The Relationship Between Perceived Attractiveness in Childhood and Divorce Rates in Adulthood

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Introduction

- Physical attractiveness in adulthood plays a role in marital success, specifically in regards to the phenomenon of extra-relationship pairing (MaKellams, 2017).

- Minimal past research has been conducted on how one's perceived personality attractiveness as a child contributes to marital status rather than one's physical attractiveness. Furthermore, there has been little research into the way that one's level of attractiveness as a child influences their marital success later in life.

- This idea of development over time is taken into account in this study. This is an important factor to take into consideration because it demonstrates the way that one's social settings and the resulting perceptions impact one's ability to have successful relationships in adulthood.

Research Questions

- **Are individuals with higher perceived attractiveness scores in childhood more likely to have successful marriages in adulthood?**

- **Does the association between attractiveness ratings and divorce rates differ depending on the specific way in which attractiveness is rated (physical vs. emotional attractiveness)?**

Methods

Sample

- The sample is drawn from **AddHealth**: a nationally representative study of over 20,000 participants from 1994 to 2018.

- The sample from the first wave of AddHealth represents adolescents in grades 9-12 in the United States that were followed over time. The sample from the fifth wave of AddHealth represents these study participants when they are in their late 30s/early 40s.

Measures

- **Divorce rates in adulthood** were assessed through the Household data provided in Wave V of AddHealth. Current marital status was measured through the question 'Are you currently?' with the following possible responses: married, widowed, divorced, separated, and never married (listed numerically 1-5).

- **Perceived attractiveness in childhood** was assessed using the Interviewer Remarks included in AddHealth Wave I. The questions examined in the present analysis included physical attractiveness ('how physically attractive is the respondent') and personality attractiveness ('how attractive is the respondent's personality').

- These two questions function as **categorical variables** that are ordered. The interviewer assessed attractiveness on a numerical scale (1-5) ranging from very unattractive to very attractive.

Results

Univariate

- Physical attractiveness ratings: **attractive = 47.1%, unattractive = 52.9%**

- Personality attractiveness ratings: **attractive = 46.8%, unattractive = 53.2%**

- Marital status: **married = 84%, divorced = 16%**

Results Continued

Bivariate

- A Chi-Square correlation test showed that **ratings of physical attractiveness in childhood** were significantly and positively associated with **divorce status** (p<0.01). Those rated as more physically attractive were more likely to be divorced.
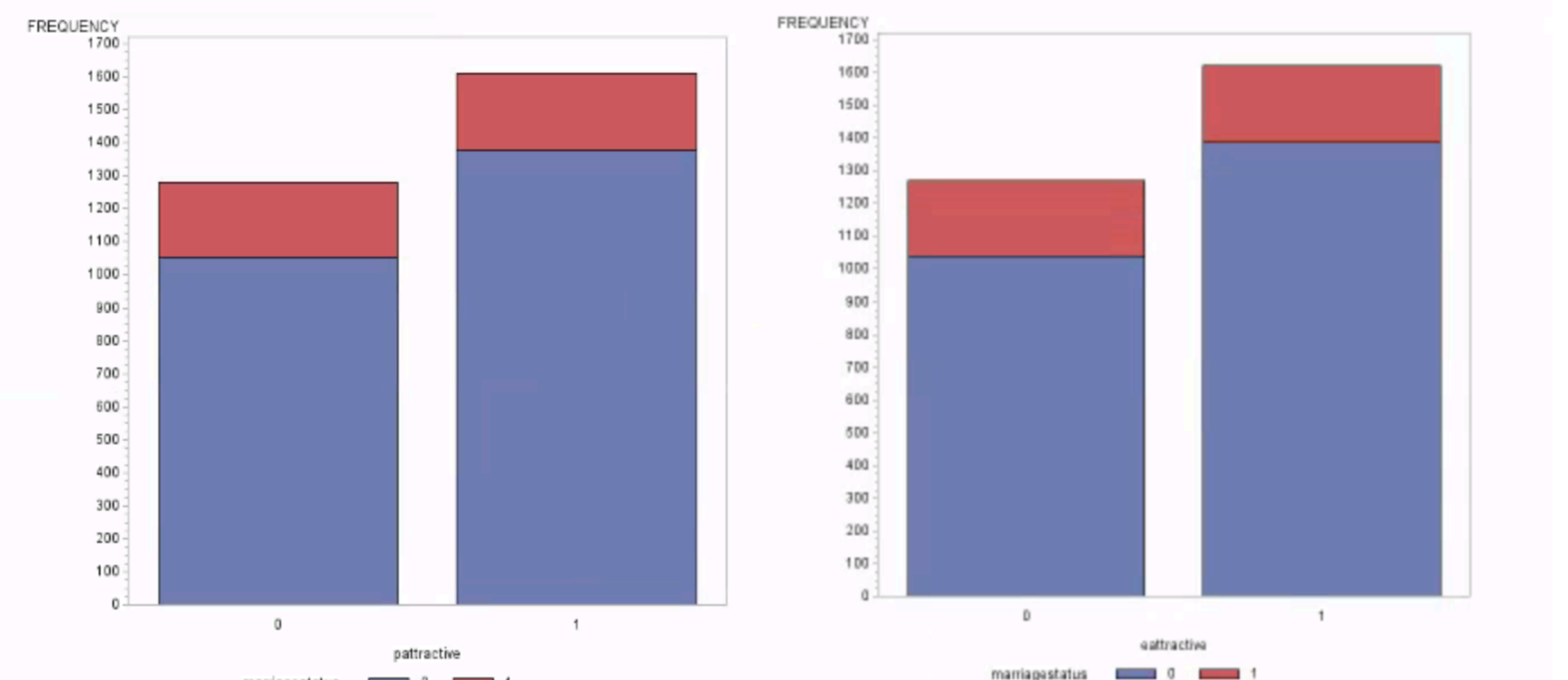

Figure 1.

Left: Relationship between physical attractiveness ratings (0=unattractive, 1=attractive and marital status (0=married, 1=divorced). Pattractive (x axis) = physical attractiveness score.

Right: Relationship between emotional attractiveness ratings (0=unattractive, 1=attractive and marital status (0=married, 1=divorced). Eattractive (x axis) = physical attractiveness score.

Regression Analysis

- Additionally, logistic regression analysis demonstrated that **those rated as physically attractive were 20% more likely to be divorced** and, separately, **those rated as emotionally attractive were 25% more likely to be divorced.** (O.R. = 0.8, 0.75 respectively, p<0.05).

Multivariate

- Emotional attractiveness and physical attractiveness are confounders for each other within the analysis of physical attractiveness and marital status The two explanatory variables have a **high correlation value** of (0.53).

- When examining the relationship between physical attractiveness and divorce rates after **controlling for personality/emotional attractiveness**, the relationship between physical attractiveness and divorce rates is **no longer significant**. (p values are > 0.05, 0.3 and 0.07 respectively.
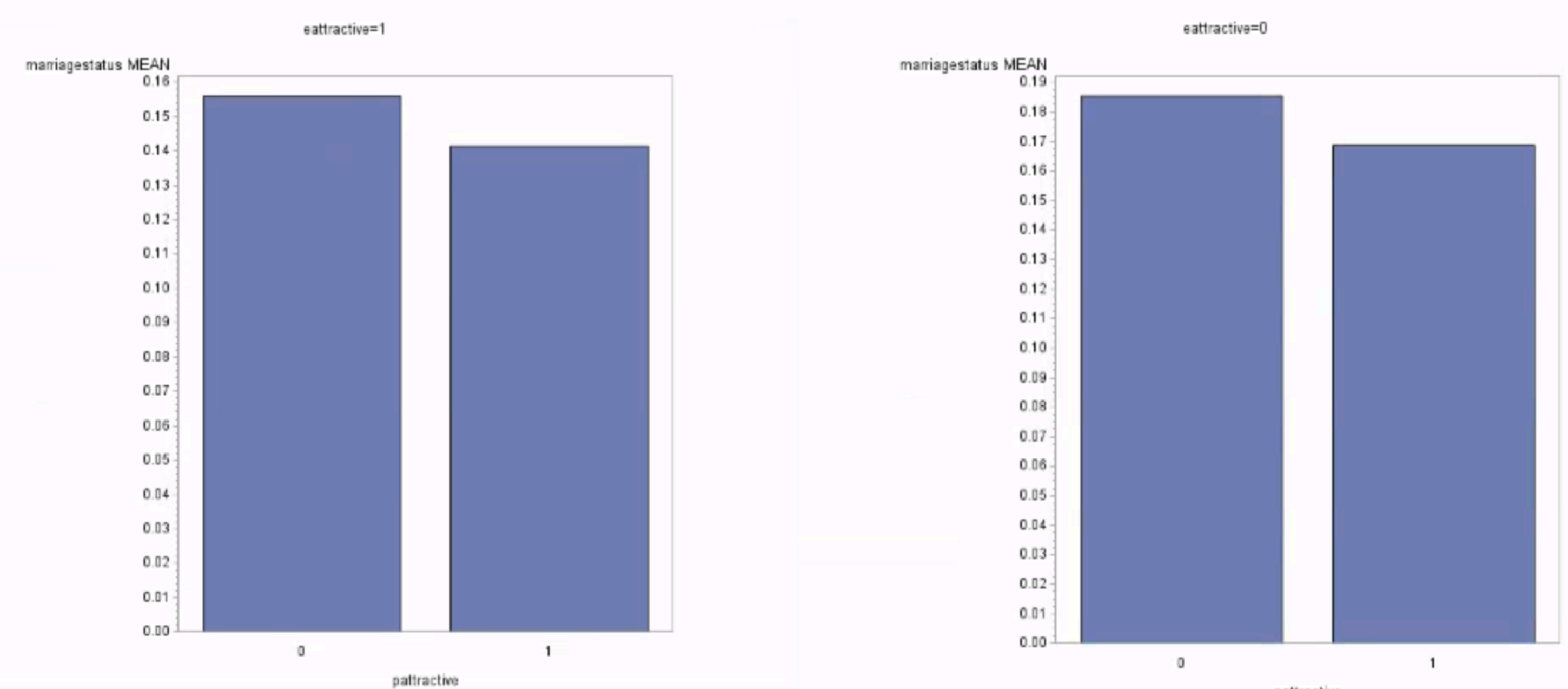

Figure 2. Relationship between physical attractiveness ratings and marital status after controlling for emotion attractiveness ratings (0=unattractive, 1=attractive)

Left: relationship between physical attractiveness and marriage status if emotional attractiveness score = 1 (emotionally attractive).

Left: relationship between physical attractiveness and marriage status if emotional attractiveness score = 0 (emotionally unattractive).

Discussion

- Those who are rated as **more physically attractive** in childhood may be **more likely to be divorced** in adulthood and those who are rated as **more emotionally attractive** in childhood may be **more likely to be divorced** in adulthood

- The two explanatory variables (physical and emotional attractiveness respectively) are highly correlated. If you are rated as physically attractive, you are more likely to be rated as emotionally attractive.

- These findings could be utilized by educators to further understand the interpersonal dynamics between adolescents and what those dynamics are likely to affect later in life.

- To build upon these findings, further research could examine the ways that perceptions of attractiveness in social media impact marital success.

Ma-Kellams, C., Wang, M. C., & Cardiel, H. (2017). Attractiveness and relationship longevity: Beauty is not what it is cracked up to be. *Personal Relationships*, *24*(1), 146-161. https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12173

United States Census Bureau, 2019. Marriage and Divorce.