

# Religiosity and Marital Stability Among Black American and White American Couples\*

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**Abstract:** We examine the effects of subjective and organizational religious participation on marital stability over time for urban Black American couples and White American couples who participated in a longitudinal project. Our findings indicated that the role religiosity plays in the stability of marriage over time varied by gender and race. Black husbands and wives reported that religion was more important to them and that they attended religious services more frequently than White husbands and wives. Greater service attendance was predictive of decreased odds of divorce, only when reported by wives. Interaction effects revealed that the effect was more notable among White wives. Practitioners should consider the diversity between and within couples and the sociohistorical contexts in which marriages are embedded.

**Key Words:** gender, marital stability, race, religiosity.

## Introduction

The literature on marriage is dominated by research examining the factors that lead to marital instability or divorce/separation. Although there is a lack of consensus about the specific factors associated with divorce, a number of researchers have focused on the objective social and economic conditions that are related to marital stability (Orbuch, House, Mero, & Webster, 1996; White & Edwards, 1990). More recently, there has been an interest in the role that religiosity plays in the stability of marital relations (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). Religiosity is typically assessed via subjective religious participation (religious beliefs) and organizational religious participation (service attendance) (Pargament, 1997); both aspects of religiosity may be resources that contribute to marital stability among couples—particularly for Black Americans (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). For example, Wilson and Musick (1996) provided evidence that greater subjective and

organizational religious participation was associated with enhanced family functioning and higher marital satisfaction. Furthermore, Call and Heaton (1997) found that when spouses participated in organizational religious activities together, couples were less likely to divorce over time. Although most religious doctrines and congregations promote attitudes for the sanctity of marriage (Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Hodge, 1996), with the underlying assumption that religious participation may encourage couples to remain married and avoid divorce, we acknowledge that divorce is not always bad or unwarranted.

In this study, we examined the links between religiosity and marital stability over the first 7 years of marriage for a representative sample of urban Black American couples and White American couples who participated in a longitudinal project. The proposed research had two specific goals. First, we examined whether there were gender and racial differences in subjective and organizational religious participation among Black American and White American couples. We also assessed the perceptions of each spouse

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regarding the joint service attendance with the other spouse (homogeneity of organizational religious participation). Second, we were interested in whether subjective and organizational religious participation were predictors of marital stability over time. For this later objective, we theorized that the processes may differ by gender and race.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Theoretical work by Ellison and his colleagues (see Ellison & Levin, 1998; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999) illuminates the role that religiosity may play in the stability of marriages over time. On the basis of the themes outlined by Durkheim (1965), Ellison (1991) proposed several mechanisms or explanations for how religiosity may lead to increased coping and well-being during stressful life events. More specifically, he argued that interactions with religious networks and the internalization of religious beliefs were two components of religious social capital necessary to effectively deal with stress (Ellison & Levin). The social capital gained through religious participation includes an exchange of social resources that can benefit congregants and guidelines and norms for reduction of unhealthy behaviors (Sherkat & Ellison; Taylor & Chatters, 1988). Thus, the two mechanisms of social integration and religious beliefs are emphasized in this study because of their conceptual and empirical utility for understanding how religious participation may predict marital stability over time.

*Organizational religious participation.* The first mechanism involves the social integration that occurs when spouses attend religious services and participate in religious activities. In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that organizational religious participation provides informal and formal resources to its members (Ellison, 1991; Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, & Boardman, 2001; Taylor & Chatters, 1988). These social resources might serve to enhance marital well-being or repair troubled marriages. In addition, socializing with people who have like-minded values, beliefs, norms, and expectations provides guidelines for behavior and interpersonal and family relationships (Brooks, 2002). However, often there are consequences for deviating from these guidelines. Adherence to expected behaviors and norms invites continued participation and social benefits, whereas veering from norms, such as with a divorce, may evoke social sanctions (Ellison, 1991; Sherkat 2004; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999).

Recent longitudinal studies by Booth, Johnson, Branaman, and Sica (1995) and Sullivan (2001) also found that although high organizational religious participation reduced thoughts of divorce, there was little evidence that organizational religious participation was predictive of the quality of a marriage. Thus, the loss of social connections and fear of disapproval established through frequent service attendance may have more consequences for the stability of the marriage than the emotional quality of the marriage.

*Homogeneity of organizational religious participation.* The literature indicates that couples who attend religious services together are less likely to divorce over time than are couples in which one spouse attends and the other spouse never attends (Call & Heaton, 1997). Differences between spouses in church attendance increased the risk of marital dissolution (Call & Heaton). According to Call and Heaton, homogeneity of organizational religious participation was linked to marital stability because attending services together increases couple solidarity and provides a filter that fosters similar views, family values, and stability (Call & Heaton; Sherkat, 2004). Although it could be argued that couples who never participate in organized religious services also achieve some level of solidarity, among church attendees, there may be additional social pressure or a shared fear of being ostracized from the congregation if the marriage should end.

*Subjective religious participation.* In addition to couples' organizational participation, Ellison (1991) proposed that strong religious beliefs, labeled as subjective religious participation, were related to personal existential certainty. Thus, Ellison (1991) theorized that strong subjective religious participation provides people with a sense of meaning and coherence and facilitates the interpretation of stressful events and circumstances as manageable (Pargament, 1997). Relatedly, with regard to marital relations, subjective religious participation might give couples the sense that any marital conflict or distress is manageable and resolvable. Rather than leave a marriage (whether an unhealthy or healthy marriage), strong religious beliefs might persuade spouses (with existential certainty) to stay in the marriage regardless of the circumstances. Strong subjective religious participation might also serve as a deterrent to divorce because of fear of divine punishment or anxiety about social ostracizing (Ellison, 1994). We expected subjective religious participation to be positively related to marital stability in our study.

Ellison (1991) further proposed that each religious denomination may shape congregants' views of values, behaviors, and moral beliefs. Some religious communities have stricter practices and norms for acceptable marriage-related behaviors in individuals and families. These differences may affect couples' feelings about the appropriateness of divorcing. Therefore we also examined the effects of religious denomination on marital stability over time in our study.

### *Contexts of Race and Gender*

Religion appears to play an important role in the lives of Black Americans (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Sherkat, 2002; Taylor & Chatters, 1988). For example, Black Americans engage in more religious activities and express stronger religious beliefs than White Americans (Fiori, Brown, Cortina & Antonucci, 2006; Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1995; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Yet, the implications for this increased religiosity on marital stability among Black Americans are unclear. Despite the higher rates of divorce found among Black Americans, the literature suggests that historically, Black churches have mobilized much needed social capital resources for their members that could not be obtained through the mainstream political, health, and community institutions more accessible to members of White congregations (Lincoln & Mamiya). In addition, a substantial body of research has demonstrated the direct and indirect positive influences of religion as a coping mechanism among Black Americans faced with stressors associated with discrimination (Williams, 1994), economic disadvantage (Taylor et al., 2004), health concerns (Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; Krause, 2006), and family processes (Taylor, Jackson, & Chatters, 1997).

Given the importance of religion for many Black Americans and the historical mobilization of resources by Black churches, the meaning of religious participation and the implications of this participation for marital stability may differ among Black American and White American couples. Furthermore, although the literature suggests that homogeneity of organizational religious participation lowers the odds of divorce among White American couples (Call & Heaton, 1997), this same effect may not be evident among Black American couples. Orbach, Veroff, and Holmberg (1993) provided evidence that Black American couples feel more comfortable about maintaining an individual perspective in their

married lives than White American couples. Thus, we speculated that homogeneity of organizational religious participation may not have the same implications for marital stability among Black American couples as it does for White American couples.

The implications of religiosity for marital stability may also vary by gender based on evidence that women are engaged in more religious participation and hold stronger religious beliefs than men (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999; Taylor et al., 2004; Waite & Lehrer, 2003). Indeed, research has indicated that the effects of religious participation on marital outcomes are different for husbands and wives (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). In addition, Call and Heaton (1997) found that wives' reports of subjective religious participation were more important to the duration of the marriage than husbands' reports of that same participation. They argued that subjective religious participation is predictive of marital stability as reported by wives but not husbands because wives' subjective religious participation is more closely tied to their beliefs about other aspects of the marital relationship (e.g., marital commitment).

In sum, there is moderate support for the link between subjective and organizational religious participation and marital stability, although some of this evidence concentrates on subjective thoughts of divorce rather than objective measures of marital stability (divorce). Consistent with previous findings, we expected Black American couples to report stronger subjective religious participation and higher organizational religious participation than White American couples. We speculated that homogeneity of organizational religious participation would not differ among the two groups of couples.

We also proposed that organizational religious participation (respondents' perceptions of their own and joint participation) and subjective religious participation are linked to the odds of divorce but that race and gender differences would emerge. This argument is consistent with prior research and theory suggesting that the meanings and functions of religion are influenced by the social context in which religious identification and participation take place (e.g., gender, race). More specifically, we proposed that given women's greater religious involvement and stronger religious beliefs than men, organizational and subjective religious participation, as reported by wives and not husbands, would be positively predictive of marital stability over time in our study. And, although quite exploratory, we speculated

that Black wives' reports of organizational and subjective religious participation would be a stronger predictor of divorce over the 7 years of marriage than White wives' and husbands' reports of religiosity. We also expected that homogeneity of organizational religious participation would be predictive of the odds of divorce for White American married couples but not Black American couples.

## Method

### Sample and Procedures

Data were collected as part of a longitudinal panel study following 373 couples (199 Black American and 174 White American) who applied for marriage licenses in Michigan during April – June 1986. Eligible participants were same-race couples applying for their first marriage where the wife was less than 35 years old. All eligible Black American couples and a random sample of the eligible White American couples were contacted for participation. Both members of the couple had to agree to be in the study (65% of Black American and 66% of White American couples agreed to participate). In order to compare our sample with national statistics, we used the General Social Survey (GSS) data from 1980 – 1994. After dividing the GSS sample into Black Americans and White Americans and selecting out individuals by marital status (first married) and age (for the EYM range of 25 – 37 years), we found that our sample was consistent with first married individuals by race on income, education, parental status, likelihood of cohabitation, employment status, and several other sociodemographic variables. See Table 1 for significant differences by race among wives and husbands.

In the first (1986), third (1988), and seventh (1993) years of their marriages, respondents participated in a face-to-face individual interview by a race-matched interviewer. Year 1 data were collected 4 – 9 months after the couple was married. All married respondents were asked an extensive battery of questions about themselves, their spouses, and their marriages.

To get the most precise estimates of which participants divorced during Years 1 – 7, we investigated the location and marital status of all 373 original couples through extensive tracking efforts and telephone interviews in Years 14 and 16 of the project.

We were able to get marital status information on all but four couples (99% of the original sample) (see Table 2). Our response rate in Year 3 was 87%; in Year 7, it was 71% (see Orbach, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002 for a complete description of procedures).

### Measures

*Control variables.* For analyses predicting divorce, several social and economic conditions or early marital variables were chosen as controls because of their importance in the literature examining marriage and divorce (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Orbach et al., 2002; White & Edwards, 1990). All these control variables were measured in Year 1, such that they represent what individuals brought to marriage or what preexisting conditions occurred in the first year of marriage. *Age* was operationalized as respondents' reported age during the Year 1 interview. *Race* was a dummy variable (0 = *White American*, 1 = *Black American*). For *Household Income*, interviewers asked respondents to select from income categories for the entire household before taxes. Respondents' household income was then coded as the midpoint of the category selected. Responses were divided by 10,000 so that unstandardized survival parameter estimates would not round to zero. *Education* was the highest grade of school or year of college that respondents had completed by Year 1, which was coded into the total number of years of schooling completed. *Cohabitation* was the number of months that each respondent reported living with spouse before marriage. *Working Wife* indicated whether the wife reported any employment outside the home in Year 1 (0 = *Unemployed*, 1 = *Employed*), *Child Before Marriage* indicated whether the respondent had a child or was pregnant before marriage (0 = *No child*, 1 = *Pregnant before marriage*), and *Divorced Parents* identified those respondents who had divorced parents prior to their 16th birthday (0 = *Not divorced*, 1 = *Parents divorced*).

*Religiosity.* Variables measuring religiosity were assessed in Years 1 and 3. Because these measures were time-varying variables, we imputed any missing values prior to divorce with the previous year's report. Only three wives and four husbands were excluded from analyses because of missing data on one or more explanatory variables (and an inability to impute from the previous year's report). We measured three different domains of religiosity: (a) subjective religious participation, (b) organizational

Table 1. Differences by Race on Year 1 Study Variables: Wives (N = 370) and Husbands (N = 369)

Year 1 Variables	Overall		White American		Black American		df	t/ $\chi^2$
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Wives								
Age	24.31	3.89	23.71	3.63	24.83	4.04	368	-2.81**
Education (years)	13.12	1.88	13.05	1.99	13.19	1.77	367	-0.75
Cohabitation (months)	11.04	20.49	6.97	14.66	14.61	23.97	330	-3.75***
Household income	3.02	1.74	3.48	1.76	2.61	1.62	366	4.90***
Working wife	63%		68%		59%		1	3.45
Child before marriage	40%		23%		55%		1	41.26***
Divorced parents	31%		24%		37%		1	7.17**
Service attendance	1.90	1.30	1.65	1.35	2.12	1.21	349	3.50***
Subjective participation	1.59	0.57	1.41	0.64	1.75	0.46	306	5.68***
Joint service attendance								
Neither attends	11%		18%		4%		2	23.16**
Both attend	79%		71%		76%			
Only one attends	10%		11%		20%			
Religious denomination								
Baptist	31%		6%		52%		3	105.75**
Other Protestant	40%		47%		35%			
Catholic	23%		40%		8%			
None	6%		7%		5%			
Husbands								
Age	24.30	3.89	23.71	3.63	24.82	4.04	367	-2.78**
Education (years)	13.12	1.92	13.34	1.97	12.92	1.87	367	2.12*
Cohabitation (months)	11.07	20.51	6.97	14.66	14.68	24.00	328	-3.77***
Household income	3.18	1.79	3.71	1.78	2.71	1.67	365	-5.54***
Working wife	63%		68%		59%		1	3.45
Child before marriage	35%		19%		49%		1	37.10***
Divorced parents	21%		12%		29%		1	15.03***
Service attendance	1.62	1.29	1.46	1.23	1.76	1.32	366	-2.30*
Subjective participation	1.50	0.64	1.26	0.68	1.70	0.51	315	-6.94***
Joint service attendance								
Neither attends	11%		16%		6%		2	11.27**
Both attend	80%		76%		82%			
Only one attends	9%		8%		12%			
Religious denomination								
Baptist	30%		7%		50%		3	116.91**
Other Protestant	33%		34%		33%			
Catholic	26%		48%		7%			
None	11%		11%		5%			

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

religious participation, and (c) homogeneity of organizational religious participation. In addition, respondents reported their religious denomination. All measures of religiousness were assessed near the end of the interviews.

To assess *Subjective Religious Participation* respondents were asked "How important is religion to you personally?" and were asked to select from three categories: 1 = *Not at all important*, 2 = *Some-what important*, or 3 = *Very important*.

Table 2. *Marital Status During the First 7 Years: All Couples by Race*

Marital Status	Year 1 <i>N</i> (%)	Year 3 <i>N</i> (%)	Year 7 <i>N</i> (%)
Married	373 (100)	304 (81.5)	242 (64.9)
White American	174 (100)	155 (89.1)	135 (77.6)
Black American	199 (100)	149 (74.9)	107 (53.8)
Divorced/separated		52 (13.9)	108 (29.0)
White American		16 (9.2)	35 (20.1)
Black American		36 (18.1)	73 (36.7)
Unknown		17 (4.6)	23 (6.2)
White American		3 (1.7)	4 (2.3)
Black American		14 (7.0)	19 (9.5)
Total	373 (100)	373 (100)	373 (100)
White American	174 (100)	174 (100)	174 (100)
Black American	199 (100)	199 (100)	199 (100)

*Note.* Marital status information has been updated given information received in Year 16 of the project.

*Organizational Religious Participation* was assessed by *service attendance*, asking respondents, “How often do you attend religious services?” Response categories were: 0 = *Never*, 1 = *A few times a year*, 2 = *Once or twice a month*, 3 = *Almost every week*, or 4 = *Every week*.

*Homogeneity of organizational religious participation* was measured by *joint service attendance*, asking respondents, “When you go to religious services, do you usually go with your (wife/husband) or do you go without (her/him)?” Response categories were “Both go” and “Go without spouse.” We then created an additional category, “Neither goes,” by identifying those respondents who reported that they never attend services *and* who also perceived that their spouse never attends services. We created three dummy variables (0 = *No*, 1 = *Yes*) for each joint service attendance category.

Last, respondents also were asked to indicate their *Religious Denomination* from several categories: “Baptist” ( $n = 112$  for wives;  $n = 108$  for husbands), “Other Protestants” (wives:  $n = 148$ ; husbands:  $n = 123$ ), “Catholic” (wives:  $n = 85$ ; husbands:  $n = 94$ ), “Other Religion” (wives:  $n = 6$ ; husbands:  $n = 8$ ) or “None/No preference” (wives:  $n = 21$ ; husbands:  $n = 40$ ). After careful consideration, we excluded respondents reporting that their religious denomination was “other” in Year 1 or Year 3, or both, from all subsequent analyses given the large variability in their responses.

*Marital Stability* of each couple was imputed from the marital status information we obtained for each respondent (1 = *married*; 0 = *divorced*) in each year. For the longitudinal analyses, marital stability was used as the time-to-event (censored) dependent variable.

### *Analytic Strategy*

Given the longevity of marriages in our sample, we used survival analyses to examine the timing of divorce across the years of our study. In particular, Cox regression analysis allowed us to examine the explanatory factors that predict the odds or timing of divorce. Cox regression makes no assumptions about the distribution of time to divorce. This methodology also allowed us to use data for all couples in our sample, until they drop out because of divorce. Using the hierarchical Cox regression, we tested the effects of religiosity on the odds of divorce across Years 1 through 7. The hierarchical approach allowed us to explore how the magnitude and significance of each religiosity measure changed as other religiosity measures were entered into the model in a step-wise fashion.

On the basis of Allison’s (1995) comparisons of the approaches to handle tied data in survival analysis, we followed his recommendation and used the “discrete” technique because of its statistical robustness and theory-derived foundation. In addition, because all the religiosity and social/economic variables were specific to the husband or wife and considered individual-level variables, we performed two separate analyses, one for husbands and another for wives. Although marital stability could be conceptualized as a couple-level variable, we are interested in the separate effects of religiosity as perceived by both husbands and wives on marital stability.

We first entered all Year 1 social/economic variables to serve as controls (Model 1). Only two variables emerged as significant predictors of the odds of divorce: race and education. However, we also included the nonsignificant variable of household income because it is so often considered a major factor in divorce outcomes, especially when understanding racial/ethnic differences in divorce. We wanted to be able to control for income in all of our analyses and to have its role consistently highlighted. Given our interest in understanding the context of race, we then computed a second model including all possible race by control interactions (Model 2).

Only significant race by control interactions were included in the second model.

In preparation for our hierarchical analyses and to ensure that religious denomination did not moderate or confound our analyses, we then tested its association with the odds of divorce through three separate analyses. First, we included denomination as a main effect covariate in our model. This approach indicated that denomination had no predictive effect on the odds of divorce across Years 1 – 7. Second, we tested whether denomination moderated the relationship between the social/economic variables and the religiosity variables, or both, and odds of divorce by creating interaction terms between denomination and all other covariates. We found no denomination interactions with any predictors in our Cox regression models. Finally, we stratified our analyses by the four denomination groups. Although power decreased the strength and significance of some associations, we found no substantive differences from our analyses with the pooled sample. Consequently, we pooled all participants into our models and religious denomination was not included as a covariate in our final models.

Next, given our concern with multicollinearity between the religiosity variables (results of a correlation analysis indicated that relationships among constructs were moderate to low; results not shown), we explored the independent effect of each religiosity indicator on the odds of divorce in separate models. We then included the three religiosity variables (subjective religious participation, service attendance, and joint service attendance) as time-varying covariates (Model 3) for wives and husbands, respectively. We found no significant differences in the results from the two analytical approaches and concluded that multicollinearity would not be a problem.

Despite the fact that religiosity predictors' main effects were nonsignificant, we kept them in the equation to test for potential interactions between the religiosity and the control variables. Potential interactions between religiosity and control variables were included in a single step, yet only significant religiosity by control interactions were kept in the final models (Model 4). Finally, we evaluated whether the effects of each predictor on the odds of divorce was constant over time by creating interaction terms between all study variables and time. No time interactions were significant and thus were not included in the final models.

## Results

The first goal of our study was to examine whether there were differences in subjective and organizational religious participation, as reported by husbands and wives, between Black American and White American couples. We tested differences in study variables by race using  $t$  or  $\chi^2$  tests (see Table 1). Consistent with previous research, the results in Table 1 indicate that Black American wives and husbands reported higher religious service attendance and stronger subjective religious participation than White American wives and husbands. It was evident from the results in Table 1 that Black American husbands and wives were less likely to report that neither spouse attends religious services than White American husbands and wives.

In our survival analyses, we tested four different models. Our findings are summarized in Table 3 (wives' reports) and Table 4 (husbands' reports).

### *Marital Stability and Religiosity as Reported by Wives*

The results in Table 3 indicate that race and education were independently associated with the odds of divorce (see Model 1 in Table 3). Black American wives had approximately two times the odds of divorce than their White American counterparts between Years 1 and 7 ( $B = .70, p \leq .01$ ; odds ratio [OR] = 2.01), after adjusting for the effects of education and income. Wives' education also had a protective effect against the odds of divorce over the first 7 years of marriage ( $B = -.26, p \leq .01$ ; OR = 0.77). The odds of divorce decreased with every additional year of education by 23%. No other social/economic covariates were significantly associated with the odds of divorce over time for wives. In addition, we found no race by control interactions on the odds of divorce.

The results in Table 3 (see Model 3) also indicated no religiosity main effects on the odds of divorce, as reported by wives. However, when we included interactions between the social/economic controls and the religiosity variables (see Model 4), we found that the association between service attendance and the odds of divorce varied across race ( $B = .49, p \leq .05$ ; OR = 1.64). White American and Black American wives were less likely to divorce with every unit increase in their frequency of religious service attendance. The magnitude of this

Table 3. *The Odds of Divorce as Predicted by Wives' Religiosity (N = 364)*

Variable	Model 1		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Hazard Ratio	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Hazard Ratio	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Hazard Ratio
Race <sup>a</sup>	.70 (.22)	2.01**	.73 (.23)	2.09**	.96 (.28)	2.62**
Education	-.26 (.07)	0.77**	-.24 (.07)	0.79**	-.24 (.07)	0.79**
Income	-.01 (.07)	0.99	-.02 (.07)	0.98	-.03 (.07)	0.97
Subjective participation			.03 (.20)	1.03	.08 (.21)	1.08
Service attendance			-.17 (.11)	0.84	-.54 (.20)	0.58**
Both go to service <sup>b</sup>			.03 (.25)	1.03	.07 (.25)	1.07
Neither goes to service <sup>b</sup>			-.15 (.41)	0.86	-.39 (.42)	0.68
Race × Service attendance					.49 (.21)	1.64*
-2 Log likelihood		789.40		785.93		779.60
Likelihood ratio ( $\chi^2$ )		31.39**		34.55**		40.88**

Note. We found no differences across religious denomination in our analyses.

<sup>a</sup>Race coded: 0 = White; 1 = Black American. <sup>b</sup>Comparison group: Wife perceives her husband goes alone or she goes alone herself.

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

effect, however, was more notable among White American than Black American wives.

#### *Marital Stability and Religiosity as Reported by Husbands*

Results summarized in Table 4 indicated that race and education were independently associated with the odds of divorce for husbands (see Model 1). Black American husbands were approximately 60% at greater odds for divorce than their White

American counterparts between Years 1 and 7 ( $B = .47$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ; OR = 1.60), after adjusting for the effects of education and income. Education also had a protective effect against the odds of divorce over the first 7 years of marriage ( $B = -.15$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ; OR = 0.86). The odds of divorce decreased with every additional year of education by 14%. No other social/economic covariates were associated with the odds of divorce.

In Model 2, we found that the effects of education and income on the odds of divorce over time

Table 4. *The Odds of Divorce as Predicted by Husbands' Religiosity (N = 361)*

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Hazard Ratio	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Hazard Ratio	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Hazard Ratio
Race <sup>a</sup>	.47 (.22)	1.60*	.59 (.25)	1.80*	.60 (.26)	1.82*
Education	-.15 (.06)	0.86*	-.37 (.11)	0.69**	-.35 (.11)	0.70**
Income	-.11 (.07)	0.89	.12 (.10)	1.13	.14 (.11)	1.15
Race × Education			.34 (.13)	1.40**	.34 (.13)	1.41*
Race × Income			-.38 (.14)	0.69**	-.40 (.14)	0.69**
Subjective participation					.09 (.21)	1.09
Service attendance					-.07 (.10)	0.94
Both go to service <sup>b</sup>					-.35 (.38)	0.70
Neither goes to service <sup>b</sup>					.02 (.38)	1.02
-2 Log likelihood		778.94		768.68		764.46
Likelihood ratio ( $\chi^2$ )		23.64**		33.90**		37.83**

Note. We found no differences across religious denomination in our analyses.

<sup>a</sup>Race coded: 1 = Black American. <sup>b</sup>Comparison group: Husband perceives his wife goes alone or he goes alone himself.

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

varied by race. Higher educational attainment was protective against the odds of divorce among White American and Black American husbands ( $B = .34$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ; OR = 1.40). White American and Black American husbands were at lower odds of divorce in their first 7 years of marriage as their educational attainment increased, but the magnitude of this effect was quite dramatic for Black American husbands as their educational attainment increased.

The effect of income on odds of divorce also varied by race ( $B = -.38$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ; OR = 0.69). The odds of divorce between Years 1 and 7 becomes greater with income increases for White American husbands, whereas the odds of divorce becomes less with income increases among Black American husbands. We found no religiosity main effects on the odds of divorce over time (see Model 3 in Table 4) nor were there significant interaction effects of religiosity by any of the control variables for the husband's model.

## Discussion

We analyzed data from a longitudinal study of Black American and White American married couples. We were interested in the effects of subjective and organizational religious participation on marital stability, or the odds of divorce, over the first 7 years of marriage. Our findings reflect the complexity of the relationship between religious participation and the odds of divorce over time, especially given the contexts of race and gender.

The first goal of our study was to examine whether Black American and White American couples differ in their reported subjective and organizational religious participation. Consistent with previous literature, we found Black American husbands and wives reported that religion was more important to them personally and that they attended religious services more frequently than White American husbands and wives. In addition, fewer Black Americans, compared to White Americans, reported that neither spouse attended religious services.

The second aim of the study was to assess whether religious participation was a predictor of the odds of divorce over time. It is important to note that we considered many different socioeconomic and early marital conditions as control variables in our analyses predicting the odds of divorce over

time. Our results indicated that only race and education were significant predictors of divorce over time, even after controlling for our religiosity measures. We note an array of racial differences between White and Black Americans in Year 1 of the study. Black American couples were significantly more likely to have lower incomes, longer periods of cohabitation prior to marriage, more premarital births, more likely to be from a divorced family of origin, and to be older in age. White American husbands also were significantly more educated than Black American husbands. Therefore, using race, education, and household income in our analyses in predicting the odds of divorce implicates many of the other socio-demographic factors.

Overall, the findings indicate that religiosity was predictive of marital stability over time but only when assessed by organizational religious participation (service attendance) and only as reported by wives. The more frequently Black American and White American wives attended religious services, the less likely that couple was to divorce over time. These results are consistent with previous research indicating that wives' organizational religious participation is associated with stable marital relations and family functioning (Call & Heaton, 1997). The current findings go beyond previous research and indicate that wives' service attendance is not only predictive of their thoughts of divorce but also of their actual odds of divorce over the first 7 years of marriage. Although subjective thoughts of divorce may be a predictor of objective marital stability, the two measures are not conceptually the same. According to Broman (2002), 90% of people who think about getting a divorce do not actually divorce over time.

Our results confirm that wives' service attendance provides an important resource for maintaining the stability of marriages over time. Similar to what Ellison and Levin (1998) theorized, we argue that the social integration and socialization that occurs when wives attend services gives women the social capital necessary to effectively deal with marital troubles and stress in their marriages. The social capital gained through religious participation includes an exchange of social resources that can benefit wives as well as guidelines and norms for the reduction of unhealthy behaviors. These informal and formal resources serve to enhance marital well-being or repair troubled marriages. Because husbands are less involved than wives in religious organizational

practices, husbands may not benefit from the religious social capital gained by wives.

Furthermore, when marital troubles do occur, wives may be more likely than husbands to turn to religion to manage stressful events, like marital troubles. Wives also may receive socioemotional and instrumental support from their relationships with other congregation members (Brooks, 2002; Taylor et al., 2004). Socializing with people who have similar beliefs and values influences behavior and facilitate norms for what is acceptable and appropriate for adherents. Divorce may be considered a deviation from the norm in many congregations and the consequences may be a loss of supportive relationships.

As we suspected, the effect of wives' service attendance on marital stability varies by race. For both groups of wives, greater service attendance was predictive of a decreased odds of divorce over time. However, despite the results that Black American wives attend religious services more frequently than White American wives, the impact of service attendance on marital stability was greater for White American wives compared to Black American wives. We suggest that although both groups of wives likely internalize "promarriage" values when they attend religious services, the effect of this socialization with respect to deterring divorce is stronger for White wives. We reason that the effect of wives' religious participation on marital stability is not as significant for Black wives because the divorce norms surrounding marital dissolution are more tolerant and accepting than in the White American community. According to Broman (2005), Black American wives may feel less ostracized by church members and more supported in their communities if they leave troubled marriages. In addition, the existence of more diverse family configurations (i.e., multigenerational families, single parent families) (Ruggles, 1997; Taylor et al., 1997) among Black Americans may allow for greater inclusion and less blaming of divorced individuals in the Black community.

We also found that reports of education were predictive of marital stability over time for both White American and Black American husbands and wives. The more education each spouse attained, the less likely the couple was to divorce over time. For husbands, however, this effect varied by race. Husbands' greater education decreased the odds of divorce, but the decrease associated with each level of education was more pronounced for Black husbands than for White husbands. Similarly, the effect of reported

income by husbands on marital stability varied by race. Greater reported income decreased the odds of divorce for Black husbands but increased the odds of divorce for White husbands. We argue that both of these findings continue to underscore the disadvantages experienced by many Black American males to find resources needed for maintaining marital commitments (see Orbuch & Brown, 2006). It appears that once Black American husbands secure the economic resources (increased education and income), they are able to maintain their marital commitments and are less likely to divorce over time.

Finally, we were surprised to find that subjective religious participation and joint organizational religious participation did not play an important role in reducing the odds of divorce over 7 years of marriage. It is important to note that in previous studies (see Call & Heaton, 1997), subjective participation was assessed by whether a spouse was in agreement with orthodox religious doctrines rather than the importance of religious beliefs to the spouse's life (regardless of content) as in our study. Furthermore, we understand that it is likely that the predictive role of these variables may change over the life course of a marriage.

We acknowledge that an important limitation of our data is that our measures were all self-report perceptions from married spouses. We did not assess whether spousal agreement or disagreement on these measures was predictive of divorce. In addition, although religious denomination was not significant in predicting marital stability over time (nor did denomination moderate the effects of religiosity on marital stability), we also recognize that we did not examine mixed denominational couples and the effects of denominational differences on the odds of divorce over time. It will be important for future research to examine which couple-level factors affect the odds of divorce over time. Transforming the data to conduct couple-level analyses may provide a deeper understanding of how compatibility or a lack thereof might lead to marital instability or divorce.

It is also important to recognize that we did not include marital quality in our models nor did we assess whether behavioral observations of interactions were predictive of divorce over the first 7 years of marriage. Future research might include religious variables along with measures of marital quality or well-being, particularly for Black Americans. In addition, because Black Americans divorce at

a higher rate than White Americans, but attend religious services more frequently, further longitudinal research addressing the links between marital relationships and religion over time is surely needed to disentangle this complex association. Nevertheless, in this study, at least in the first 7 years of marriage, it is wives' connection to religious norms, networks, and sanctions through frequent attendance at religious services that contributes to marital stability.

### *Implications and Conclusion*

Religious institutions play a central role in family and marital life. The concept of religiosity has emerged as an important mechanism for understanding marital stability, yet little is known about whether religiosity is linked to marital stability over time, especially among Black American couples.

Our results point to the significant role that organized religious participation can play, especially with wives, for marital stability over time. Wolf and Stevens (2001) suggested that counselors who work with couples who frequently participate in religious activities should seek additional education and training to accommodate their clientele. It is important for marital therapists, family practitioners, and mental health professionals to understand the integral link between organizational religious participation and marital relations (Taylor, Lincoln, & Chatters, 2005). Practitioners should inquire about organizational religious participation and the specific norms associated with it as a possible resource for coping with or working through marital problems. Practitioners also need to bear in mind that the significant role organized religious participation plays for wives, but not husbands, may be a source of conflict and trouble, or both, for married couples in the early years of marriage. Still, practitioners should consider the diversity and differences between and within couples. Resources that may be appropriate for one couple or for one spouse may not be suitable for everyone. Our findings suggest that the role of organized religious activities for marital stability is complex and varies depending on whether the spouse is male or female and a Black American or a White American.

Practitioners also need to consider the sociocultural contexts in which marriages are embedded. Although Black wives may find organized religious participation important to the stability of their

marriages, they also are influenced by the attitudes and trends within their secular communities. The sanctions that may be imposed for leaving a bad or unhealthy marriage within a religious community may be offset by available emotional and material support within their secular communities. Gender and culturally appropriate strategies and techniques should be sought in order to address the challenges of marital roles and responsibilities.

Doherty and Anderson (2004) described successful community marriage initiatives that emphasize the sociocultural contexts for which various aspects of these initiatives and programs can be adapted to meet the particular needs of different types of communities. Specific guidelines and policies for each initiative were created within local communities. For example, in the Healthy Marriage Community Initiative, established in a Black American community with strong religious convictions, faith-based workshops and community programs were developed to promote healthy and stable relationships, father involvement, and parenting training. Clergy and lay leaders were trained to administer premarital, marital enrichment, and marital education workshops on the basis of the needs and religiosity of that specific community. Doherty and Anderson asserted that not all marriages can or should be saved and that any training of lay leaders needs to include how to recognize when saving a marriage is not warranted. The Healthy Marriage Initiative also has begun research to better understand the attitudes and trends surrounding divorce within this Black American community and to evaluate empirically the effectiveness of the program (Doherty & Anderson).

In conclusion, our results highlight the differences and similarities in the role that religiosity plays among Black American and White American married couples over time. We found that the links between the religiosity and the odds of divorce over time varies by race and gender. More specifically, it was wives' service attendance that predicted marital stability over the first 7 years of marriage, and these effects on the odds of divorce were greater for service attendance as reported by White American wives compared to Black American wives. It is critical for practitioners to be aware that the most efficacious strategies for appropriate therapeutic intervention in marriages at risk for divorce are those that consider the specific social, cultural, and religious contexts surrounding the individuals involved.

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