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The Extent to Which Mate Standards are Stable Over a Nine-Month Period

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To What Extent are Mate Standards Stable Over a Nine-Month Period?

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Theoretical Perspectives:

- There is an underlying assumption in both evolutionary theory and Fletcher's Ideal Standards Model that mate standards are stable over time.
- In contrast, social-exchange theory suggests that mate standards should actually adapt over time as people's experiences change.

Empirical Evidence:

- The empirical evidence on mate selection also is mixed on the extent to which standards are stable.
- The majority of previous research on mate standards has focused on assessing mate standards at one point in time, with the *assumption* that mate standards are stable over time.
- Although a few studies have found that people's mate standards are relatively stable over a period of weeks and even a couple of months, many of these same studies suggest that there may be interindividual differences in stability (e.g., Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Fletcher, Simpson & Thomas, 2000; Zentner, 2005).

THE PRESENT STUDY

- In order to address the limitations of these past studies, we conducted a longitudinal study over approximately nine to ten months, which employed a more diverse sample than previous studies, not only in age and student status but also in relationship status and marital history.
- The current study explored relationship status, age/relationship experience, marital urgency, and standard salience in order to determine the extent to which these factors potentially moderated the stability of mate standards over time.

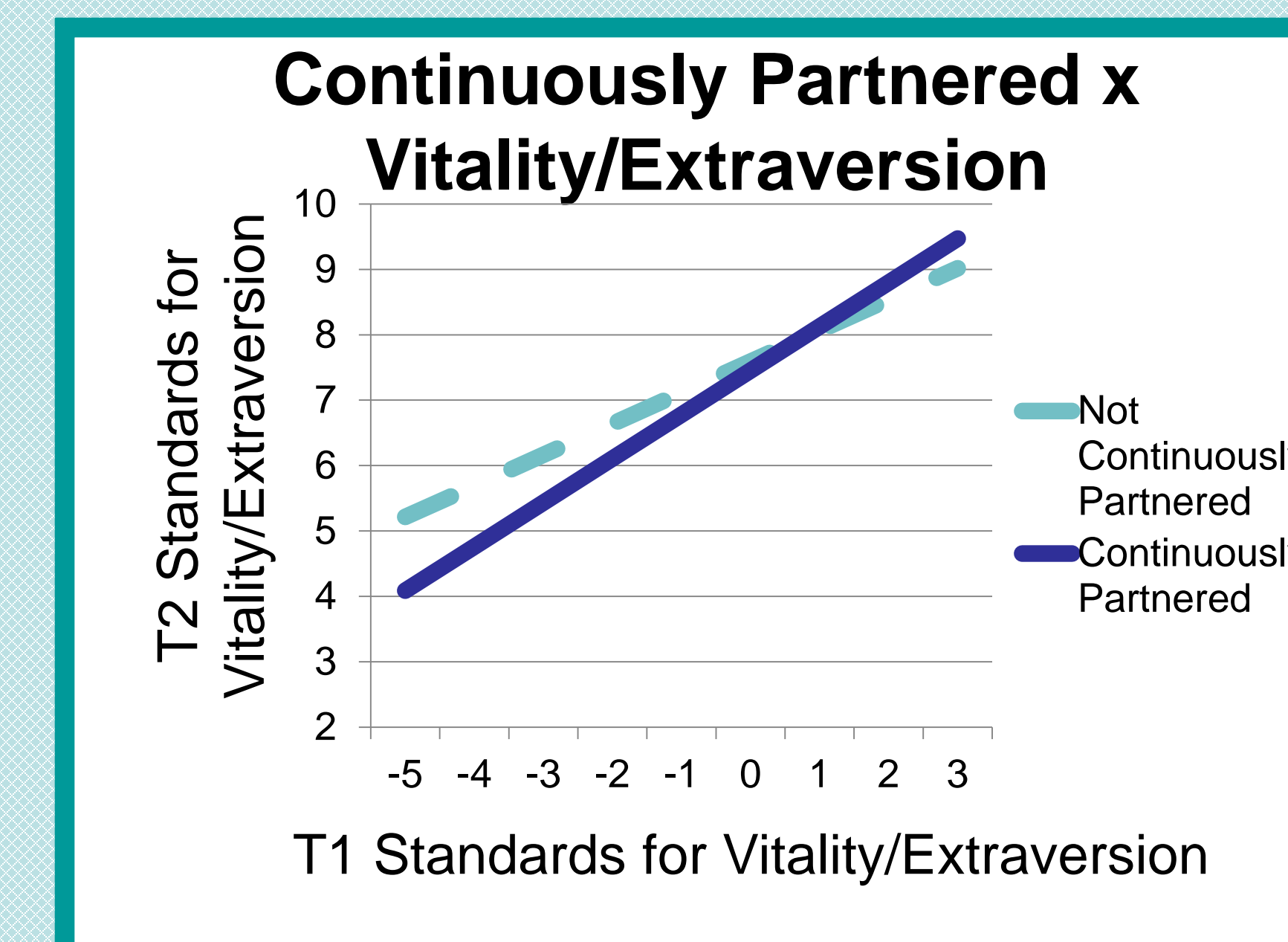
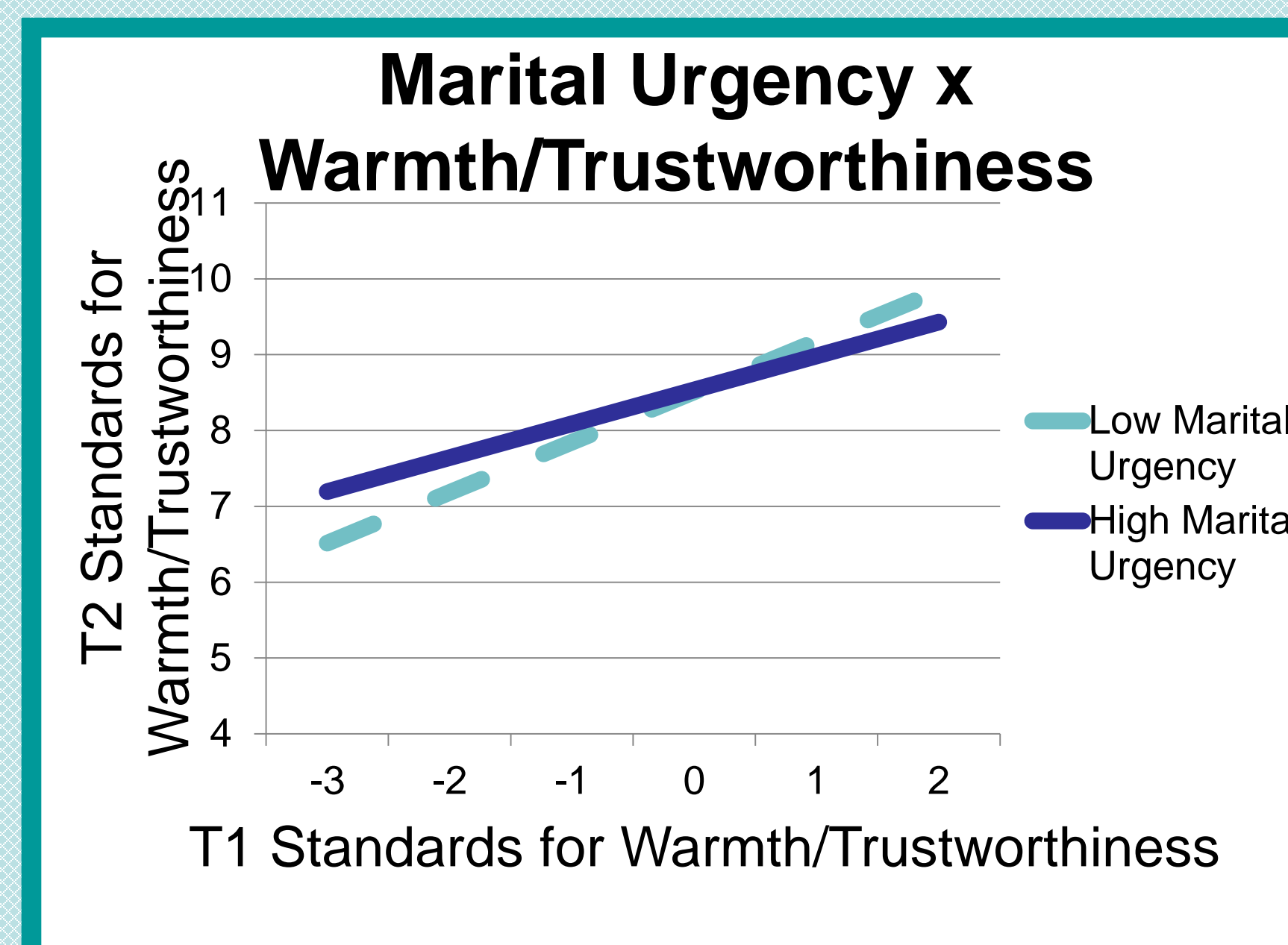
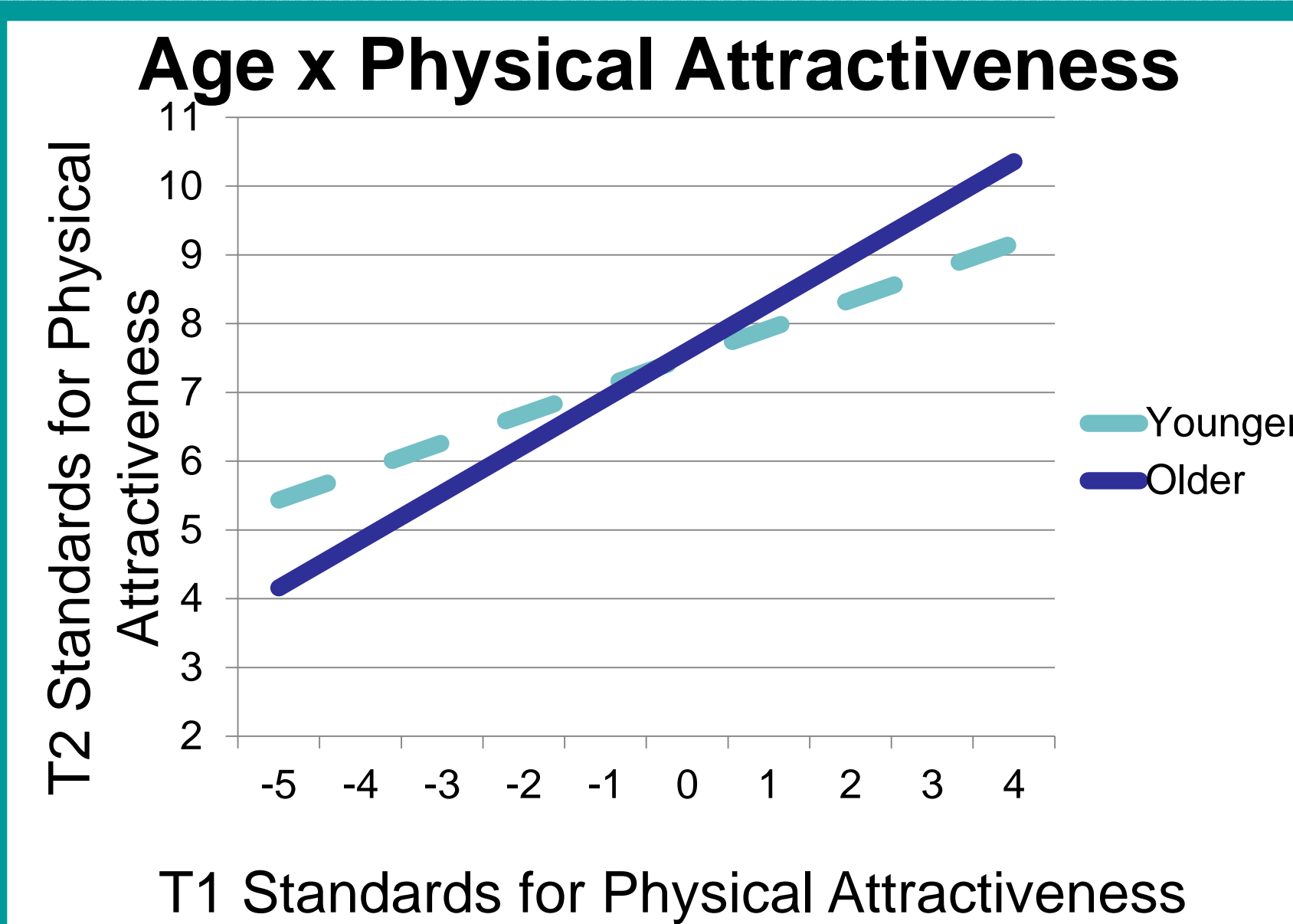
HYPOTHESES

- We hypothesized that mate standards would remain generally stable over time.
- We expected that those who were continuously partnered and continuously single would differ in their reported stability of standards and for both of these "continuous" groups to report more stable standards than those experiencing a relationship transition.
- We expected people who were older and who had more relationship experience, lower marital urgency, and higher standard salience to report more stable standards than their counterparts.

RESULTS

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Although participants' Time 1 and Time 2 overall mate standards were correlated fairly strongly (average $r = .65$), paired sample t -tests revealed small, but significant increases over time on all standard dimensions (e.g., overall mate standards $t(342) = -5.66, p < .001$).
- Continuously partnered and continuously single individuals significantly differed in the stability of their mate standards. Continuously partnered people were more stable in their *level* of mate standards on the dimension of vitality/extraversion ($ps < .05$) and were marginally more stable with respect to their *level* of overall mate standards ($p = .06$). On the other hand, continuously single people reported a more stable *pattern* of standards compared to those who were continuously partnered or who experienced a relationship transition.
- In support of our hypothesis, we found that older people reported more stable standards than younger people with respect to the *level* of their criteria for the dimensions of physical attractiveness ($p < .01$) and status/resources ($p < .01$) as well as their overall *pattern* of mate standards ($p < .05$).
- People with lower marital urgency reported more stable standards than people with higher marital urgency on traits related to warmth/trustworthiness ($p < .05$) and marginally more stable standards for physical attractiveness ($p = .06$).
- Neither relationship experience nor standard salience moderated the stability of standards.



DISCUSSION

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

- In accordance with past research, mate standards were found to be generally stable (i.e., highly correlated) over time. However, we also found that, on average, participants actually raised their standards over the nine-month period.
- Taken together, our results show that despite an overall pattern of stability, change did occur, particularly for people who were younger, who had greater marital urgency, and who experienced relationship transitions.
- Given that more stable mate standards are likely to be better predictors of people's later mate choices or relationship evaluations, this work provides insight into when someone's reported mate standards are most likely to "matter."

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

- Unmarried participants were recruited from social science courses, evening classes, community organizations, and social media sites.
- This study used a sub-sample of 343 unmarried, heterosexual adults (95 men, 247 women) who participated at both Time 1 and Time 2.
- Mean age of participants was 30.79 years (S.D. = 11.39; Range = 18-69).
- At Time 1 and Time 2, 49.9% and 59/8% of people were in a romantic relationship, respectively.

PROCEDURE

- 547 people indicated during the initial (Time 1) survey that they would like to receive an invitation to a follow-up survey nine months later. 359 individuals completed the Time 2 online survey (response rate = 65.63%).

MEASURES

- Participants' mate standards were assessed using 18 characteristics taken from past research examining what qualities people desire in a long term romantic partner (T1 & T2 $as = .89$) (e.g., Buss, Shackelford, Kirkpatrick, & Larsen, 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999).
- Using factor analysis, these standards loaded onto four distinct dimensions. Items on each dimension were averaged to create the following standard subscales: *physical attractiveness*, *vitality/extraversion*, *warmth/trustworthiness*, and *status/resources*.
- Marital urgency was classified as participants' desire to get married in the near future (e.g., "I can't wait to get (re)married!"). Responses were averaged to create an overall score of participants' marital urgency (T2 $\alpha = .83$).
- Standard salience was classified as the extent to which a participant has thought about their standards for a long term romantic partner (e.g., "I know exactly what I want in a marriage partner."). Items at each time point were averaged and then combined to create a measure of average standard salience across both waves (T1 $\alpha = .81$, T2 $\alpha = .84$).
- Continuously partnered people were classified as those in the same relationship at Time 1 and Time 2.
- Continuously single people were classified as those not in a relationship through Time 1 and Time 2.
- People experiencing a relationship transition were those who broke up or entered a new relationship between Time 1 and Time 2.
- **Mate standards were examined using both a level and pattern approach. The level approach looked at consistency in the stringency of ratings for a particular dimension of mate standards. The pattern approach looked at stability in the overall order of ratings of mate standards.**