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Marital Quality in African American Marriages

Research Report
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African Americans/Blacks comprise 12.6% of the total U.S. population—nearly 39 million people—according to the 2010 U.S. Census. Almost 31% of African Americans over the age of 15 are married (as opposed to 53.5% of Whites in this age group and 59.5% of Asians).¹ Research shows that among African Americans, satisfying, healthy marriages promote physical health and psychological well-being, just as they do among Americans of European descent.² However, previous research has found that African Americans tend to be less happy with their marriages and exhibit higher levels of conflict than do Whites.³ Compared with Whites, African Americans are more likely to have children outside of marriage, are less likely to marry at all, and if they do marry, are more likely to end their unions in divorce.⁴

This Research Report presents tentative answers to three questions: (1) How did marital quality differ between African Americans and Whites in 1980, 2000, and 2010? (2) What factors seem to account for these differences? (3) Do some factors related to marital quality operate differently for these two groups? This information may be useful to counselors and therapists, marriage and relationship educators, and researchers concerned with marriage and relationship quality.

Background — Theoretical Perspectives

Social scientists do not agree on which theoretical perspective is the most appropriate explanation of African American patterns of marriage and family life.⁵ Three explanations have been offered for differences between African American and White

marriage patterns. Empirical evidence provides partial support for three perspectives, but many differences in marriages between African Americans and Whites have yet to be explained adequately. Various theorists propose that these patterns may be explained by lingering effects of slavery, class and regional differences, and the availability of marriageable partners.

Lingering effects of slavery into the 20th century

Several family scholars, including the prominent Black sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, wrote on the condition of African American families during the first half of the 20th century. In his book, *The Negro Family in the United States*, Frazier argued that slavery had a severe, detrimental effect on African American families.⁶ Formal marriage was prohibited among slaves, and although many slaves had informal weddings, husbands and fathers could be sold away from their wives and children at any time. This inhumane system made it difficult for men and women to form strong, long-lasting emotional attachments. Because most children were allowed to remain with their mothers until maturity, the mother-child bond remained strong. Later, the destructive effects of slavery were exacerbated by the large-scale migration of young African American men to northern cities (in search of jobs) after World War I. Slavery and migration resulted in fragile male-female relationships, frequent non-marital births, and large numbers of families headed by mothers and grandmothers.

Class and culture effects

Other observers have suggested that differences between African American and White families are due not to the legacy of slavery or migration, but to social class. According to this perspective, racial differences in family patterns may reflect the fact that African Americans are disproportionately impoverished. One implication of this view is that the differences between African Americans and Whites can be accounted for by statistically controlling for socioeconomic status.

Marriage opportunity effects

Another perspective refers to *marriage markets* as potential influences. In the search for marriage partners, men and women have preferences for attributes they would like in a mate. Presumably, women prefer husbands who will be productive workers and responsible fathers. Local marriage markets for many African American women, however, do not always support this preference. Many African American communities contain fewer young men than young women due to differential mortality. (Black men, ages 15-29, especially if they are economically disadvantaged, have a relatively high risk of dying). According to the CDC, more deaths are caused by homicide than any other cause, followed by unintentional injury (like motor vehicle accidents). Moreover, a large proportion of young Black men are incarcerated.⁷ Incarceration greatly reduces the likelihood that men will marry.⁸ Even among young men available for marriage, unemployment is common, and men's wages have been undermined in recent decades by structural trends in the economy. From the perspective of many African American women, there are simply not enough "marriageable" men. For this reason, many African American women may have children outside of marriage and form their own households independently of men.

Although each of these theoretical perspectives has some merit, a greater effort to analyze newer data could shed more light on African American marriage qualities.

Marital Quality in African American and White Marriages

To examine how the marriages of African Americans and Whites differ, three data sets were used: the Marital Instability over the Life Course Study; the Survey of Marriage and Family Life; and the General Social Survey. The first is the original wave of data from the Marital Instability over the Life Course study (collected in 1980). The second is the Survey of Marriage and Family Life (collected in 2000). Because both surveys include identically worded questions, it is possible to treat them as one large

These data sets have two limitations: First, they are not as current as one might like (although they do contain more information on marital quality than any other available source). Second, the number of African American respondents in these data sets is comparatively small. African Americans, as noted above, are less likely to marry and more likely to divorce. For these reasons, the number of African American marriages in the current analysis is close to what one would expect to find in nationally representative samples.

data set. Both surveys involved telephone interviews with randomly selected, married individuals living in the United States. For the present purpose, the analysis was restricted to 3,657 White respondents and 242 Black respondents who were married to a spouse of the same race.⁹ The General Social Survey is conducted face-to-face with an in-person interview of a randomly selected sample of adults. Waves of data gathered range from 4510 participants to 4907 participants from 2006-2010.

The results of the three trend analyses are discussed below. The dimensions of marital quality (between Whites and African Americans) in the dataset as a whole, changes between the 1980 and 2000 datasets, and change since 2000 are analyzed.

Differences in fundamental dimensions of marital quality

Compared with White spouses, African American spouses report lower levels of marital happiness and interaction. African American spouses also report more conflict in their relationships, more problems, and higher levels of divorce proneness. All of these

differences are statistically significant ($p < .001$), with the exception of divorce proneness, which is only marginally significant ($p < .10$). These results mean that the differences between African Americans and Whites (for the first four outcomes) exist not only in the sample, but also in the larger population from which the sample was drawn. Moreover, these differences are large enough to be nontrivial.

Figure 1 shows the mean scores of African Americans and Whites on five fundamental dimensions of marital quality: relationship happiness, the frequency of shared activities (interaction), conflict, reports of marital problems, and divorce proneness. Divorce proneness incorporates cognitions—such as thinking that one’s marriage is in trouble or thinking about divorce—and behaviors such as talking with one’s spouse about divorce or consulting with a divorce attorney. (More details on these measures are available in Appendix 1.) The means in the figure represent standardized Z scores (i.e., the outcomes have been set to a common metric to facilitate comparisons).

Figure 1. Marital Quality Differences Between Black and White Spouses

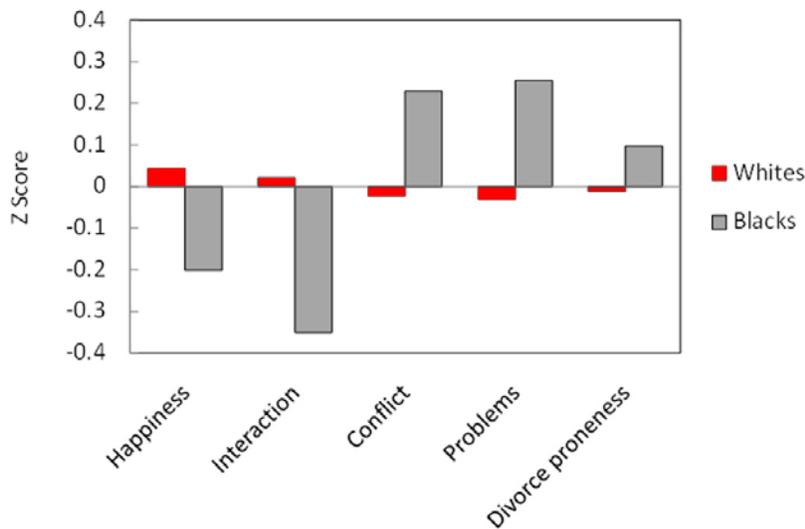
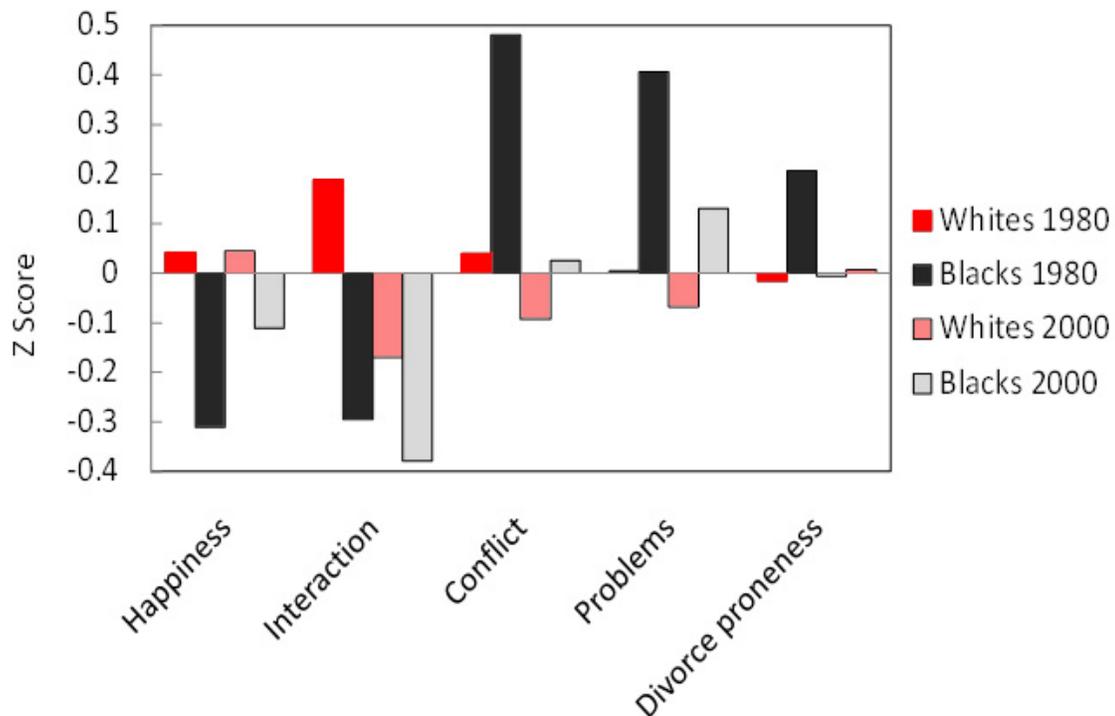


Figure 2. Marital Quality Differences Between Black and White Spouses in 1980 and 2000



Marital quality trends 1980–2000

Did these differences between African Americans and Whites change over time? Figure 2 shows that the mean level of marital happiness among Whites changed little between 1980 and 2000, but increased among African Americans; as a result, the gap between the two groups became smaller. Second, levels of marital interaction declined for Whites as well as for African Americans across the two decades. The decline was not as large among African Americans, however, resulting in a smaller gap in the more recent survey. Third, mean levels of conflict and problems decreased substantially among African Americans between surveys, while such declines for Whites were more modest. Once again, the gaps between groups were considerably smaller in 2000 than in 1980. Finally, in 1980, marital instability was

higher among African Americans than among Whites, but this difference essentially disappeared in 2000.

Taken together, the results reveal an important social trend: Although African Americans continued to report less happiness, less interaction, more conflict, and more problems in 2000 than Whites, the differences were not as large as in the past. Marital quality differences between African Americans and Whites declined substantially between 1980 and 2000. Moreover, the racial gap in divorce proneness essentially disappeared during this time. This result is consistent with that of one other study, which found that the gap in divorce rates between African Americans and Whites narrowed between the 1950s and the mid-1980s. It appears that the differences between African American and White marriages are fewer than they used to be, although some variances do remain.

Results in marital quality trends 2000–2010

How might these trends have changed since 2000? Unfortunately, no recent data sets contain enough detail to answer this question fully. For a rough answer, the General Social Survey, which is administered to a cross-section of the American population every other year, was utilized. This survey contains a recurring item in which people describe their overall level of marital happiness (as being very happy, pretty happy, or not very happy).

The trends shown in Figure 2 (above) and Figure 3 (below) indicate that marital quality among African Americans improved substantially between 1980 and 2000 but did not change appreciably between 2000 and 2010.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of African Americans and Whites who described their marriages as “very happy” in the years between 2000 and 2010. In 2000, the gap in the percentage of African Americans and

Whites who said that their marriages were “very happy” was identical in the General Social Survey and the Survey of Marriage and Family Life, which also was conducted in 2000. Data from the General Social Survey reveal that the gap in marital happiness did not change overall after 2000. (Although the trend line for African Americans shows more variability than the corresponding trend line for Whites, this is due to the smaller number of African Americans in the samples and should not be over-interpreted.)

To provide more detail, Table 1 shows the percentage of spouses who reported various types of problems in their marriages. Among African Americans as well as Whites, “having feelings that are easily hurt” was the most commonly reported problem. “Not talking,” “being moody,” and “getting angry easily” also were reported by more than one third (1/3) of African Americans. The least common problems were “drinking too much or using drugs,” “having a sexual relationship with someone else,” and “getting

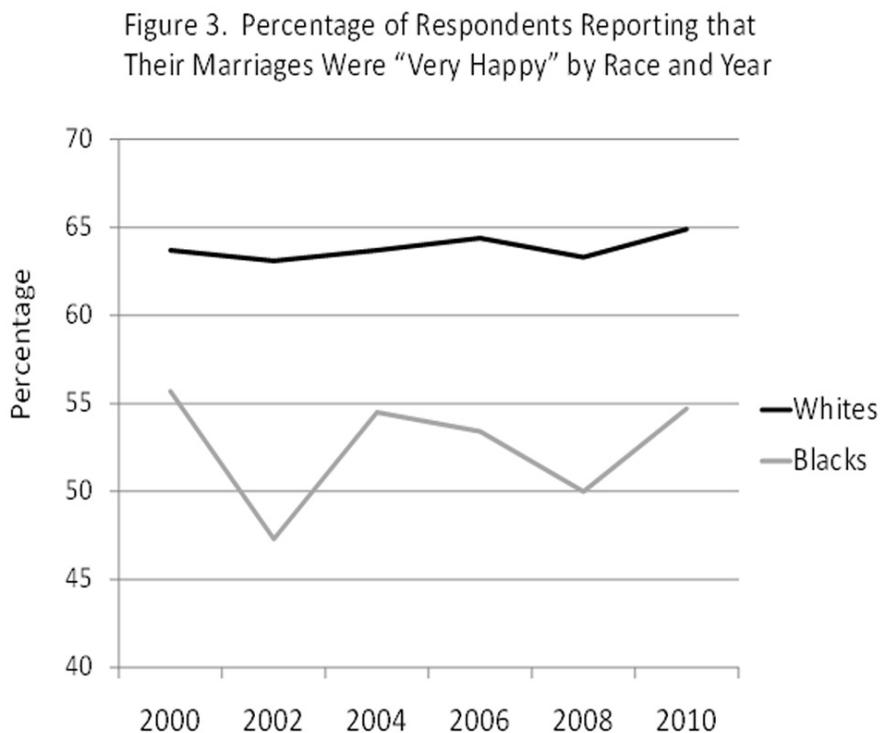


Table 1. Percentage of African American and White Spouses Reporting Various Problems in their Marriages.

Problem	African Americans	Whites	Significance
Feelings easily hurt	53	41	*
Not talking	41	26	***
Moody	38	37	
Gets angry easily	37	30	*
Jealousy	31	16	***
Spends money foolishly	31	17	***
Irritating habits	27	19	**
Critical	24	22	
Domineering	23	17	*
Not home enough	21	20	
Drinks or uses drugs	11	6	**
Infidelity	10	5	***
Trouble with the law	2	7	***

Source: Pooled data from the Marital Instability over the Life Course study and the Study of Marriage and Family Life. Sample includes 3,657 Whites and 242 African Americans married to a person of the same race. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

into trouble with the law.” These problems were mentioned by 10% or less of African American (and White) spouses.

The rank order of marital problems was similar for African Americans and Whites. That is to say, the most common (and least common) problems among African Americans also tended to be the most common (and least common) problems among Whites. But despite this similarity in the rankings, the table shows that African Americans were substantially more likely than Whites to report “having feelings that are easily hurt,” “not talking,” “jealousy,” and “spending money foolishly.”

It is not clear why “having feelings that are easily hurt” and “not talking” are more common among African Americans. These problems reflect communication issues that arise frequently in all marriages. The fact that African Americans were especially likely to

report problems with money may be due to the fact that Blacks are more likely than Whites to experience economic hardship. Elevated reports of jealousy may reflect issues of “gender mistrust” that some observers claim characterize many African American couples—especially low income couples.¹⁰

In summary, the results presented thus far show that African American marriages face more challenges than do White marriages. However, it cannot be generalized that all African American marriages are troubled.

Explaining the Gap in Marital Quality

As suggested earlier, it is possible that African Americans may have lower levels of marital quality than Whites because they differ in socioeconomic status and region of residence. Analysis shows that

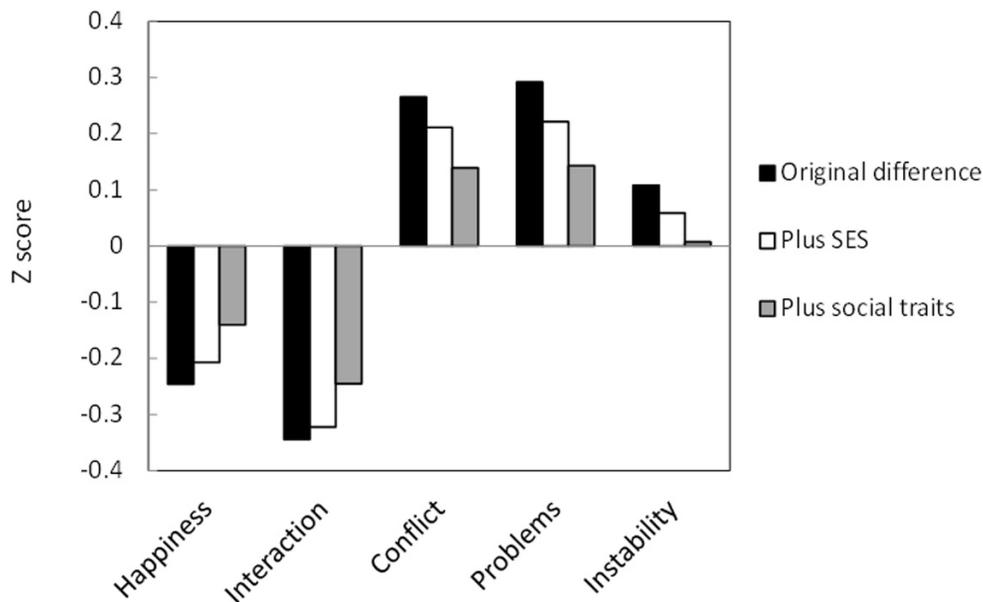
African American couples, compared with White couples, had lower levels of education, earned less income, were more likely to have experienced unemployment within the previous three years, were more likely to have used public assistance during the previous three years, were less likely to own (or be purchasing) their homes, and had fewer accumulated assets (the value of savings, retirement accounts, second homes, and so on). Further analysis revealed that most of these variables were related to multiple dimensions of experiences of marital quality.

Adjusting for socio-economic differences

Overall, even with differences in socioeconomic resources controlled, African Americans continued to have poorer quality marriages than did Whites. Figure 4 shows the results of a series of analyses, one for each dimension of marital quality, controlling for socioeconomic factors.

The first bar (in black) shows the gaps between African Americans and Whites without taking socioeconomic variables into account. The second bar (in white) shows these gaps after adjusting for all of the socioeconomic variables described above. (For an example of this analysis, see Appendix 2.) Figure 4 shows that the gaps in marital quality between African Americans and Whites decline once socioeconomic variables are taken into consideration. (That is, the white bar is shorter than the black bar.) After controlling for all socioeconomic factors, the gap in marital happiness declined by only 16%, whereas the gap in marital interaction declined by only 6%. The declines for conflict, problems, and instability were somewhat larger at 20%, 24%, and 55%, respectively. Nevertheless, the decline in marital quality is small in absolute terms.

Figure 4. Marital Quality Gap Between Blacks and Whites Adjusting for Socioeconomic Status and Other Social Traits



Accounting for the gap: Analysis of attitude and behavior differences

If socioeconomic status cannot account for the Black-White gap in marital quality, then what can? To address this question, a large number of individual and couple characteristics were investigated. To be explanatory, these characteristics had to (a) differ significantly between African Americans and Whites, and (b) be significantly associated with at least two different dimensions of marital quality.

A number of important individual and couple characteristics emerged from these analyses. Moreover, as shown in Figure 2, adjusting for these traits reduced the gaps between African Americans and Whites by an additional 22% for happiness, 22% for interaction, 27% for conflict, and 27% for problems. The entire gap in marital instability was thus accounted for. In other words, these factors, taken together, are at least as important as socioeconomic status in explaining the low relationship quality of many African American couples. Each factor is described in detail below.

Unfairness in the household division of labor

African American wives have a history of working outside the household, and to this day they continue to have higher levels of full-time employment than do White wives. Correspondingly, African American wives tend to contribute a greater share of household income than do White wives. For example, in the Study of Marriage and Family Life, 64% of African American wives were in the labor force compared with 55% of White wives. Furthermore, African American wives earned 40% of total family income compared with 31% for White wives.

Given that African American wives are especially likely to be employed, it is not surprising that African

American husbands tend to do more housework than White husbands. Not all men are happy about doing housework, however, and 9% of African American husbands felt strongly that the division of household labor was unfair to them, compared with 5% of White husbands. Although the percentage of African American husbands who felt this way was small in absolute terms, men who felt this way were very unhappy with their marriages. These men reported less happiness, less interaction, more conflict, more marital problems, and more divorce proneness than did other men. (Interestingly, African American wives were no more likely than White wives to complain that the household division of labor was unfair to them.) These findings suggest that in a small number of African American marriages, tension over the household division of labor takes a large toll on relationship quality.

Attitudes about work and gender roles in marriage

Both surveys used in this study involved a set of seven statements that assessed people's attitudes about work and gender roles in marriage. Sample questions included: "A woman's most important role in life should be taking care of her children," "Husbands should earn a larger salary than wives," "Even though a wife works outside the home, the husband should be the main breadwinner and the wife should be responsible for the home and children," and "If jobs are scarce, a woman whose husband can support her ought not to have a job." People responded to these statements in the following manner: 1 = disagree strongly, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = agree strongly. People's responses to these questions were combined and calculated to reflect support for traditional gender roles.

Not surprisingly, women, overall, tended to hold less traditional views than men. Among both genders,

however, African Americans had more conventional views about work and gender roles than did Whites. For example, 23% of Whites agreed that a husband should earn a larger salary than this wife, compared with 34% of African Americans. Of course, people have diverging views about this topic. But holding traditional attitudes toward gender is also associated with less positive marital quality. That is, husbands and wives with conventional attitudes about work and gender arrangements in marriage are, on average, less happy with their marriages and see more problems in their marriages.

Why would this be the case? A likely possibility is that traditional beliefs about the roles of men and women no longer fit well with the realities of contemporary married life. In recent decades, married women have increased their participation in the labor force substantially. This increase was due to several reasons. Women have more education now than in the past, and they experienced increases in real wages during the last several decades. Hence, the opportunity costs of not being employed have grown. In addition, stagnation and declines in men's wages during the last several decades (especially among men without college degrees) means that wives' income contributions are necessary now in order for many couples to attain a reasonable standard of living.

Spouses who value the breadwinner-homemaker model of marriage are likely to experience a clash between their expectations and their ability to enact traditional marital roles. Consistent with this interpretation, it is primarily when spouses hold conservative views about gender relations and when wives are employed full-time that marital quality is compromised. Because African American wives are especially likely to be in the labor force, and because they earn a greater share of household income than

do White wives, tensions are likely to be especially high for this group.

Decision-making equality

The surveys asked spouses about how important decisions were made. Among African Americans, 50% reported that decisions were made equally between the spouses, compared with 57% among Whites. Decision making equality, in turn, is associated with greater happiness and interaction, less conflict, fewer problems, and lower levels of divorce proneness. Consistent with the results described earlier, African Americans appear to have more traditional gender relationships than do Whites, and this partly accounts for their lower levels of marital quality.

Shared friends and organizations

When spouses have friends in common, and when they share membership in clubs and community organizations, their joint interests contribute positively to relationship quality. Specifically, spouses who share all or most of their good friends in common report greater marital happiness, more interaction, less conflict, fewer problems, and greater stability. Spouses who belong to the same community groups report similar benefits. Of course, spouses who do not get along may adopt different friendship networks and organizational affiliations, partly as a strategy to get away from one another. But sociological theories of social integration strongly suggest that holding affiliations in common creates cohesive bonds between people.

African Americans, compared with Whites, are less likely to report that all of their close friends also are close friends of their spouses: 37% versus 49%, respectively. Correspondingly, only 18% of African American spouses, compared with 29% of White spouses, share common membership in a community

organization or club. The fact that African Americans have comparatively few network ties in common with their spouses appears to be one of the reasons for their lower levels of marital quality.

Commitment to lifelong marriage

The surveys included six items designed to assess the extent to which people supported the norm of lifelong marriage. Examples of these items included: "Marriage is for life, even if couples are unhappy," and "Couples get divorced too easily these days." People either agreed or disagreed with these items, and their responses were combined to create an overall score that reflected how strongly spouses were committed to the norm of lifelong marriage. African Americans reported slightly less support for lifelong marriage than did Whites. For example, 68% of African Americans agreed that individual happiness is more important than being in an unhappy marriage, compared with 62% of Whites.

Spouses who report strong support for the norm of lifelong marriage tend to have higher quality marriages, as reflected in greater marital happiness, less conflict, fewer problems, and lower levels of instability. Of course, spouses in troubled marriages may become more tolerant of divorce and less supportive of lifelong marriage. But at least one longitudinal study indicates that influence occurs primarily in the opposite direction; that is, spouses who report weak support for the norm of lifelong marriage are more likely to see their marital quality erode over time than are spouses who report strong support.¹¹ Presumably, when spouses strongly believe that marriages should last a lifetime, they invest more time and energy in working on relationship problems, as opposed to jettisoning their relationships.

Parental divorce

Because divorce is more common among African Americans than among Whites, it is not surprising that African American spouses are more likely than White spouses to have grown up with divorced parents. Overall, 37% of African American spouses had divorced parents, compared with 32% of White spouses. A large body of research demonstrates that parental divorce increases the risk of marital problems and divorce among offspring.¹² These intergenerational associations may occur because children with divorced parents have not had opportunities to learn positive, healthy relationship skills. Or, they may occur because children with divorced parents develop weaker commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage.

Whatever the reason, having divorced parents is associated with lower levels of marital quality across all dimensions. In this sense, the transmission of marital problems across generations is part of the explanation for African Americans' lower levels of marital quality, on average.

Religiosity

A strength of many African American married couples lies in their religiosity. The marriage surveys contained the following question: "How much does religion influence your daily life?" Among African American respondents, 61% said "very much" compared with only 35% of Whites. Similarly, when asked how often they attended religious services together with their spouses, only 15% of African Americans said "rarely or never" and 40% said "every week." Correspondingly, among Whites, 29% said "rarely or never" and 33% said "every week." Spouses who report a high level of religious influence also tend to be quite happy with their marriages. Even more importantly, frequent attendance at religious services

with one's spouse is linked to greater happiness, more interaction, less conflict, fewer problems, and lower divorce proneness.

Attending religious services together appears to have many benefits for couples that extend beyond their individual levels of religiosity. Sociologists have argued that when people attend religious services regularly, they become members of a community of like-minded others. The church community provides social support to spouses, and this support may be especially useful during times when the marriage is troubled. Moreover, the church community reinforces norms about the value of commitment, self-sacrifice, and sticking together through hard times. Many churches also offer marriage education programs and counseling services to troubled couples. With respect to marital quality, the important point is not only to feel religious, but also to share religious beliefs and practices with one's spouse in a public setting.

Do Some Factors Affect the Marriages of African Americans and Whites Differently?

Thus far, analysis has shown that African Americans tend to have lower quality marriages than Whites on average, and that certain factors, such as socioeconomic resources, perceived unfairness in the household division of labor, and having close friends in common, can explain some of these differences. A related question is whether the correlates of marital quality differ between African Americans and Whites. The answer to this question can be stated simply: Results of this analysis show the great majority of personal and couple characteristics are related to marital quality similarly among African Americans and Whites. In other words, the factors that predict healthy marriages are largely the same for both groups. One major exception to this general rule emerged from the analysis, however.

As noted earlier, spouses with traditional attitudes about gender relations tend to have poorer quality marriages than do spouses with less traditional views. This tendency is considerably stronger among African Americans than among Whites, and this difference appears to be related to every dimension of marital quality.

Figure 5 provides the relevant results. In this figure, the scale measuring traditional attitudes about gender and work roles is split at the median to create two groups: spouses with relatively traditional attitudes and those with relatively nontraditional attitudes.

Among Whites, spouses with traditional attitudes reported *slightly* less marital happiness and *slightly* more conflict than did spouses with nontraditional attitudes. In contrast, among African Americans, spouses with traditional attitudes reported *substantially* less happiness and *substantially* more conflict. Although only two marital outcomes are shown in the figure (marital happiness and marital conflict), the same trend was apparent for levels of marital interaction, problems, and divorce proneness.

In each case, holding traditional attitudes was associated with modest declines in marital quality among Whites and strong declines in marital quality among African Americans. As described earlier, spouses who hold conventional views about work and gender may be "out of step" with the current circumstances of most married couples.

Implications for Marriage and Relationship Education

Since the 1980s, the marital quality gap between African Americans and Whites has narrowed, demonstrating that change is possible. The following represents implications for the field of marriage and relationship education as they relate to this analysis.

Figure 5. Marital Happiness and Conflict by Race and Traditional Attitudes about Gender Roles in Marriage



1. Issues surrounding gender roles in marriage are relevant to many African American couples. As noted earlier, African American couples tend to be more egalitarian than White couples with respect to behavior. In many African American marriages, husbands and wives share breadwinning, housework, and child care in a relatively equitable fashion. At the same time, however, many African American men and women would prefer to have a traditional division of labor, with husbands serving as the primary breadwinner and wives taking care of most family work. This clash between the ideals and realities of family organization creates tension in many marriages.

2. Sharing friends and organizational interests help to build couple cohesiveness and positive relationships. Couples do not exist in isolation,

and successful couples are usually integrated into common social worlds. Yet, African American couples are less likely than White couples to have friends and organizational affiliations in common. Interventions that help couples develop mutual networks of friends and organizations would be useful.

3. African American couples are less likely than White couples to support the norm of lifelong marriage. Interventions that help couples to define their commitments to one another, and support them during the inevitable periods of disillusionment, would be especially useful for this population.

4. African Americans are more likely than Whites to have experienced parental divorce while growing up. In addition, they are more likely than Whites to have been born to single mothers. Consequently, they are less likely

than Whites to have been exposed to positive models of relationship functioning as children. Given that relationships skills are learned through observing others, African American couples may gain particular benefit from classes that provide models of communication and conflict resolution skills.

5. Religiosity is a major strength of many African American couples. Interventions that build on this foundation may prove to be especially useful. In particular, helping couples to build strong bonds with members of their religious communities would complement implication 2 (above).
6. There is a great deal of diversity among African American couples with respect to marital quality. Among Blacks as well as Whites, there are terrible marriages and outstanding marriages. Programs in which African American couples with stable, healthy marriages serve as mentors for young couples could help to build on this important resource. Given the low rate of marriage among African Americans, and the high level of relationship dissolution, some African American couples may not personally know other couples with committed, healthy marriages.

Summary and Conclusions

In the major indicators of marriage quality that once sharply delineated African American marriages from White American marriages, gaps are closing. The rank order of marital problems is also similar for African Americans and Whites. A strengthening factor in African American marriages was also higher than in White marriages: influence of religion in daily life and attendance at religious services with their spouse. Socioeconomic status partially explains differences,

but even controlling for these, significant variances remained.

The factors that did finally account for remaining differences in African American and White marriages were variables such as individual and couple characteristics. Primary among these differences were 1) perceived unfairness in household division of labor (among men); 2) conventional or traditional attitudes about women's paid work and gender roles in marriages; 3) lower levels of equality in decision making; 4) fewer shared friends and club or community organization memberships (network ties); 5) slightly less commitment to lifelong marriage versus individual happiness; and 6) slightly higher rates of divorce among African American couples' parents. The individual and couple characteristics that were lower in African American couples, just described, accounted for 22-27% of lower levels of couple happiness, interaction, conflict, and named problems.

The findings of this analysis may have implications for the relationship education field. Helping African American couples form social networks to participate in together and addressing gender roles may be central themes to providing effective marriage and relationship education specific to this population.

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Appendix 1: Measures of Marital Quality

Marital happiness was measured with 10 items. Seven items asked respondents to state whether they were (1) not too happy, (2) somewhat happy, or (3) very happy with:

- The amount of understanding received from your spouse
- The amount of love and affection received from your spouse
- The extent to which you and your spouse agree about things
- Your sexual relationship with your spouse
- Your spouse as someone who takes care of the home
- Your spouse as someone to do things with
- Your spouse's faithfulness.

These items were supplemented with additional questions:

Compared with other marriages you know about, do you think your marriage is better than most, about the same as most, or not as good as most? (1 = not as good, 2 = about the same, 3 = better than most)

Would you say the feeling of love you have for your spouse is extremely strong, very strong, pretty strong, not too strong, or not strong at all? (1 = not strong at all, 2 = not too strong, 3 = pretty strong, 4 = very strong, 5 = extremely strong)

Overall, how happy is your marriage? (1 = not too happy, 2 = somewhat happy, and 3 = very happy)

When equally weighted and summed, these items yielded an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.88.

Marital interaction was based on people's reports of how often they engaged in the following activities with their spouses:

- Eating the main meal of the day together
- Shopping
- Visiting friends
- Working on projects around the house
- Going out for recreation, such as playing cards, movies, or bowling.

Responses were coded so that high scores indicated more frequent interaction: 1 = never, 2 = occasionally, 3 = usually, 4 = almost always. When equally weighted and added, these items yielded an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.65.

Marital conflict was based on five items.

"Do you and your spouse have arguments or disagreements about whether one of you is doing your share of the housework?" (0 = no, 1 = yes)

"In general, how often do you disagree with your spouse?" (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = very often)

"How many serious quarrels have you had with your spouse in the last two months?" (coded as 0 through 6 or more)

"In many households bad feelings and arguments occur from time to time. In some cases people get so angry that they slap, hit, punch, kick, or throw things at one another. Has this ever happened between you and your spouse?" (0 = no, 1 = yes).

"How many times has this happened (physical aggression) over the last three years?" (coded as 0 through 6 or more)

Responses were equally weighted and summed and yielded an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.62.

The measure of **marital problems** was derived by asking respondents about 13 potential problems. "Have you had a problem in your marriage because one of you..."

- Gets angry easily?
- Has feelings that are easily hurt?
- Is jealous?
- Is domineering?
- Is critical?
- Is moody?
- Won't talk to the other?
- Has had a sexual relationship with someone else?
- Has irritating habits?
- Is not home enough?
- Spends money foolishly?
- Drinks or uses drugs?
- Has been in trouble with the law?

The sum of the number of problems served as the scale score, and the alpha reliability coefficient was 0.77.

Divorce proneness was based on 13 items that assessed the frequency and timing of indicators of relationship instability. For example, a question on thinking about divorce was scored 0 = never have thought about divorce, 1 = have thought about divorce but not within the last three years, 2 = have thought about divorce within the last three years but not recently, and 3 = thinking about divorce now. Questions included:

Sometimes married people think they would enjoy living apart from their spouse. Have you ever felt this way?

Even people who get along quite well with their spouse sometimes wonder whether their marriage is working out. Have you ever thought your marriage might be in trouble?

Have you talked with your husband/wife about these problems?

Have you ever talked with family members, friends, counselors, clergy, or social workers about problems in your marriage?

As far as you know, has your husband/wife talked with family members, friends, or counselors about problems in your marriage?

As far as you know, has your spouse ever thought your marriage is in trouble?

Has the thought of getting a divorce or separation crossed your mind?

As far as you know, has the thought of divorce or separation crossed your spouse's mind?

Have you or your husband/wife seriously suggested the idea of divorce?

Have you discussed a divorce or separation with family members or close friends?

Have you or your husband/wife consulted an attorney about a separation or divorce?

Have you or your husband/wife filed a divorce or separation petition?

Because of problems people are having in their marriage, they sometimes leave home either for a short time or as a trial separation. Has this ever happened in your marriage?

Items were summed, but because the resulting distribution was positively skewed, the logarithm served as the scale score. The alpha reliability coefficient was 0.92.

Appendix 2. Regression Analysis for Marital Happiness

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
(Constant)	.146	***	-.118	**	-.325	**	-.580	***
African American	-.246	***	-.207	***	-.140	*	-.209	***
Decade (1 = 2000)	.021		-.024		.001		-.029	
Female	-.226	***	-.219	***	-.169	***	-.187	***
Years education			.023	**	.019	*	.013	
Family income			.001		.001		.001	
Unemployment			-.219	***	-.167	***	-.148	***
Welfare use			-.130	*	-.094		-.087	
Assets (log)			-.021		-.022		-.022	
Own or buying home			.000		-.061		-.081	
Housework unfair husbands					-.647	***	-.622	***
Traditional gender attitudes					-.010		-.044	*
Equal decision making					.290	***	.283	***
All friends shared					.251	***	.233	***
All clubs shared					.124	***	.047	*
Parental divorce					-.065		-.041	
Personal religiosity							.045	**
Go to church with spouse							.087	***

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