

## An Application of Marital Horizon Theory to Dating Violence Perpetration

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**ABSTRACT.** Elements of marital horizon theory (the importance of marriage, desire for marriage now, and beliefs about the ideal age of marriage) were examined in relation to dating violence perpetration using a sample of 611 college students from a large Midwestern university. We examined whether marital horizon variables significantly predicted dating violence perpetration above and beyond other known predictors of dating violence. Results indicate desire to marry was the only element of marital horizon theory to emerge as a significant predictor of dating violence. However, it was only salient for women's perpetration of psychological aggression. Implications of the findings are discussed, including the possibility that marital horizon theory may be a proxy for conventionality. Future directions for research are discussed.

Research has generally shown that emerging adulthood is a time of exploration and self-development. This developmental period is also associated with greater participation in risk-taking behaviors such as alcohol abuse and illicit drug use (Arnett, 2000) and higher rates of dating violence (Murray & Kardatzke, 2007). Recently, a marital horizon theory has been proposed that suggests the closer marriage is perceived to be (shorter marital horizon), the less likely emerging adults are to engage in various unhealthy individual and relational behaviors and the shorter their emerging adulthood period (Carroll et al., 2007).

This theory, in part, is based on the assumption that marriage continues to be a powerful socializing force. Indeed the current body of research suggests that marriage significantly decreases the occurrence of a wide variety of unhealthy behaviors (Arnett, 1998); specifically, illicit drug use (Homish, Leonard, & Cornelius, 2008) and alcohol abuse (Leonard & Mudar, 2003). It has been suggested that marriage serves to reduce these unhealthy risk-taking behaviors because it is a socializing institution that possesses "requirements, implicit or explicit, for conforming to conventional societal norms" (Arnett, 1998, p. 306). Marital horizon theory extends marriage's influence, suggesting it is not just the act of getting married that impacts emerging adults' behavior, but their attitudes and beliefs about marriage that influences their behaviors.

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To date, there is some evidence to support the idea that one's marital horizon influences risk taking behavior in emerging adults (Carroll et al., 2007; Willoughby & Dworkin, 2008) and family formation values (Carroll et al., 2007; Willoughby & Carroll, 2010), but no research to date has applied this theory to engagement in other unhealthy behaviors, such as dating violence. It is possible that, due to the socializing power of marriage (Arnett, 1998), emerging adults' perpetration of dating violence behaviors will decrease as they approach marriage.

The current study sought to test marital horizon theory's explanatory power of dating violence perpetration (physical and psychological) and three marital horizon variables: perceived marital importance, desire to marry now, and desired timing of marriage. This relationship was examined in conjunction with several known predictors of dating violence perpetration identified in the literature: problematic alcohol use, having witnessed parental violence as a child, relationship length, relationship satisfaction, and dating violence victimization.

## Literature Review

### Marital Horizon Theory

Marital horizon refers to "a person's outlook or approach to marriage in relation to his or her current situation" (Carroll et al., 2007, p. 224). Three separate components serve to comprise one's marital horizon: 1) the importance of marriage in one's current life plans, 2) the desired timing of marriage, and 3) the type of preparation required before being ready to get married. Situated within the emerging adulthood developmental period (Arnett, 2000), the principal idea of this theory is that one's marital horizon is a central factor in determining both the length of emerging adulthood and specific behaviors (especially unhealthy behaviors) that occur during emerging adulthood (Carroll et al., 2007).

**Importance of marriage.** According to marital horizon theory, the relative importance of marriage in relation to other goals will impact emerging adults' current behaviors. The more central a goal marriage is, the more likely that individual will conform to conventional societal norms and therefore, the less likely he or she will engage in various risk-taking behaviors.

**Desired marital timing.** The farther away an individual is from his or her perceived ideal age for marriage, the more likely he or she is to engage in risk-taking behaviors, according to marital horizon theory. As an individual gets closer to his or her ideal age for marriage, he or she will engage in less risky behavior as the person begins aligning himself or herself more closely with the social expectations for marriage.

**Criteria for marriage readiness.** Marital horizon theory posits that the emerging adult's belief about what criteria are necessary for marriage will greatly influence the desired timing of marriage and possibly the relative importance of marriage to that individual. For example, if financial stability is viewed as a criterion for marriage for an individual, then that individual will be more likely to wait until he or she finishes college and has stable employment before wanting to get married. Therefore, marriage will be much less important during college, and the timing of marriage will be later for that individual than for an individual who does not hold that criterion to be necessary.

### Marital Horizon Theory in Research

Given that this theory was proposed only recently, it has not been widely used in research. To date, only three studies have tested this theory, and their findings represent preliminary empirical support for the validity of marital horizon theory. Throughout the research, marital timing is operationalized through the question: "What is the ideal age for an individual to get

married?” Therefore, “marital timing” and “ideal age for marriage” are synonymous.

Marital timing and marital importance have been shown to be related to substance use and sexual permissiveness, with those individuals holding later marital timing and regarding marriage as less important being more likely to engage in these behaviors (Carroll et al., 2007). Marital importance, as measured by whether or not the respondent wants to be married at the present time, is related to lower rates of binge drinking and marijuana usage in Whites (Willoughby & Dworkin, 2008), but was not a salient predictor for other racial groups. However, when grouped with other known predictors of these behaviors, desire to marry did not account for much additional variance explained in the linear regression model, ranging from no additional variance explained to an additional 2.1% of the variance explained. In addition, marital timing is positively related to acceptance (but not usage) of pornography, with those wanting to delay marriage being more likely to find pornography acceptable (Carroll et al., 2008).

In regard to family formation values, marital timing and marital importance are related to child-centeredness, nonmarital cohabitation, out-of-wedlock childbirth, and spousal independence. Marital importance is negatively associated with endorsement of nonmarital cohabitation, out-of-wedlock childbirth, and spousal independence, but is positively associated with child-centeredness (Carroll et al., 2007). Later marital timing is associated with greater acceptance of nonmarital cohabitation in both men and women, but they differ in the other areas. Women with later marital timing reported less child-centeredness, greater consideration of having a child out of wedlock, and higher levels of spousal independence. For men, later marriage was associated only with less willingness to have a child out of wedlock (Carroll et al., 2007).

While marital horizon theory has received some empirical support in regard to its relation to risk-taking behaviors and family formation values, this theory has yet to be applied to any other behaviors in emerging adulthood. Carroll et al. (2007) assert, “it is apparent that young people’s attitudes toward marriage may be associated with a wide range of values and behaviors in emerging adulthood” (p. 241). The current study sought to extend marital horizon theory to a new area: dating violence.

### **Prevalence and Predictors of Physical Assault Perpetration**

The most recent estimates for prevalence of physical assault in dating relationships range from 20% to 45% in the United States (Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; Shook, Gerrity, Jurich, & Segrist, 2000; Straus, 2004), indicating that nearly half of all dating relationships experience physical assault at some point. In the dating violence literature there are numerous studies that have found perpetration rates to be equal among men and women (Katz, Kuffel, & Coblenz, 2002; Kaura & Lohman, 2007; Straus, 2006). Some research has suggested that female perpetration of dating violence might even be more common than male perpetration (Scott & Straus, 2007; Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; Archer, 2000). While women might be more likely to commit dating violence, men are far more likely to inflict an injury from the violence (Archer, 2000). A careful review of the dating violence literature has revealed the following items to be predictors of physical assault perpetration: problematic alcohol use, having witnessed parental violence as a child, relationship length, relationship satisfaction, and dating violence victimization.

**Problematic alcohol use.** The problematic consumption of alcohol has consistently been linked to physical assault perpetration for both men and women (Luthra & Gidycz, 2006), with earlier consumption (during adolescence) being a stronger predictor than later consumption

(during emerging adulthood) (Chen & White, 2004). Several reviews of the professional literature have also reported this as a predictor of perpetration (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Murray & Kardatzke, 2007; Pittman, Wolfe, & Wekerle, 2000).

**Witnessing parental violence.** Research using data from the Rutgers Health and Human Development Project, a nationally representative sample of adolescents who were followed through their adolescent and emerging adulthood years, found that individuals who witnessed physical assault in their parents' relationship as a child were more likely to perpetrate physical assault against a dating partner (Chen & White, 2004). This finding is echoed elsewhere in the literature (Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; Pittman, Wolfe, & Wekerle, 2000; Shook et al., 2000), with the possibility that this may be a stronger predictor for males than females (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001).

**Relationship length.** There is some research that suggests the longer a relationship lasts, the greater the likelihood of experiencing physical assault (Luthra & Gidycz, 2006). Longer relationships might be indicative of a more serious relationship or they might simply provide a greater time frame in which dating violence could occur. It has also been proposed that the longer a relationship lasts, the higher the level of expressed negativity will be, which often leads to violent behaviors (Marcus & Swett, 2002).

**Relationship satisfaction.** There are relatively few studies that look at relationship satisfaction in conjunction with dating violence. However, one study found low levels of relationship satisfaction to be predictive of physical assault in dating relationships (O'Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994) and a separate study found relationship satisfaction to be a significant predictor of physical assault for women (Baker & Stith, 2008). In addition, low relationship satisfaction has been correlated with physical assault (Lundeberg, Stith, Penn, & Ward, 2004; Katz, Kuffel, & Coblenz, 2002), yet bivariate correlations fail to demonstrate that low relationship satisfaction has predictive power in relation to physical assault. However, using relationship satisfaction as a predictor for physical assault has adequate support in the literature to be included in the current study.

**Dating violence victimization.** One recent study examining predictors of dating violence found that the most salient predictor for men's and women's perpetration of physical assault was their partners' use of physical assault and psychological aggression (Baker & Stith, 2008), which has been reported in similar studies as well (Luthra & Gidycz, 2006). For women, past victimization, even with a different partner, is predictive of future perpetration of physical assault against a dating partner (Graves, Sechrist, White, & Paradise, 2005).

### **Prevalence and Predictors of Psychological Aggression**

Most of the literature pertaining to dating violence deals specifically with physical assault, with very little attention focused on psychological (verbal) aggression (Shook et al., 2000). A review of the literature in relation to psychological dating violence showed prevalence rates ranging from 80% to 90% of all couples experiencing some form of psychological aggression (Murray & Kardatzke, 2007; Shook et al., 2000). In addition, this is the most common form of aggression for females to display (Nelson, Springer, Nelson, & Bean, 2008). This is a potentially important area for further exploration due to the fact that "the negative effects of psychological abuse on the victim's self-esteem and recovery far outweigh the immediate effects of physical violence" (Neufeld, McNamara, & Ertl, 1999, p. 126).

Some preliminary predictors of perpetration of psychological aggression are experiencing psychological aggression as a child from parents and problematic alcohol consumption (Shook et

al., 2000). A separate study found predictors of physical assault in dating relationships (problematic alcohol use, relationship length, etc.) to also accurately predict psychological aggression (Hammock & O’Hearn, 2002). Therefore, the predictors for physical assault (described above) will also be used as predictors of psychological aggression in this study.

### **Research Question and Hypotheses**

Marital horizon theory has been shown to be associated with various risk-taking behaviors and, while dating violence is not considered a risk-taking behavior, certain risk-taking behaviors (problematic alcohol use, in particular) are known predictors of dating violence. In addition, given the premises of marital horizon theory, it is logical that dating violence should fall under the “wide range” of behaviors influenced by emerging adults’ marital horizon. Physical assault and psychological aggression, though somewhat common, are not considered acceptable by societal standards in marital relationships. Therefore, it is possible that an individual with a shorter marital horizon would be more likely to conform to the idea that dating violence is not appropriate in interpersonal relationships and, as a result, be less likely to engage in such behavior than someone with a longer marital horizon. The importance that one places on marriage, his or her desire to marry now, and the distance one considers himself or herself to be from marriage might serve as important factors in the prediction of dating violence perpetration. Therefore, the current study seeks to answer the following research question:

1. To what extent can prediction of psychological aggression and physical assault perpetration in dating relationships be further enhanced by knowing participants’ marital importance, desire to marry now, and ideal age of marriage, above and beyond other known predictors of dating violence, including problematic alcohol use, having witnessed parental violence as a child, relationship length, relationship satisfaction, and dating violence victimization?

Two hypotheses were tested:

1. Marital importance, desire to marry now, and ideal age of marriage will be a significant predictor of physical assault, even when coupled with some of the known predictors of physical assault.
2. Marital importance, desire to marry now, and ideal age of marriage will significantly enhance the prediction of psychological aggression, even when coupled with some of the known predictors of psychological aggression.

### **Method**

#### **Study Design**

This study used data collected in 2008 from students at a large Midwestern university. A 237-item survey was distributed to undergraduates in sociology, human nutrition, marketing, political science, and family studies and human services classes. Demographic information such as gender, education level, age, race, parents’ education levels, family income, and parents’ marital status was requested for background information. Questions were also asked regarding the participant’s dating status and general relationship information. Only Respondents that had been in a relationship for at least one month were asked to complete the survey. Students currently married were excluded from the study.

#### **Sample**

The sample consisted of 272 males (44.5%) and 339 females (55.5%) who voluntarily

agreed to participate in the study. Nearly 25% of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 19 years, 49.4% fell between the ages of 20 and 21. Twenty-three percent were between the ages of 22 and 23 years, and the remaining 3.6% were between 24 and 25. Almost 40% of the students were freshman or sophomores, with the remaining 60% being comprised of upperclassmen (juniors and seniors). Less than 1% of the participants were in graduate school. The participants consisted of 88.4% European American, with 5.6% self-identified as African American, 2.5% as Latin American, 1.6% as Asian, and 2.0% were classified as Native American or another race not listed.

Nearly 86% of the sample were currently or had been in a dating relationship that has lasted at least one month. The remaining 14% had never been in a relationship that has lasted at least one month and were instructed to skip the sections of the survey pertaining to dating relationships. Of those that had dated for more than one month, 37.4% were currently single, 24.6% were dating, 32.5% considered themselves to be in a committed relationship (intend to stay together in the future), and the remaining 5.5% were engaged to be married. Only 16.2% of the sample had cohabited with a partner or was currently cohabiting with a partner. The sample was diverse with respect to relationship length: over 30% of the respondents' most recent relationship had lasted five months or less, almost 22% had lasted between six months and one year, 19.9% had lasted between one and two years, 19.1% had lasted between two and four years, and the remaining 7% had lasted four years or more.

## Measures

**Problematic alcohol use.** The Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index (RAPI; White & Labouvie, 1989) was used to assess problematic consequences due to alcohol consumption. This 24-item measure poses a series of statements related to alcohol consumption during the previous 6 months. Example items include, "Went to work or school drunk," and "Kept drinking when you promised yourself not to." Responses ranged from, "this has 'Never' happened during the past 6 months" (1) to "this has happened 'More than 10 times'" (5). Reliability for the RAPI in the current study is  $\alpha=.94$ .

**Witnessing parental violence.** Two items were used to determine whether the participant witnessed parental violence as a child. One item referred to physical assault and the other to psychological (verbal) aggression. The items read, "While you were growing up, was there ever any physical violence/verbal abuse between your parents or whoever raised you?" Response options identified if the violence was initiated by the father, mother, was mutual, or if there was no violence present. However, for the purposes of this study, responses were recoded into a dichotomized format indicating whether the participant did not witness parental violence (0) or witnessed parental violence (1).

**Relationship length.** Respondents were asked, "How long have you been in this relationship (or how long did the most recent relationship last)?" Responses ranged from "Less than one month" (1) to "Four years or more" (7).

**Relationship satisfaction.** The Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS; Schumm et al., 1985) was used to measure relationship satisfaction. The KMSS is a 3-item scale that assesses one's perceived level of relationship satisfaction. Items such as, "How satisfied are (or were) you with your relationship," are rated on a scale of "Extremely Dissatisfied" (1) to "Extremely Satisfied" (7). The scale has a reliability coefficient of  $\alpha=.95$  in the current study. The score for the KMSS was reverse-coded in order to go in a consistent direction with the other predictors of dating violence.

**Dating violence victimization and perpetration.** The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale-CTS2 (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) was used in this study to measure partner violence victimization and perpetration. The CTS2 assesses the frequency with which an individual perpetrates and is a victim of physical assault and psychological aggression against and from their partner. Each subscale is broken down into minor and severe forms of violence. Respondents are asked to identify the frequency that they committed each item in the past and were a victim of each item. Response choices range in frequency from “No, this has never happened” (0) to “More than 20 times in the past year” (6). The reliability scores for perpetration of physical assault are  $\alpha=.89$  and  $\alpha=.79$  for perpetration of psychological aggression. The reliability for victimization is  $\alpha=.76$  for perpetration of psychological aggression and  $\alpha=.91$  for physical assault.

**Marital horizon.** Three items were used to assess for marital horizon. The first items state, “Being married is a very important goal for me,” and “I would like to be married now.” Respondents select their level of agreement with the statement from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (4). The third item asks, “What is the ideal age for an individual to get married?” Response choices range from “21 or younger” (1) to “32 or older” (7). This score was then reverse-coded in order to fit theoretically with level of marital importance.

## Results

First, we examined gender differences in the predictor variables using independent t-tests. There were significant differences between men and women on several of the predictors. Therefore, men and women were examined separately in the analysis. Then, we created correlations matrices for men and women regarding the predictors and outcome variables to gain an understanding of the univariate relationships between all the variables (see Table 1).

For men, the four dating violence variables (physical assault victimization and perpetration and psychological aggression perpetration and victimization) were highly correlated with each other (ranging from  $r = .72, p < .001$  to  $r = .95, p < .001$ ), the four dating violence variables were also significantly related to relationship satisfaction (ranging from  $r = .19, p < .05$  to  $r = .23, p < .01$ ), and problematic alcohol use (ranging from  $r = .16, p < .05$  to  $r = .22, p < .01$ ). Perpetration of physical assault and being a victim of physical assault were correlated significantly with relationship length ( $r = -.23, p < .01$  and  $r = 0.17, p < .05$ , respectively) and physical assault victimization was also related to witnessing parental violence as a child ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ). Marital horizon variables were not significantly related to any of the dating violence variables, but shared sporadic correlations with the other known predictors of dating violence.

The four dating violence variables (perpetration and victimization) for women were, once again, significantly correlated with each other (ranging from  $r = 0.51, p < .001$  to  $r = 0.89, p < .001$ ). The four dating violence variables were significantly related to relationship satisfaction (ranging from  $r = 0.30, p < .001$  to  $r = 0.15, p < .05$ ), and problematic alcohol use (ranging from  $r = 0.26, p < .001$  to  $r = 0.18, p < .01$ ). Relationship length was significantly related to perpetration and victimization of psychological aggression ( $r = 0.24, p < .001$  and  $r = 0.22, p < .001$ , respectively) and witnessing parental violence was significantly correlated with being a victim of psychological aggression ( $r = 0.14, p < .05$ ). Marital importance was significantly related to all of the dating violence variables except for being a victim of physical assault (ranging from  $r = -.21, p < .01$  to  $r = -.16, p < .05$ ) and desire to marry now was significantly correlated with being a victim of psychological aggression ( $r = -.14, p < .05$ ).

Table 1.  
*Correlations Matrix for Predictor and Outcome Variables Among Males and Females*

| Variable                            | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4      | 5     | 6       | 7      | 8       | 9      | 10      | 11      |
|-------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|
| 1. Perpetration of Psych Aggression | —      | .59*** | .51*** | .89*** | .13   | .15*    | .18**  | .24***  | -.03   | -.16*   | -.12    |
| 2. Perpetration of Physical Assault | .75*** | —      | .81*** | .54*** | .08   | .21**   | .20**  | -.01    | -.04   | -.17**  | -.05    |
| 3. Victim of Physical Assault       | .76*** | .95*** | —      | .62*** | .01   | .30***  | .26*** | -.04    | .02    | -.13    | -.03    |
| 4. Victim of Psych Aggression       | .91*** | .72*** | .74*** | —      | .14*  | .20**   | .24*** | .22***  | -.03   | -.21**  | -.14*   |
| 5. Witness Parent Violence          | .14    | .14    | .15*   | .13    | —     | .08     | 0.00   | .10     | -.07   | -.14*   | .03     |
| 6. KMSS                             | .20**  | .23**  | .19*   | .21**  | .08   | —       | .22*** | -.30*** | -.18** | -.29*** | -.24*** |
| 7. RAPI                             | .22**  | .19**  | .16*   | .16*   | .08   | .06     | —      | -.09    | -.04   | -.03    | -.06    |
| 8. Relationship Length              | .01    | -.23** | -.17*  | .05    | .03   | -.40*** | -.08   | —       | .10    | .22***  | .22***  |
| 9. Ideal Age for Marriage           | -.05   | -.06   | -.10   | -.02   | -.13* | -.10    | -.13*  | .13*    | —      | .35***  | .37***  |
| 10. Marital Importance              | -.12   | -.08   | -.08   | -.08   | -.03  | -.08    | -.10   | .04     | .30*** | —       | .18**   |
| 11. Desire to Marry Now             | -.08   | -.05   | -.03   | -.07   | .08   | -.14*   | -.01   | .16*    | .24*** | 0.18**  | —       |

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001, *Note:* Correlations for women are above and for men are below the diagonal.

Two hierarchical linear regressions were then computed in order to measure how much ideal age of marriage, marital importance, and desire to marry now would enhance the prediction of both psychological aggression and physical assault, above and beyond the other known predictors of dating violence. Due to the strength of the correlations between the victimization and perpetration of dating violence variables (as high as  $r = .95, p < .001$  for men and  $r = .89, p < .001$  for women) the victimization predictors were excluded from the regression models. Correlations above .80 generally indicate multicollinearity, which tends to distort the regression model and produces unreliable results (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Relationship length, witnessing parental violence, relationship satisfaction, and alcohol use were entered into step 1 of the regression model. Ideal age of marriage, marital importance, and desire to marry now were then entered into step 2 of the model.

The results of the regression models for men’s perpetration of physical assault and psychological aggression are presented in Table 2. Relationship length ( $\beta = -.16, p < .05$ ) and alcohol use ( $\beta = .16, p < .05$ ) were the only significant predictors in both steps of the model for men’s perpetration of physical assault. The final model was able to explain 9% of men’s perpetration of physical assault ( $r^2 = .09, F = 3.45, p < .01$ ). In predicting psychological aggression in men, relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ) and alcohol use ( $\beta = .21, p < .01$ ) were significant predictors in both steps of the model, accounting for 8% of the variance in men’s perpetration of psychological aggression ( $r^2 = .08, F = 3.15, p < .01$ ). Ideal age of marriage, marital importance, and desire to marry now were not significant in the explanation of men’s perpetration of dating violence. In fact, with both the perpetration of physical assault and perpetration of psychological aggression, the marital horizon variables caused the final model to have less predictive power than in step 1, when they were not included.

Table 2  
*Hierarchical Regression for Perpetration of Physical Assault and Psychological Aggression in Males (n = 213)*

|                              | <i>Physical Assault</i>       |             | <i>Psychological Aggression</i> |                               |             |         |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|---------|
|                              | <i>B</i>                      | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$                         | <i>B</i>                      | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ |
| <b>Step 1</b>                |                               |             |                                 |                               |             |         |
| Constant                     | 12.28                         | 2.35        |                                 | 4.90                          | 1.93        |         |
| Relationship Length          | -.68                          | .33         | -.16*                           | .33                           | .27         | .10     |
| Witnessing Parental Violence | 1.28                          | .73         | .13                             | .95                           | .59         | .12     |
| Relationship Satisfaction    | .21                           | .11         | .15                             | .25                           | .09         | .21**   |
| Alcohol Use                  | .08                           | .03         | .16*                            | .08                           | .03         | .21**   |
|                              | R <sup>2</sup> =.10,F=6.00*** |             |                                 | R <sup>2</sup> =.09,F=5.20*** |             |         |
| <b>Step 2</b>                |                               |             |                                 |                               |             |         |
| Constant                     | 13.23                         | 3.48        |                                 | 7.06                          | 2.84        |         |
| Relationship Length          | -.69                          | .33         | -.16*                           | .35                           | .28         | .10     |
| Witnessing Parental Violence | 1.22                          | .74         | .12                             | .88                           | .60         | .11     |
| Relationship Satisfaction    | .21                           | .12         | .14                             | .24                           | .09         | .20*    |
| Alcohol Use                  | .08                           | .04         | .16*                            | .08                           | .03         | .21**   |
| Marital Importance           | -.39                          | .59         | -.05                            | -.51                          | .49         | -.08    |
| Desire to Marry Now          | .18                           | .65         | .02                             | .05                           | .54         | .01     |
| Ideal Age for Marriage       | .01                           | .50         | .00                             | -.13                          | .41         | -.03    |
|                              | R <sup>2</sup> =.09,F=3.45**  |             |                                 | R <sup>2</sup> =.08,F=3.15**  |             |         |

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

The final regression models examined women’s perpetration of physical assault and psychological aggression (see Table 3). Women’s perpetration of physical assault had relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = .15, p < .05$ ) and alcohol use ( $\beta = .21, p < .01$ ) emerge as significant predictors in both steps of the model. This regression model was able to explain 8% of women’s perpetration of physical assault ( $r^2 = .08, F = 3.57, p < .001$ ). The final model analyzed women’s perpetration of psychological aggression. The significant predictors in this model were relationship length ( $\beta = .35, p < .001$ ), alcohol use ( $\beta = .25, p < .001$ ), and marital importance ( $\beta = -.17, p < .05$ ). The final model accounted for 19% of the variance in women’s perpetration of psychological aggression ( $r^2 = 0.19, F = 7.76, p < .001$ ). Marital importance was a significant variable in explaining women’s perpetration of psychological aggression, adding an additional 3% of variance explained.

Table 3.  
*Hierarchical Regression for Perpetration of Physical Assault and Psychological Aggression in Females (n = 213)*

|                              | <i>Physical Assault</i>       |             | <i>Psychological Aggression</i> |                                |             |         |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|---------|
|                              | <i>B</i>                      | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$                         | <i>B</i>                       | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ |
| <b>Step 1</b>                |                               |             |                                 |                                |             |         |
| Constant                     | 8.45                          | 1.59        |                                 | 1.45                           | 1.81        |         |
| Relationship Length          | .19                           | .22         | .06                             | 1.14                           | .25         | .31***  |
| Witnessing Parental Violence | .31                           | .46         | .05                             | .54                            | .54         | .07     |
| Relationship Satisfaction    | .18                           | .07         | .18*                            | .19                            | .08         | .16*    |
| Alcohol Use                  | .09                           | .03         | .21**                           | .14                            | .04         | .25***  |
|                              | R <sup>2</sup> =.08,F=5.38*** |             |                                 | R <sup>2</sup> =.16,F=10.57*** |             |         |
| <b>Step 2</b>                |                               |             |                                 |                                |             |         |
| Constant                     | 9.09                          | 2.59        |                                 | 2.17                           | 2.89        |         |
| Relationship Length          | .24                           | .22         | .08                             | 1.32                           | .25         | .35***  |
| Witnessing Parental Violence | .17                           | .48         | .03                             | .42                            | .54         | .05     |
| Relationship Satisfaction    | .15                           | .07         | .15*                            | .14                            | .08         | .12     |
| Alcohol Use                  | .09                           | .03         | .21**                           | .13                            | .04         | .25***  |
| Marital Importance           | -.70                          | .39         | -.14                            | -.99                           | .43         | -.17*   |
| Desire to Marry Now          | .15                           | .34         | .03                             | -.67                           | .38         | -.12    |
| Ideal Age for Marriage       | .28                           | .39         | .05                             | .77                            | .45         | .12     |
|                              | R <sup>2</sup> =.08,F=3.57*** |             |                                 | R <sup>2</sup> =.19,F=7.76***  |             |         |

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

### Discussion

The current study sought to examine the potential link between an individual’s marital horizon, including marital importance, desire to marry now, and ideal age of marriage, and his or her perpetration of physical assault and psychological aggression. The only marital horizon variable to emerge as a significant predictor of dating violence was marital importance in the model for women’s perpetration of psychological aggression, despite being significantly correlated with perpetration of physical assault. In particular, the less important marriage is to a woman, the more likely she is to perpetrate psychological aggression. This indicates that, perhaps, a woman would be more willing to call her partner derogatory names or use profanity toward him if she did not intend to marry or have a long-term committed relationship with him. It is unclear why this pattern would not also hold true for men. Previous research looking at marital horizon theory has found it to be a salient factor for both men and women in relation to

risk-taking behaviors and family formation values (Willoughby & Dworkin, 2008; Carroll et al., 2007).

The results of this study indicate that marital horizon theory does not contribute much to understanding the perpetration of dating violence. Rather, like previous research has suggested, one's marital horizon might influence that individual's engagement in various risky behaviors (including problematic alcohol consumption), which play a more direct role in the perpetration of physical assault and psychological aggression. However, in the current study, there was no significant relationship between problematic alcohol consumption and any of the marital horizon variables for either men or women. In addition, most of the predictors of dating violence deal with family of origin and relationship factors with less focus on risk behaviors outside of alcohol consumption. Therefore, marital importance, desire to marry now, and the ideal age of marriage may influence factors that only contribute partially to understanding one's perpetration of physical assault and psychological aggression.

Given that up to this point in the research literature, the marital horizon variables have only proven to impact risk-taking behaviors and various family formation values, it is possible that this theory is actually a proxy for conventionality or religiosity. Willoughby and Dworkin (2008) controlled for religiosity with two items assessing the perceived importance of the participant's religious faith and how much time the participant spends on religious activities each week and found that marital importance still emerged as a significant predictor of risk-taking behaviors while religiosity was distinct from conventionality. It could be that people who want to get married younger and place more emphasis on marriage hold more conventional beliefs in a variety of areas and are, therefore, less likely to do drugs, be sexually permissive, and have problematic alcohol consumption. While it has been proposed that marriage is a socializing institution that directs people toward conformity to conventional societal norms (Arnett, 1998), it is possible that those individuals who place more importance on marriage and want to marry at a younger age might already adhere to many of the conventional societal norms. This potentially explains why marital horizon theory is unable to explain a behavior (dating violence perpetration) that is less associated with conventionality than risk-taking behaviors and family formation values. Distinguishing marital horizon from more conventional beliefs and behaviors in general is a crucial next step if this theory is to be useful in explaining emerging adult attitudes and behavior.

Perhaps the most important finding from the current study is the overwhelming strength of the relationship between victimization and perpetration of dating violence variables for both men and women. The strength of victimization variables in the prediction of dating violence perpetration has been found in one previous study using hierarchical linear regression to examine dating violence predictors (Baker & Stith, 2008), where most of the variance was accounted for by victimization and the other predictors enhanced the regression model's explanatory power by a very small amount (2% to 4% additional variance accounted for). Other studies looking at dating violence among college students have found victimization to be a significant factor in relation to perpetration as well (Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, & Sebastian, 1991).

The strength of the relationship between perpetration and victimization leads to the conclusion that dating violence in the current study is probably best described as situational couple violence, as it has been described in the literature (Johnson & Leone, 2005). This type of violence is one in which "conflict occasionally gets 'out of hand,' leading usually to 'minor' forms of violence" (Johnson, 1995, p. 285). Viewing frequency tables of the violent acts in the

Conflict Tactics Scale for the current study lends further credence to this conclusion because the vast majority of the physical assault occurred infrequently. Interestingly, psychological aggression did occur more frequently than physical assault, in general, and possibly becomes an enduring pattern in dating relationships. However, it is still mutual, likely falling under the umbrella of situational couple violence.

In the regression models, alcohol use became a significant predictor of dating violence for both men and women, with higher levels of problematic usage contributing to greater occurrences of dating violence. In addition to alcohol usage, the other predictors became significant for different types of perpetration. Quite interestingly, men's perpetration of physical assault was significantly predicted by relationship length, but in the opposite direction described in the literature. While it was previously suggested that physical assault is more likely to occur with longer relationship length (Luthra & Gidycz, 2006), these current results suggest that men perpetrate more often in newer relationships. This area has not been widely explored in the dating violence literature and the current findings suggest that more investigation is needed. Relationship satisfaction also became a significant predictor in every type of violence except men's perpetration of physical assault and women's perpetration of psychological aggression when marital horizon variables were included in the model.

While marital horizon theory may influence emerging adults' participation in various risk-taking behaviors (Willoughby & Dworkin, 2008; Carroll et al., 2007) and some of those risk-taking behaviors are known predictors of dating violence (Murray & Kardatzke, 2007), there does not seem to be a direct link between one's marital horizon and his or her perpetration of psychological aggression or physical assault. This study does indicate, though, that situational couple violence may be the most prevalent type of dating violence among college students today.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The current study contains several limitations. The first limitation is that the sample is comprised entirely of college students. This greatly limits the generalizability of the findings to emerging adults who do not attend college. While the sample did have a sufficient number of participants from various age ranges within emerging adulthood, the geographic location and level of education contained little variation. In addition, one of the variables used in the analysis, ideal age for marriage, was categorical and it would have possessed more explanatory power if the data were continuous. Furthermore, items for one of the key components of marital horizon theory, criteria for marriage readiness, have been developed quite recently and were not available when the data was gathered. As a result, the theory was not tested in its entirety.

Future research needs to focus on distinguishing marital horizon variables from conventional societal beliefs in general. If that distinction is established, an alternate explanation will be necessary as to why it is that one's marital horizon is not associated with dating violence behaviors. The theory should also be applied to other behaviors during emerging adulthood to determine how many behaviors are shaped by emerging adults' perceived distance from marriage. In addition, future research should aim to unearth the role violence plays in relationships as a couple makes the transition from dating to cohabitation and, ultimately, to marriage.

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