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Are There Differences in Decision-making Power and Relationship Quality between Free Choice and Arranged Marriages in Indonesia? Evidence from Yogyakarta

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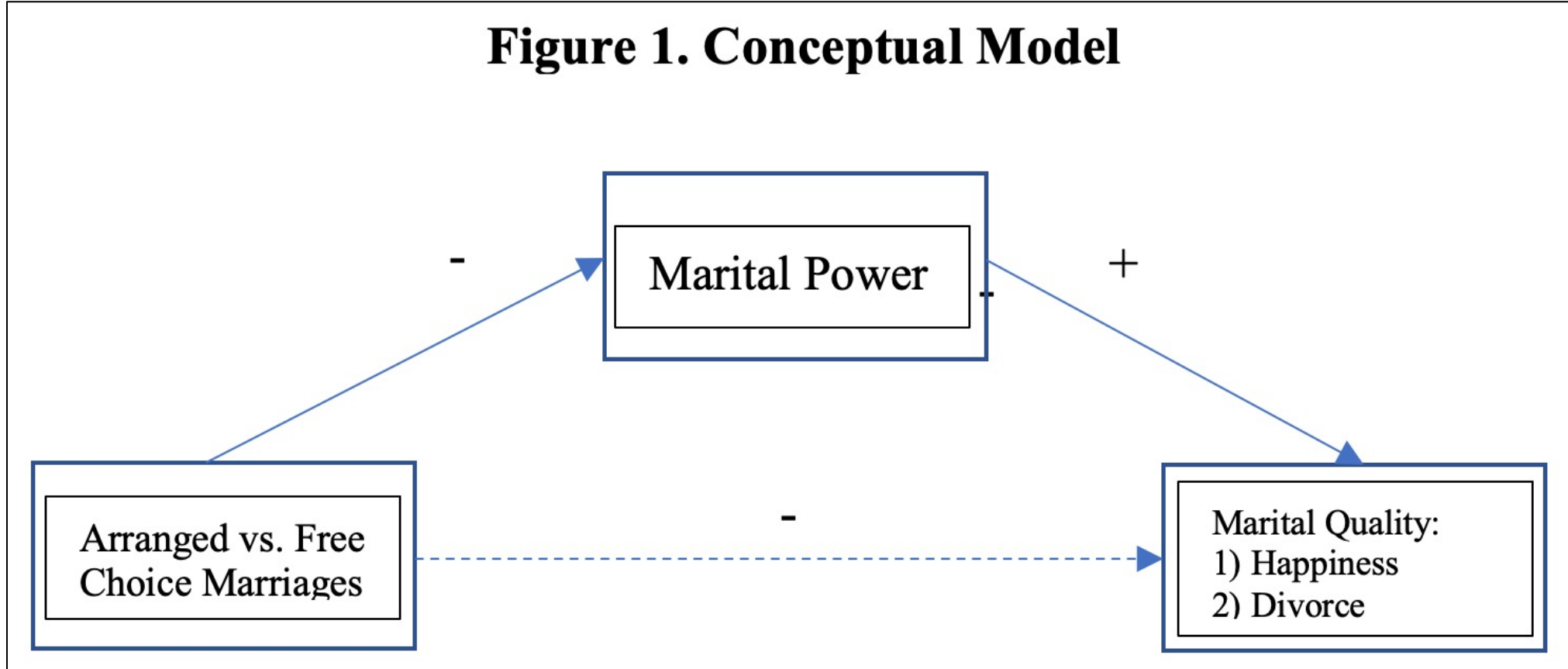
Introduction

Arranged marriages, where parents select the spouse for those who are marrying, have been practiced in many Asian countries. Prior studies conducted in Japan, Turkey, China, and Nepal indicated that men and women who had arranged marriages reported lower marital quality than individuals who had love-match or free choice marriages, regardless of the length of marriage. A recent study concluded that compared to their peers in arranged marriages, women in urban China who had free choice marriages tend to be romantic and equal partners. In light of these research findings, this study utilizes survey data from Yogyakarta to replicate prior research on marital behaviors and outcomes of arranged marriages vs. free choice marriages in Indonesia. Special attention is given to a potential mechanism - decision-making power - that underlies the negative association between arranged marriages and marital quality.

Study Context

Indonesia has the eighth largest number of child marriages globally, with one in nine women married under the age of 18. Even though the marriage age for girls has been steadily increasing since the 1990s, child marriage remains prevalent. Previous studies have shown that young girls involved in arranged or child marriages tend to be associated with a number of negative social and health outcomes, including but not limited to, higher risk of dropping out of school, greater likelihood of experiencing intimate partner violence, and higher risks of maternal mortality, preterm birth, and low birth weight. Moreover, numerous studies have demonstrated that arranged marriages are significantly associated with lower marital quality and greater likelihood of marital dissolution in comparison with free choice marriages. It is in this broad context that this study investigates the association between arranged marriages and marital quality through marital power in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Conceptual Model

By definition, women in arranged marriages would have little or no say in selecting a marriage partner. This lack of decision-making power is likely to be carried over into marital decision-making power after marriage. As such, the association between arranged marriages (vs. free choice marriages) and marital quality will be mediated by marital decision-making power. Figure 1 displays this conceptual model for the present study. In the model, arranged marriages are hypothesized to be negatively associated with marital happiness and positively associated with the propensity of divorce/separation either directly or indirectly through marital power.

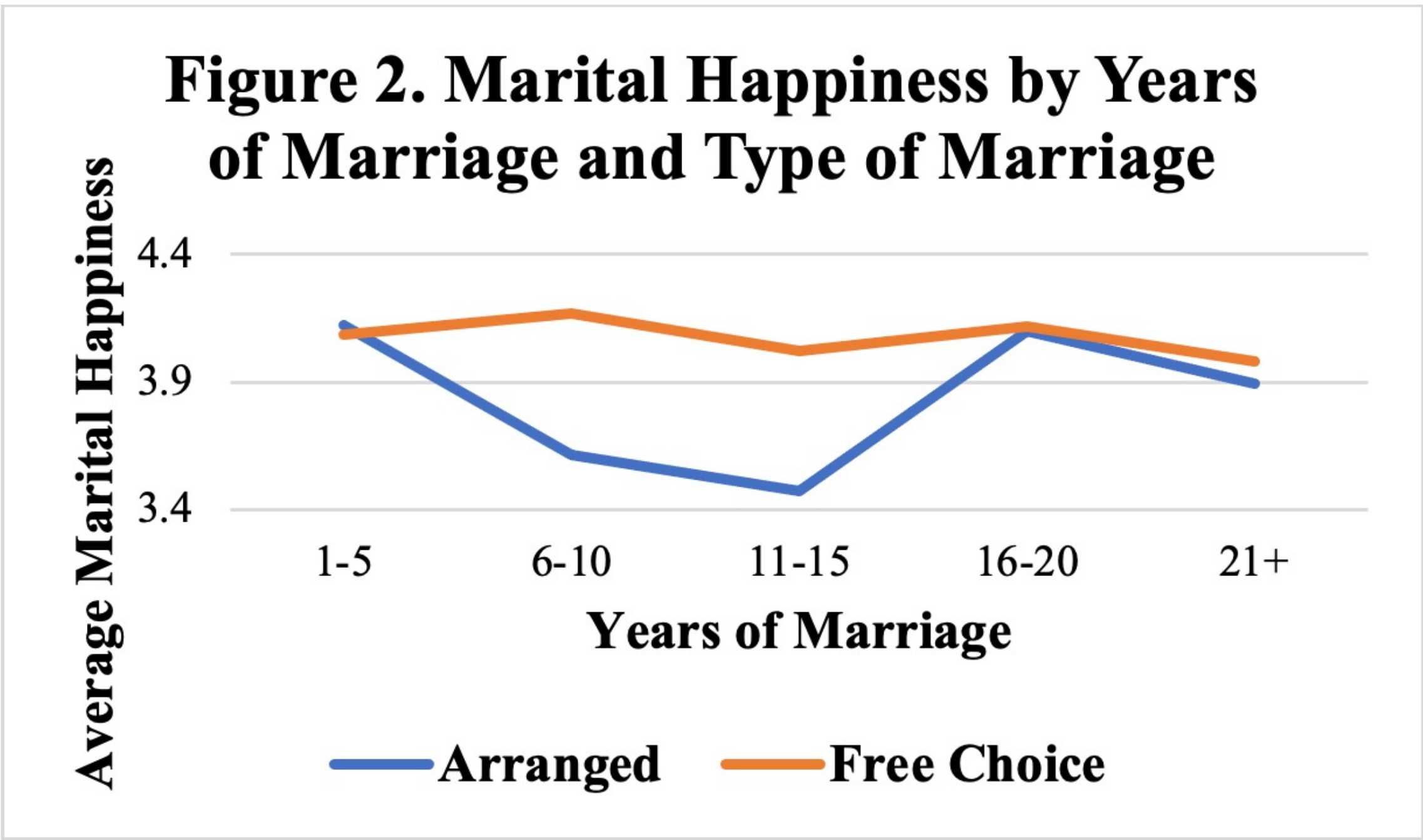Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Methods

Data for this study came from a probability sample of 800 married women aged 20-49 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The survey data was collected in 2018. There are two dependent variables in this study, representing, respectively, the positive and negative dimensions of marital quality. The first dependent variable is marital happiness (positive dimension) consisting of two measures. Respondents were asked (1) how they would describe their current marriage and (2) how happy they were with the love and affection they received from their spouse. Response categories ranged from 1 = very unhappy to 5 = very happy. The mean-score index was created with Cronbach's Alpha = 0.886. The second dependent variable is the propensity of divorce or separation (negative dimension). Respondent's marital status was dummy-coded into a new variable with 1 = divorced or separated and 0 = otherwise.

The key independent variable is dummy-coded type of marriage with 1 = arranged marriage (including child marriage) and 0 = free choice marriage. The mediating variable is marital decision-making power. Respondents were asked who had the final say in the areas of fertility, sexual relationship, residence, wife's employment, and family expenditure. Responses were first dummy-coded with 1 = equal sharing and 0 = otherwise, then averaged to form a mean-score index with Cronbach's Alpha=0.677.

Control variables included marital duration, number of children, urban-rural residence, educational attainment, employment status (fulltime, parttime, and not working), log transformed monthly income, frequency of prayer, and degree of religiousness.

Two path models were estimated to establish associations as illustrated in the conceptual model (see Figure 1). Direct, indirect, and total effects are reported, respectively, in Table 1.

Results

Figure 2. Marital Happiness by Years of Marriage and Type of Marriage

As shown in Figure 2, with the exception in early years of marriage where two types of marriages are crossed, the level of marital happiness is generally lower for arranged marriages than for free choice marriages as marriages endure. Moreover, the path models (Table 1) reveal that: (1) Indonesian women with arranged marriages reported less sharing of decision-making power than their counterparts with free choice marriages; (2) equal sharing of decision-making power is significantly and positively associated with marital happiness and negatively associated with the propensity of divorce/separation; (3) arranged marriages are negatively and indirectly associated with marital happiness through marital power; and (4) arranged marriages are positively and directly associated with the probability of divorce/separation. These results persist after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and religiosity (not shown in the table).

Table 1. Path Models to Predict Marital Happiness and Divorce/Separation

	Marital Happiness		Divorce	
Arranged Marriage to Marital Power	-0.080	*	-0.080	*
Equal Sharing of Marital Power	0.238	***	-0.091	**
Arranged Marriage				
Direct Effect	-0.056	†	0.071	*
Indirect Effect	-0.019	*	0.007	†
Total Effect	-0.075	*	0.078	*
R-squared	0.062		0.014	
n	800		800	

†$p<.10$. *$p<.05$. **$p<.01$. ***$p<.001$.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study adds to the growing evidence on the detrimental marital outcomes associated with arranged marriages in the Asian context. Taken together, the results emerged from this analysis confirm early study findings from other Asian countries (e.g., Japan, Turkey, China, and Nepal). That is, in Yogyakarta free choice marriages are indeed more happy, more stable, and more gender egalitarian than arranged marriages. Furthermore, the mediating effect underscores the important role of marital power sharing on the association between arranged marriages and marital happiness from the Indonesian women's point of view. As such, this and other aspects of marital dynamics have a potential to help explain the multifaceted linkages between arranged marriages and marital quality in Asian countries where arranged marriages are commonly practiced (e.g., India and Nepal).

Directions for Future Research

Although the lens of Indonesian women is important, future research should consider including married men. Obviously, couple data can not only help corroborate findings based on the wife's or the husband's report, but also help elucidate how gendered marital experiences can lead to differential marital quality for both arranged and free choice marriages. More importantly, future research should move beyond the past research findings to explore health implications for arranged marriages in comparison with free choice marriages as those who are involved in arranged marriages tend to be young and uneducated. Until then, this study serves as a small step toward understanding marriage and family life in contemporary Indonesia.

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