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# **Divorce Among African Americans**

**Research Report**  
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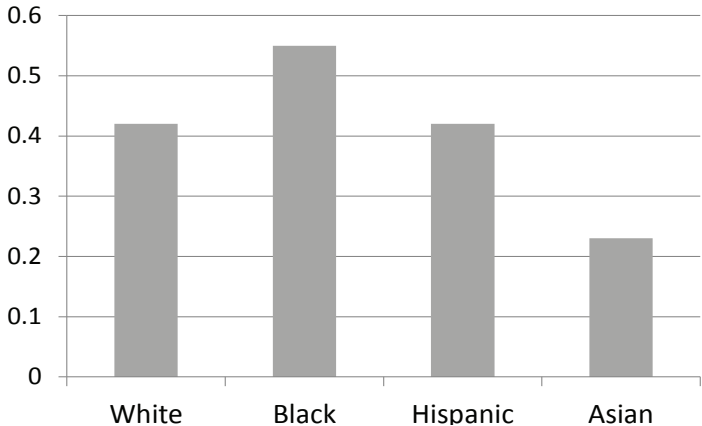
The family patterns of African Americans are distinctive in many ways. Compared with Caucasians, African Americans are less likely to marry and more likely to have children outside of marriage. African Americans also report lower levels of relationship quality and are more likely to end their marriages in divorce. Although family sociologists and demographers have known about these differences for some time, surprisingly little research has attempted to explain them.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1 provides relevant data on divorce from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth. This figure shows the probability that a first marriage will end in divorce or separation within 15 years for four groups: Non-Hispanic Whites, Non-Hispanic Blacks, Hispanics, and Non-Hispanic

Asians. The probability of divorce for Blacks (.55) is considerably higher than the probabilities for Whites and Hispanics (both .42). The relatively low risk of divorce among Asians (.23) is a curious but little understood phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

This report describes previous studies of divorce among African Americans and presents an analysis of recent data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (1979). The analysis provides information on (1) the Black-White gap in marital disruption, (2) how this gap can be explained, and (3) factors that may affect marital disruption differently for Blacks and Whites. This information may be useful to counselors and therapists, marriage and relationship educators, and other family professionals.

Figure 1. Probability of First Marriage Disruption within 15 Years by Race/Ethnicity



Source: National Survey of Family Growth

## Previous Research on Divorce among African Americans

A few longitudinal studies have shown that differences in marital disruption between African Americans and Caucasians are due mainly to differences in marital quality.<sup>3</sup> The general strategy in these studies has been to show that (a) African American couples are more likely than Caucasian couples to divorce, (b) African American couples have lower marital quality than do Caucasian couples, and (c) controlling for marital quality in a regression analysis statistically eliminates the racial difference in divorce. Although these studies are useful, it is not surprising to learn that African Americans have an elevated risk of divorce because they are less happily married.

Some studies have found that the Black-White gap in divorce can be explained partly by differences between Blacks and Whites in education and income. Although socioeconomic factors are clearly important, most studies show that the racial gap in divorce persists after adjusting for these factors, albeit at a reduced level.<sup>4</sup> Andrew Clarkwest found that Black couples were more likely than White couples to disagree about certain topics, such as beliefs about maternal employment, independence in marriage, and infidelity. In this study, attitude dissimilarity between spouses accounted for a small proportion (about one fifth) of the racial gap in the odds of divorce.<sup>5</sup>

A few studies have shown that some factors predict divorce differently among African Americans and

Caucasians. Orbuch and her colleagues found that the husband's share of household chores was negatively related to divorce among Blacks but not among Whites.<sup>6</sup> That is, divorce was less common when Black husbands (but not White husbands) performed a relatively large share of housework. Julie Phillips and Megan Sweeney reported that premarital cohabitation was positively associated with subsequent marital disruption among Whites but not among Blacks or Mexican Americans.<sup>7</sup> They found that age at marriage was negatively associated with divorce in general, but the association was stronger for Whites than for Blacks. The same researchers also found that educational attainment was related to marital disruption more strongly among Blacks than Whites. For example, completing 16 or more years of schooling (versus fewer than 12 years) was associated with a 20% reduction in the odds of disruption among Whites and a 40% reduction in the odds of disruption among Blacks. In addition, premarital births tended to destabilize marriage in general, but more so among Whites than Blacks.<sup>8</sup> A final study reported that frequency of attendance at religious services was negatively associated with divorce among Whites but not among Blacks.<sup>9</sup>

Because these studies all yielded unique findings (with little replication), it is difficult to know how much faith to put in these results. Most of these findings were not predicted in advance, so many are likely to be false positives, that is, results that are due mainly to chance and not to substantive differences between racial groups in the population. Overall, available research tells us little about marital instability among African Americans.

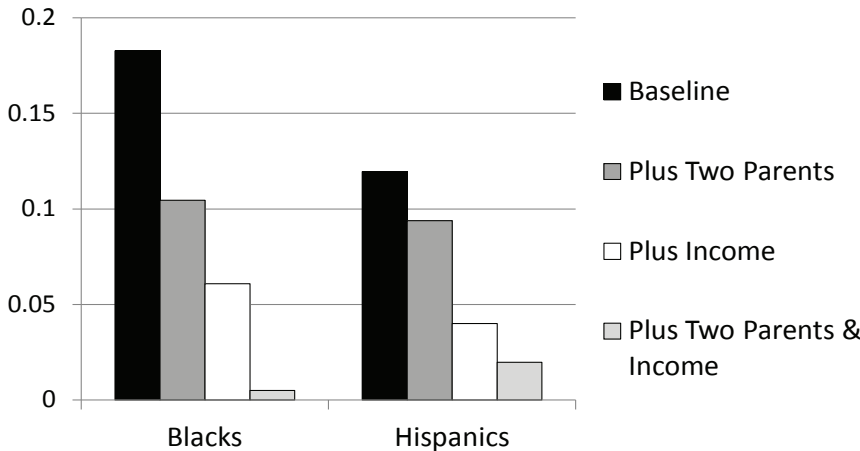
## New Data on African Americans and Divorce

To provide a new look at this issue, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), which began in 1979, was used. The NLSY79 is a nationally representative sample of young men and women who were 14 to 22 years of age when first surveyed in 1979. During the years since the first interview, many of these young people finished their educations, moved out of their parents' homes, entered the labor market, married, and started families of their own. The cohort was interviewed annually through 1994 and every two years after that. An advantage of this sample is that it included oversamples of African Americans and Hispanics. The current analysis focused on 2,562 married adults who provided data between 1992 and 2008, the most recent years available. This total includes 575 Non-Hispanic African Americans and 514 Hispanics.

Across the entire sample, 678 respondents (26%) divorced during the period covered. Specifically, 29% of African Americans divorced, compared with 28% of Hispanics and 25% of non-Hispanic others. (The latter category consisted mainly of Caucasians, along with Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans.) The difference between African Americans and non-Hispanic others was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), which indicates that we can generalize these findings to the larger population. The difference between Hispanics and non-Hispanic others, however, was not statistically significant. Overall, these results are consistent with virtually all other studies in showing an elevated risk of divorce among African Americans. Nevertheless, the difference in divorce between African Americans and others was narrower in the current analysis than in most previous studies.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 2 shows divorce relative risk ratios for African Americans and Hispanics. The baseline risk ratio for African Americans is defined as the

Figure 2. Relative Risk of Divorce for African Americans and Hispanics Before and After Adjusting for Childhood Family Structure and Current Household Income



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979

probability of divorce for this group divided by the probability of divorce for non-Hispanic respondents in the sample multiplied by 100, minus one  $((.2939/.2485)*100)-1$ ). This value reflects the additional risk of divorce associated with being African American (.1827, or about 18%). Figure 2 also shows how the relative risk ratios change once adjustments are made for other variables.

Two factors appeared to explain the elevated risk of divorce among African Americans. One was whether respondents were living with two biological (or adoptive) parents at age 14. Across the full sample, 73% of respondents had lived with two parents at age 14 (52% of African Americans, 71% of Hispanics, and 82% of non-Hispanic others). Respondents who grew up without two parents were significantly more likely to see their marriages end in divorce—a finding consistent with many previous studies. Figure 2 shows that statistically adjusting for childhood family structure (labeled “Two Parents” in the figure) reduces the relative risk for African Americans substantially. (Compare the first column with the second column.) This result suggests that the elevated risk of divorce among African Americans can be traced partly to the absence of one parent (usually the father) from their homes during childhood.

Current household income also appeared to be an important factor. Consistent with virtually all other data sources, African Americans and Hispanics had lower earnings than did others. Household income also was negatively associated with the risk of divorce. Figure 2 shows that adjusting for differences in income reduced the relative risk for African Americans substantially (column 1 versus column 3). Finally, adjusting for the number of parents *and* income reduced the relative risk of divorce among African Americans essentially to zero. These results indicate that childhood family structure and current household income completely explain the elevated risk of divorce among African Americans.

Figure 2 also shows comparable results for Hispanics. For this group, adjusting for childhood family structure had a small effect on the relative risk of divorce, although adjusting for income had a stronger effect. Adjusting for both factors reduced the relative risk to a trivial level—a result comparable to the pattern for African Americans. Readers should be cautious in interpreting these results, however, because the overall difference in divorce between Hispanics and Non-Hispanic others was not statistically significant.

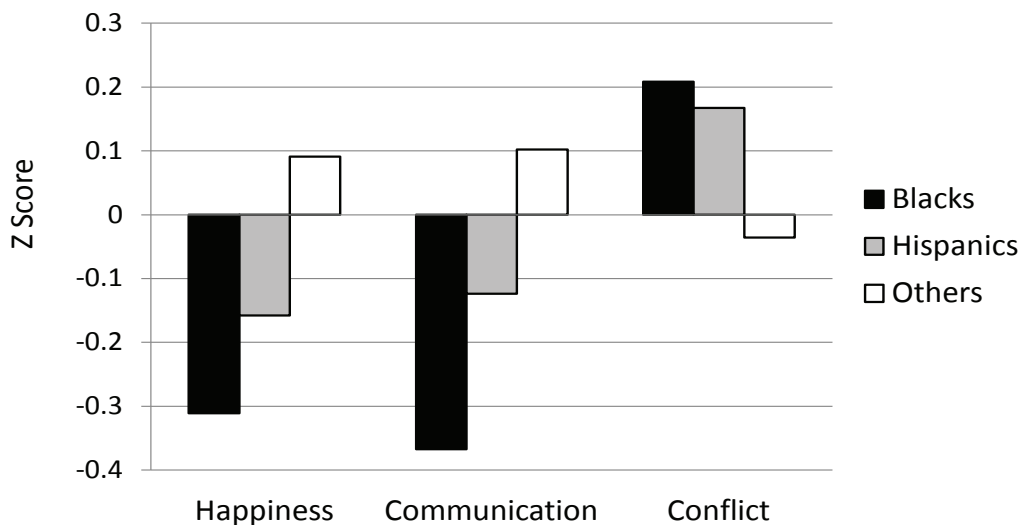
The analysis also considered spouses' perceptions of marital quality. Spouses provided information on the frequency of marital disagreements, the quality of marital communication, and the degree of marital happiness. (In cases of divorce, these ratings were obtained from the interviews prior to disruption.) Consistent with previous studies, African Americans reported significantly more conflict, less effective communication, and less happiness with their marriages than did other respondents. These results are shown in Figure 3. In this figure, conflict, communication, and happiness scores were standardized to have means of 0 and standard deviations of 1. This procedure provides a common metric and makes it easier to compare across outcomes.

Not surprisingly, each of these dimensions of marital quality also predicted divorce. Moreover, these three marital quality variables largely

accounted for the racial gap in divorce. These results replicate earlier research showing (again, not surprisingly) that African Americans have a relatively high divorce rate because they tend to evaluate their relationships more negatively.

A final step focused on whether the predictors of divorce are similar or different for African Americans and others. In addition to childhood family structure and income, the analysis revealed that a high level of education, older age at marriage, and having children reduced the risk of divorce. Correspondingly, cohabiting prior to marriage and experiencing periods of unemployment were positively associated with divorce. These predictors of divorce, however, were no stronger (or weaker) among African Americans than among other respondents. In other words, the same factors that predicted divorce for African Americans predicted divorce for others as well.

**Figure 3. Mean Levels of Marital Happiness, Communication, and Conflict by Race-Ethnicity**



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979

## Implications for Counseling and Relationship Education

Recent data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1979) continue to show that African Americans have a relatively high rate of divorce. The racial gap in the current analysis was narrower than in previous studies. A decade ago, Jay Teachman noted that the Black-White gap in divorce rates was narrowing.<sup>11</sup> The current findings suggest that this trend is continuing. But despite this convergence, counselors, therapists, and educators should recognize that African Americans continue to experience higher levels of marital instability than do most other groups.

The elevated level of divorce among African American couples can be attributed partly to economic factors. A large research literature suggests that economic hardship undermines marital quality and stability.<sup>12</sup> And despite the emergence of a well educated Black middle class in recent decades, African Americans continue to lag behind Caucasians in earnings and wealth accumulation. Bringing about economic equality between the races will require broad interventions at a societal level, such as policies to increase the number of jobs, job training programs, and assistance with higher education expenses. Nevertheless, family professionals who work with African Americans couples may be able to assist with financial planning, budgeting, and disagreements over jobs and money.

In addition to income, the current analysis revealed that childhood family structure is part of the explanation for the elevated rate of divorce among African Americans. African Americans are more likely than Caucasians to experience parental

divorce while growing up. In addition, Blacks 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 marital functioning as children. Given that relationships skills are learned by observing others, African American couples may benefit from classes that focus on communication and conflict resolution skills. In addition, matching recently married couples with older, happily married couples who can serve as role models may be especially useful.

Offspring from single-parent families also reach adulthood with less conventional attitudes about marriage and family life. In particular, they are less likely than adults raised by two continuously married parents to support the norm of lifelong marriage. But a strong belief in the long-term stability of marriage can become a positive self-fulfilling prophecy. Interventions that help couples to define their commitments to one another, and support them during the inevitable periods of disillusionment, may be especially useful for this population.

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