



**University  
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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**“Will she say yes? A content analysis of accepted and rejected marriage proposals”**

Department of Psychology

Wednesday, June 15, 2016

1:30PM

David Turpin Building

Room A144

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Danu Stinson, Department of Psychology, University of Victoria (Supervisor)

Dr. Erica Woodin, Department of Psychology, UVic (Member)

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Dr. Catherine Léger, Department of French, UVic

## **Abstract**

Proposing marriage is one of the few rituals that many people engage in world-wide, and yet many aspects remain a mystery. For example, there is currently no research on rejected marriage proposals, despite their potential impact on the self and well-being. The purpose of the present research was to compare and contrast rejected and accepted marriage proposals. Because the traditional proposal script is well known in Western society, I hypothesized that all proposals would be high rather than low in traditionalism. But, men whose proposal is rejected may not know that women prefer private proposals (Hoplock, 2015), and so I hypothesized that rejected proposals would be more likely to occur in public compared to accepted proposals. Additionally, I hypothesized that couples would distance themselves from each other during rejected proposals. I also predicted that couples would remain close to each other during accepted proposals compared to during rejected proposals. Finally, I hypothesized that couples experiencing rejected proposals would be less likely to talk about marriage in advance than couples experiencing accepted proposals. I tested these hypotheses in two studies. I conducted a content analysis of 285 marriage proposal videos (36 rejected proposals, 249 accepted proposals; Study 1), and of 374 first-person written accounts of marriage proposals (180 rejected proposals, 194 accepted proposals; Study 2). Trained coders rated the proposals for traditionalism (e.g., offering a ring), the presence of others, and couple members' approach and avoidance goals. I also used inductive coding to derive themes from the data. Additionally, in Study 2, trained coders noted men's motivation for proposing and women's reasons for their response, the relationship status before and after the proposal, and whether couples discussed marriage in advance of the proposal. In Study 1 but not Study 2, proposals were high rather than low in traditionalism. In both studies, rejected proposals were less traditional than accepted proposals. Some traditional behaviors were particularly strong as distinguishing between proposals: The odds of a proposal being accepted were 8 – 20 times higher if the proposer presented a ring. Expectedly, rejected proposals were more likely to occur in public than accepted proposals. Moreover, women were particularly affected by the proposal, distancing themselves from their partner during rejected proposals and drawing close to their partner during accepted proposals. Providing insight into the proposers' motivations, men often proposed for reasons such as a desire to commit to their partner, but, unlike men whose proposal was accepted, men whose proposal was rejected were also likely to propose out of desperation. Furthermore, women most commonly declined a proposal because they thought they were too young or not ready to get engaged. Unfortunately, some of the heartache of rejected proposals may have been avoided if the couple members had discussed marriage in advance: Only 29% of couples experiencing rejected proposals discussed marriage in advance, compared to 100% of couples experiencing accepted proposals. The rich nature of this data brings to life the proposal experience and highlights many potential directions for future research.