

# Factors Influencing Intentions to Marry: A Comparison of Americans and Australians

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## ABSTRACT

This study looked at the strength of relationships between attitudes and intentions to marry for Australians and Americans. It also examined cross-cultural differences in attitudes and intentions. Participants were 313 single female undergraduates from both the University of Wisconsin- La Crosse ( $n = 201$ ) and University of La Trobe (Bundoora Campus) in Australia ( $n = 112$ ). I found that Americans viewed marriage more positively than Australians, and were more likely to indicate an intention to marry than Australians. Based on census information from both countries, the results were not surprising. However, the results help explain why marriage rates in Australia are lower than in the U.S. Given high cohabitation rates in Australia (and low marriage rates), it is not surprising that attitudes toward marriage and subjective norms were both highly predictive of intention to marry.

## INTRODUCTION

Most developed countries are undergoing a radical change in family roles. Industrialization, declining fertility rates, and increased numbers of women in the workplace have coincided with sizable increases in divorce and cohabitation and a moderate decline in marriage rates (Sassler, 2004). Demographic shifts in socioeconomic status, education levels, social and religious attitudes, and the increase in cohabitation have also led to the change in the number and quality of marriages (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003). Changing gender roles contributed to the shift as well; marriage is moving away from the breadwinner/ housewife image to a more equal division of labor. Along with this, the increase in childbearing outside of wedlock has weakened the social institutional drive, or the social norms that drive people's behavior, towards marriage (Cherlin, 2004). The increase in divorce has dramatically led to more remarriages and an increase in cohabitation (King & Scott, 2005). Cohabitation exists as a prelude to marriage or as an alternative to it (Sassler, 2004). Given the changing meaning and context of relationships, the proposed study focuses on American and Australian college students' intentions to marry.

### *United States and Australia*

The United States and Australia are similar in many ways: they are both industrialized nations with high gross national products, are involved in heavy global trading, are English speaking, largely Christian (Australia is 70% and the US is 76% Christian), and have large, diverse populations (Australian Census, 1996 & United States of America, 2006). While similar in many ways, in terms of family dynamics the two cultures vary in terms of marriage. Australians are more likely to cohabit and less likely to marry than are Americans. As of the U.S. Census of 2000, 73% of the US population was married, 54.4% of the married population was separated, and 9.7% of the population was divorced. Whereas, 2.4% of the population reported that they were cohabitating with their partner (US Census, 2000). In the Australian Census of 2001, 43% of the population was married; 7.1 % was divorced, 6.7% of the married population was separated. Whereas 5.5% of the population reported cohabitating with their partner (Australian Census, 2001). Overall, the cohabitation rate in Australia is 2.3 times as high as it is in the US. Furthermore, Australia has a lower marriage rate than the U.S. (5.3 per 1,000 population compared to 8.3 per 1,000 in the U.S.) and a lower divorce rate than the U.S. (2.8 per 1,000 compared to 4.2 for the U.S.) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002).

### *Factors Affecting Marital Choices*

Children who grow up in households where their parents are married view marriage more positively than those who grew up with divorced, separated, or non-married cohabitating parents. Children of divorced or cohabitating parents are more likely to cohabit with their respective partners in the future rather than commit to marriage (Cunningham & Thornton, 2005). In addition, individuals who divorce are more likely to cohabit with their new partner rather than remarry (Cunningham & Thornton (2005). Interestingly, people who are married view cohabitation more negatively than those who have not married. A vast amount of research exists on the

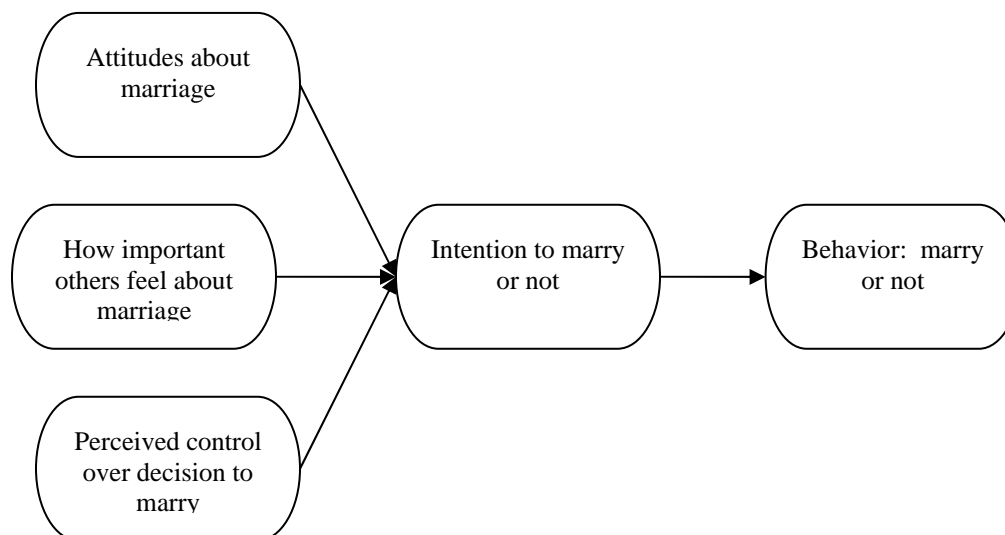
effectiveness of cohabitating before marriage and its relationship to overall marriage satisfaction and stability. People who decide to cohabit *before* engagement have shorter marriages, if the couple stays together long enough to get married (Smock, 2000). However, those people who cohabit *after* engagement have been shown to have more lasting, satisfying relationships (Kline, Stanley, Markman, et al., 2004).

The decision to marry or cohabit is also correlated with many other factors including societal level factors such as socioeconomic status, educational level, race/ethnicity, and religiosity (Hewitt & Baxter, 2005). These factors set a cultural context regarding relationship decisions and affect how individuals view the impact of these decisions. For instance, many young people view cohabitation as a “trial period” in a relationship, one that determines the compatibility of the two people involved (Martin, Martin, & Martin, 2001). However, despite the overall decrease in marriage rates and changing views on cohabitation, marriage remains an institution Americans regard as being the symbol of the ideal relationship, and in some populations, a status symbol (Cherlin, 2004). In the U.S. marriage is still considered the most stable and fulfilling type of relationship, one involving the highest levels of intimacy and agreement (Moore, McCabe, & Brink, 2001).

### *Predicting Behavior*

Ideally, the best way to study relationship behaviors would be to follow individuals over time. However, in absence of the ability to do a longitudinal study, well-designed research exists which suggests that individual’s intentions strongly predict their actions. Therefore, this study used the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB Ajzen, 1991) to examine Americans’ and Australians’ intentions to marry and the variables that influence their intentions. The TPB is one of the most highly respected and widely used measures in the arena of attitude/behavior measurement (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) found that intention is a very strong predictor of behavior and that intention best predicts behavior when there is a shorter time lapse between the two variables; consequently, measuring college students’ intentions reflects age groups relatively close in time to intended marriage ages. Overall, Ajzen (1991) proposed that people will show a stronger intention towards a behavior when they have a positive attitude about it, believe that other people think they should do it, and that they perceive that they have control over it. These three key attitude areas are labeled attitudes toward the behaviors, subjective norms (perceived social pressures towards executing or not executing the behavior) and perceived control as illustrated in the figure below (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Consequently, as applied to this study, in order to predict whether or not an individual will marry, a researcher would need to know: the individual’s intention to marry, his/her attitudes toward marriage, his/her view of important others’ attitudes toward marriage, and how much control he/she feels they have over the outcome.

**Figure 1.** Theory of Planned Behavior applied to this study.



The current study looked at several factors. First, it looked at the strength of relationships between attitudes and intentions to marry for both Australians and Americans. Second, it explored cross-cultural differences in attitudes and intentions. I expected to find that there will be a significant difference between Australia and the United States

in three arenas: attitudes, subjective norms, and intentions. In addition, I expected to find no difference with the perception of control between the two countries.

## METHODS

Participants were 313 single undergraduates from both the University of Wisconsin- La Crosse (n = 201) and University of La Trobe (Bundoora Campus) in Australia (n = 112). I only solicited single women between the ages between 18 and 25 (Mean = 20 years, *SD* = 2.28) as participants. See Table 1 for more demographic information.

**Table 1.** *Sample Demographics*

		All Participants
Marital Status*	Single	56%
	Dating	29%
	Long-term Partner	15% **
Ethnicity	Asian	1.6%
	Black	.3%
	Caucasian	94.5%
	Hispanic (US)	1%
	Native American (US)	.3%
	Other	2.3%
Religion		78% Christian, 14% No Religious Affiliation

\* 96% of participants were heterosexual.

\*\* 50% of long-term partners were together for less than one year.

\*\*\* 5% of participants were living with their partner.

Based on the demographic information given, it appears that the parents of the Australian sample were less educated than American parents (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** *Parental Educational Status*

<b>Mother's Education</b>	All	USA	Australia
Some High School	9%	0%	29%
High School Grad	27%	26%	29%
Some College or Associated Degree	26%	32%	12%
University Grad	23%	25%	19%
Post Grad Degree	14%	15%	11%
<b>Father's Education</b>			
Some High School	11%	1%	31%
High School Grad	23%	25%	17%
Some College or Associated Degree	25%	26%	22%
University Grad	22%	26%	14%
Post Grad Degree	19%	21%	15%

The participants filled out a questionnaire designed according to the theory of behavior that included marriage attitudes, social norms and intentions to marry. Using the research literature and pilot testing, I developed items associated with attitudes toward marriage (e.g., "It is better for children when their parents are married." "Getting married means a loss of freedom."). In addition, I developed items regarding "important others" to comprise the social norms component of the theory (e.g. "My mother thinks marriage is important", "Our societal laws reward marriage."). The format of the questionnaire reflected the Expectancy Value model (Fishbein in Eagly & Chaiken) where the participant responded to each item in two ways. First, she indicated how important the attitude is to her

(1-3 not very important, important, very important) and then her certainty that marriage will lead to this particular advantage or disadvantage (1-3 not very certain, certain, very certain). The expectancy X value model utilizes the product of the two measures for each item and then sums across all items to determine a total score for attitudes and social norms. Utilizing a reliability analysis, the final scale reflecting attitudes towards marriage was comprised of 16 out of the original 29 items; whereas the social norms scale was comprised of 7 out of the original 11 items (see Table 3 for the final items). The questions actually used in the final questionnaire are displayed in Table 3. Cronbach's alpha was .64 for both scales, indicating good reliability.

In order to measure perceived control, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (none at all) to 7 (complete control) their answer to the question "To what extent do you feel you have control over whether or not you will marry in the next fifteen years." Intention to marry was measured with a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (definitely) to the question "Do you intend to get married at some point in the next 15 years." Fifteen years was chosen because both countries' census information relayed that the majority of people who get married are between ages 24 and 35 (US Census, 2000 & Australian Census, 2001) and the majority of participants were approximately 20 years old. Informed consent was obtained prior to the study. The questionnaires were solicited during May 2006 for the participants at UWL and during November 2006 for the participants at La Trobe.

**Table 3.** Attitudes Towards Marriage and Social Norm Statements

Attitudes Questions	
Atm1	For me, marriage would provide me with the highest level companionship.
Atm2 (R)	Marriage between younger people is destined to fail.
Atm3 (R)	Marriage often results in unequal household responsibilities.
Atm4 (R)	A marriage ends in heartbreak.
Atm5	It is better for children when their parents are married.
Atm10 (R)	I would have less personal time if I was married.
Atm13	Marriage provides shared responsibilities.
Atm14	Marriage is the highest form of bonding a couple can have.
Atm19 (R)	Marriage would take away my freedom.
Atm21 (R)	Marriage causes a lot of stress.
Atm22 (R)	Being married would interfere with career goals.
Atm23	Marriage provides a greater financial security.
Atm26 (R)	Dissolving a marriage requires legal hassle.
Atm27	Good communication between partners is one of the keys to having a strong marriage.
Atm28 (R)	My social life would be hampered if I were married.
Atm29 (R)	Weddings are too expensive.
Social Norm Questions	
Sn3	I expect that my partner's family would pressure us to get married.
Sn5	My relatives think marriage is important.
Sn6	My parent(s) would be disappointed if did not ever marry.
Sn8	Even if partner wanted to get married, I would be the one to determine if and when.
Sn9	Our societal laws reward marriage.
Sn10	My religious leaders would frown upon cohabitation without marriage.
Sn11	My parent(s) think marriage is important.

(R) = Reverse coded

## RESULTS

I used ANOVA to compare Australian and the US respondents on attitudes toward marriage, social norms, and perceived control (see Table 4 for means and standard deviations). As predicted, Americans were more positive in their attitudes toward marriage ( $F = 5.80, p < .05$ ), viewed social norms supporting marriage as higher ( $F = 13.44, p < .001$ ), and reported higher likelihood and intention to marry than did Australians ( $F = 40.37, p < .001$ ). Australians had a higher level of perceived control ( $F = 6.20, p < .05$ ).

**Table 4.** Means and SD's of Australia and the United States

	Attitudes	Social Norms	Perceived Control	Intention to Marry
Australia (n = 96)	Mean = 1.4 SD = 4.4	Mean = 14.6 SD = 3.7	Mean = 2.74 SD = 1.62	Mean = 5.8 SD = 1.55
United States (n = 192)	Mean = 3.4 SD = 3.7	Mean = 16.3 SD = 2.88	Mean = 2.59 SD = 1.36	Mean = 6.5 SD = .94

Table 5 shows the correlations between the variables. There were significant correlations between the central variables except for perceived control which was not related to social norms or attitudes toward marriage and yielded a weak negative correlation with intention.

**Table 5.** Correlations between Planned Behavior Variables

	Attitudes Towards Marriage	Intent	Control
Social Norms	-.119*	.176**	.08
Attitudes Towards Marriage		.348**	-.097
Intent			-.109*

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A regression analysis was performed to test the Theory of Planned Behavior. Table 6 displays the complete regression results. The regression analyses suggest that the attitudes toward marriage and social norms were more highly explanatory of intention to marry for Australians. For Americans, perceived control was negatively associated with intent to marry – the more control respondents perceived themselves to have over marriage, they less they intended to marry. Overall, 17% of the variance in intention to marry was predicted by social norms, attitudes toward marriage and perceived control. Country of origin explained another 3% of the variance.

**Table 6.** Regression Analyses

Model Variable	Intent to Marry		
	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Beta (Standardized) $\beta$
TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 276)			
Theory of Planned Behavior	.42***	.17***	
Attitudes toward Marriage			.37***
Subjective Norm			.23***
Perceived Control			-.09
Step 2			
Country (U.S. or Australia)	.44***	.20*** <sup>a</sup>	
UNITED STATES (n = 187)			
Theory of Planned Behavior	.37***	.14***	
Attitudes toward Marriage			.25***

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Subjective Norm		.13
Perceived Control		-.24***
AUSTRALIA (n = 89)		
Theory of Planned Behavior	.43***	.18***
Attitudes toward Marriage		.39***
Subjective Norm		.25**
Perceived Control		.05

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup> Change in  $R^2 = .02^{**}$

## DISCUSSION

My hypotheses were largely supported. I found that there were significant differences between Australia and the United States in three arenas: attitudes, subjective norms, and intentions. However, in contrast to my hypothesis, I found a small but statistically significant difference between the two countries on perception of control. Australians perceiving more control over their intent to marry than did Americans.

Based on census information from both countries, the results were not surprising and help to explain why marriage rates in Australia are lower than in the U.S. Given high cohabitation rates in Australia (and low marriage rates), it is not surprising that attitudes toward marriage and subjective norms were both highly predictive of intention to marry. Presumably Australian women experience a level of control and lower social pressures to marry. Consequently, Australian women with an intent to marry may be more influenced by their attitudes and social norms. American media has a major focus on marriage, especially celebrity marriages. In the U.S. culture, being married is seen as being successful. However, in Australia, the focus is more on who you are as a person and your accomplishments than if you are married. In Australia, the choice to marry is seen as a more personal decision rather than a social one.

In addition, census data indicates that people in Australia tend to get married at later ages than those in the United States. This may indicate that Australians weigh the decision to marry for a longer time than do Americans. The higher cohabitation rates may also indicate a larger numbers of individuals with a stronger sense of their overall compatibility in living styles. Younger ages at marriage in the U.S. are associated with higher divorce rates. Cohabitation in the U.S. has a mixed relationship to successful marriage.

The study could be improved by a larger sample from Australia. More notably, both the American and Australian samples would be more generalizable if they were more representative of young women in both countries in terms of social class, ethnicity, and educational status. In addition, it would be beneficial to sample young men from both countries as well. There is an expansive area for growth in the area of marriage research; especially cross-culturally.

While there is more research needed to be done, the differences in attitudes, perceived norms, and intentions to marry between the US and Australia offer useful information for researchers, therapists, counselors, and relationship specialists. The results provide an appreciation of the different perceptions regarding marriage from the United States and Australia. The correlations can provoke a greater consciousness towards the ideals and values of other cultures. More research is needed on cross-cultural differences in attitudes regarding marriage as it is such a predominant social custom. As the world is growing smaller, the more we know about other cultures, the better we are able to relate to them and also improve our understanding of our own culture.

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