1.03	.35	1.02	.70
Less education	1.06	.09	1.07	.10
Different religion	1.03	.46	1.03	.48
Unattractive	1.02	.71	1.04	.38
5 years older	1.02	.65	1.03	.51
More education	1.02	.61	1.01	.86
Earns more money	1.05	.33	1.07	.27

NOTE: These models control for age, employment, school enrollment, educational attainment, mother's education, race, region, church attendance, and relationship status and the desire to marry at first interview.

are unattractive are more likely to get married. Nonetheless, for both men and women the overwhelming majority of the effects do not support the hypothesis.

Note that some of the effects are negative. That is, being more willing to marry someone with some characteristics decreases one's likelihood of marriage. For example, women who are more willing to marry men who are less than 5 years younger than themselves are less likely to marry. This supports our interpretation that respondents who report a high willingness

to marry someone with a characteristic are actually indicating a preference for a person with that characteristic.

To investigate the possibility that selection bias distorts our results, we estimated the models for the population younger than 25 at first interview. The results reported in the right-most columns of Table 2 closely parallel the results for the whole population. Restricting the sample increases the standard error but has little effect on the size of the coefficients. We conclude that our results are generally robust and not substantively affected by selection bias.

Table 3 presents the full set of expectations as well as the coefficients for the relevant variables for the complementary preferences hypothesis. Support for this hypothesis lies in the pattern of effects. Men willing to marry women who earn less money or have less education are predicted to have the highest likelihood of marriage. These effects should be more positive than other preference effects because women rank earning more money and having more education the highest. The results for men correspond quite well with the predicted effects. Men willing to marry women who earn less money or who have less education are most likely to marry. At the other end of the scale, men preferring to marry women of a different race have a lower likelihood of marriage, although this effect achieves significance at only the .10 level. In the middle, willingness to marry someone of a different religion has no effect on the likelihood of marriage, perhaps because women have relatively weak preferences on this dimension. Note that the complementary preferences hypothesis does not produce a prediction for all of the preference variables, only those that indicate the preferred spouse's characteristics in relation to the respondent. As a result, Table 3 provides no prediction for the willingness to marry someone unattractive, previously married, with a child, or who cannot hold a steady job.

Table 1 shows that men are most willing to marry women with more education and who earn more money. Thus, the complementary preferences hypothesis predicts that women who are more willing to marry men with less education or who earn less money should have higher marriage rates. The bottom panel of Table 3 shows the full set of predictions along with the results from multivariate analyses of the effects of women's preferences on their likelihood of marriage. This table shows positive but nonsignificant effects for most of the preferences. Only one of the preference variables, which is expected to predict lower marriage rates, has a significant effect. Women more willing to marry men 5 years younger have lower marriage rates.

**TABLE 3**  
**Expectations of the**  
**Complementary Preferences Hypothesis and Observed Effects**

<i>Men</i>					
<i>Expectations of the Complementary Preferences Hypothesis</i>			<i>Observed Effects</i>		
	<i>Women Are Looking for:</i>	<i>So Men With Highest Marriage Rates Should Be Those Who Are Looking for:</i>		<i>Relative Risk</i>	<i>p Value</i>
Strong preference	Earns more	High marriage rates	Less money	1.16	.00
	More education		Less education	1.15	.00
	5 years older		5 years younger	0.95	.18
	Unattractive				
	Different religion		Different religion	0.98	.68
	Less education		More education	1.06	.18
	Earns less		Earns more	1.04	.38
	Previously married				
Low Preference	Different race	Low marriage rates	Different race	0.93	.07
	5 years younger		5 years older	0.98	.57

  

<i>Women</i>					
<i>Expectations of the Complementary Preferences Hypothesis</i>			<i>Observed Effects</i>		
	<i>Men Are Looking for:</i>	<i>So Women With Highest Marriage Rates Should Be Those Who Are Looking for:</i>		<i>Relative Risk</i>	<i>p Value</i>
Strong preference	More education	High marriage rates	Less education	1.06	.09
	Earns more		Earns less	1.03	.35
	Earns less		Earns more	1.05	.33
	Less education		More education	1.02	.61
	5 years younger		5 years older	1.02	.65
	Different religion		Different religion	1.03	.46
	5 years older		5 years younger	0.92	.04
	Unattractive				
Low preference	Previously married				
	Different race	Low marriage rates	Different race	0.95	.18

NOTE: When the preference question is phrased relative to a spouse, we can establish when preferences are complementary. The measures for willingness to marry someone unattractive, previously married, with a child, and who cannot hold a steady job do not fit this analytical framework. These models control for age, employment, school enrollment, educational attainment, mother's education, race, region, church attendance, and relationship status and the desire to marry at first interview.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Demographers striving to understand trends and variation in marriage have long understood that marriage markets play an important role in affecting individuals' probability of marrying. Usually these markets are defined in terms of age, race, education, and employment, and these factors are clearly important. However, such analyses tend to treat individuals in the same age, race, sex, and education group as having similar preferences, and these preferences are often measured by looking at marriage tendencies among these sociodemographically defined groups.

This research advances our understanding of the working of marriage markets in two ways. First, controlling for age, race, education, region, mother's education, church attendance, relationship status at the first interview, and the desire to marry, preferences affect marriage rates, so there must be some relevant variation within age-race-education groups in preferences. Second, this research provides and empirically examines two frameworks for understanding which preferences are most important. One framework, the less competition position, focuses the demand side of the marriage market. Do men and women who have greater willingness to marry someone that their same-sex competitors find less desirable have a greater likelihood of marrying? The analysis provides some support by showing that for men, willingness to marry someone with a child or who is unattractive increases the likelihood of marriage. However, contrary to expectations of the less competition hypothesis, women who are more willing to marry previously married men are less likely to marry.

The second framework focuses on the supply factors: Men who are looking for women with a set of preferences that are in greater supply are more likely to get married. Women looking for men with greater economic resources are in greater supply, so men looking for women with fewer economic resources have a greater likelihood of marriage. Our analysis provides more support for this second position, especially for men. As predicted, men who are looking for women with less education and who earn less money have a higher likelihood of marriage independent of their own education and employment characteristics.

In contrast to the models for men, women's preferences have a small impact on their likelihood of marriage. Women who are accessing larger markets by preferring men with less money or education than themselves did not have exceptionally higher (or lower) marriage rates than other women. Only two of the preference variables had any effect. Nonetheless, in support of the complementary preferences hypothesis, women who

preferred men that were in short supply (i.e., men who preferred women 5 years older or of a different race) had depressed marriage rates.

As gender differences in work and family roles blur, individuals' criteria for an acceptable mate are likely to change. For example, women's economic potential becomes increasingly important (Oppenheimer, 1988). This might directly affect the timing of marriage by increasing the amount of education women obtain. However, the median age at marriage is now well above the age where most people quit school and start to work. An explanation for delays in marriage past age 23 could be that there is a growing mismatch between what men are looking for in a mate and what women are looking for. If both men and women hope to improve their financial status by marrying a higher earning spouse, it will take longer for both to find a suitable mate and more people will never marry. This interpretation is supported by the fact that men who are more willing to marry a woman with lower earnings have higher marriage rates, although we are unable to directly test whether changes in preferences have caused some of the delay in marriage. Before we can know whether a mismatch in men's and women's preferences have played a role in delayed marriage, more research must address the weakness of the current study. The two most serious weaknesses we see are selection bias and an inadequate control for local marriage market characteristics.

We attribute the lack of strong effects for women largely to selection bias in our sample of women. As the age at marriage for women tends to be lower, selecting unmarried 19- to 35-year-olds excludes those who are the most marriageable—those who already have husbands. Although we attempt to correct for this by observing a younger sample (women aged 19-25), a better test would look at a sample of never-married women in their late teens to early 20s and assess their preferences for spouses and its relationship to future marriage. Future research on this relationship for women needs to observe women at ages when they are least likely to be married and on the verge of their first marriage.

Another avenue for future research may be to incorporate more fully measures of the local supply of potential mates of the appropriate age, race, education, and employment status. Our hypotheses, particularly the complementary preferences hypothesis, rest on a supply-demand dynamic where men and women whose own preferences complement the preferences of potential spouses are most likely to get married. Other research could investigate whether the effect of these preferences change depending on the objective characteristics of the local supply of spouses. For example, does men's preference for women with less education have a

stronger effect in areas where there is a greater supply of women with less education? Although our models control for the respondent's education, we do not include controls for the local supply of potential spouses. Furthermore, future research should examine more fully how the objective characteristics of the marriage market affect preferences. McLaughlin, Lichter, and Johnston (1993) find the economic character of the local marriage market is less relevant for women living in nonmetropolitan areas, perhaps because there are fewer economic opportunities and therefore expectations of spouses are different. Lewis and Oppenheimer (2000) find that assortative mating patterns by education are somewhat governed by the local area supply of men and women.

Despite these weaknesses, our study informs our understanding of mate selection and the impact of marital search constraints on the timing of marriage using a nationally representative, longitudinal data source. One hypothesis with strong intuitive appeal, the less competition hypothesis, is tentatively rejected in favor of a model that accounts for the preferences of potential spouses.

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