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Trends in Marital Happiness by Gender and Race, 1973 to 2006

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This article uses data from the 1973-2006 General Social Survey to assess the interactive impact of race and gender on marital happiness over time. Findings indicate independent and significant effects for both variables, with Whites and husbands reporting greater marital happiness than Blacks and wives. Comparing four subgroups (White husbands, White wives, Black husbands, and Black wives), the authors find that White husbands report the highest levels of marital happiness whereas Black wives report the lowest. Assessment of trends from the 1970s to the 2000s reveals a convergence among the groups: Although White husbands consistently report the highest levels of marital happiness, there has been a steady decline in the gap between all four groups. Most notably, Black wives exhibit a significant increase in marital happiness relative to the other groups. Findings are discussed in the context of the changing structure and composition of families in contemporary U.S. society.

Keywords: *race; gender; marital happiness; over-time trends; family*

The family in U.S. society has undergone considerable social and economic changes during the past four decades. Since the 1970s, rates of divorce, single parenthood, and cohabitation have increased considerably

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(Cherlin, 1992). A corresponding decline in overall marriage rates has been observed, particularly among African Americans (Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000). Women have entered the labor force in greater numbers, especially those who are married and with children (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003; Rogers & Amato, 2000), whereas men have experienced a decline in real wages and increased unemployment (Hernandez, 1993; Wilkie, 1993).

In conjunction with these broad social and economic changes in families, some researchers find evidence of a decline in marital happiness over time (1973-1988; Glenn, 1991) and a decrease in the strength of the relationship between marriage and reported global happiness (1972-1989; Glenn & Weaver, 1988; Lee, Seccombe, & Shehan, 1991). Cohort comparisons find that younger married couples report less marital interaction (Amato et al., 2003; Rogers & Amato, 1997, 2000) and more marital conflicts and problems (Rogers & Amato, 1997, 2000) than older cohorts. There is also evidence of period effects, where decreases in marital happiness during the life course were particularly pronounced during the 1980s for all cohorts (Van Laningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). Amato and colleagues (2003), however, found no change in marital happiness or divorce proneness from 1980 to 2000, reporting a decline in marital interaction only. They suggest that social changes that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s had a stabilizing effect on marital happiness, with positive and negative factors canceling each other out.

Moreover, previous research has suggested that levels of marital happiness and over-time trends in marital quality may vary by gender and race. Regarding gender, many researchers find that husbands report greater marital happiness than wives (Amato et al., 2003; Faulkner, Davey, & Davey, 2005; Henry, Miller, & Giarrusso, 2005; Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2006; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Tsang, Harvey, Duncan, & Sommer, 2003), although at least one study reports contradictory results (Aldous & Woodberry, 1994). There is also evidence that the difference in marital happiness between husbands and wives declined from 1972 to 1986 (Glenn & Weaver, 1988), and a recent survey found virtually no difference in overall happiness between men and women (irrespective of marital status; Taylor, Funk, & Craighill, 2006).

Race has also been linked to marital happiness, with Black respondents reporting lower levels of marital happiness than Whites (Broman, 1993, 2005; Faulkner et al., 2005; Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1993). Some researchers have found significant race differences only for women, with Black wives reporting lower levels of happiness than White wives and

no significant difference in reported happiness between White and Black husbands (Broman, 1993; Rank & Davis, 1996). Yet others have found only a weak relationship (Zollar & Williams, 1987) or no relationship (Thomas, 1990) between gender and marital happiness among Blacks.

Although previous research provides evidence for independent effects of gender and race on marital happiness, little is known about the interactive impact of the two. Scholars have convincingly argued that the interaction of race and gender creates unique social positions that shape the ways individuals experience and interpret social life (Collins, 2000; Dugger, 1988; Kane, 1992; Zinn & Dill, 1996). Broad societal changes in the United States during the past several decades have arguably influenced the marital patterns and quality of each group in unique ways, the magnitude of which is yet to be fully understood. Previous research suggests that overall levels of marital happiness declined from the 1970s to the 1990s, and that at any given point in time during the past four decades, husbands and Whites report higher levels of marital happiness than wives and Blacks. What is still unknown is how changes in marital happiness over time have affected White and Black husbands and wives in comparison with each other. In other words, have over-time changes in marital happiness followed the same pattern for each group? Or have levels of marital happiness become more or less similar over time? The purpose of the current study is to compare over-time trends in marital happiness by race and gender. We compare reported levels of marital happiness among White husbands, White wives, Black husbands, and Black wives from 1973 to 2006.

Understanding trends in marital happiness by race and gender has potential value at societal and individual levels. Although it is widely accepted that race and gender interact to create unique social groups, the full impact of these social positions on individuals' lives has not been fully explored. Many changes have occurred in U.S. society during the past four decades that are likely to affect individuals differently according to their social position. An examination of marital happiness by social group over time will contribute to our understanding and assessment of the impact of such changes in group experiences.

At the societal level, changes in the structure of families over time, including increased rates of divorce, single parenthood, and cohabitation coupled with decreased rates of marriage and remarriage, have caused some scholars to express concern about the state of the family in U.S. society (Popenoe, 1988, 1993; Skolnick, 1991). Conversely, other scholars argue that the institution of family has remained equally significant over time, but that it is simply changing its form (Glick, 1988). An examination

of over-time trends in marital happiness can shed some light on the strength of marriages today and may help inform these discussions.

Marital quality also has important consequences at the individual level that include physical and mental well-being (Waite, 1995; Wickrama, Lorenz, Conger, & Elder, 1997). Adults who recall high levels of parental marital discord during childhood tend to report a disproportionately large number of psychological and marital problems of their own (Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth & Edwards, 1990; Kessler & Magee, 1993). The work of Amato and Booth (1997), for instance, showed a strong positive relationship between parental discord and psychological distress in adulthood. The quality of marriage in the homes in which children are raised also affect their own family relationships in adulthood (Booth & Edwards, 1990; Thornton, 1991); hence, spouses' happiness within marriage today may have a long-term impact on the strength and quality of marriages in the future.

Background

The term *marital happiness* refers to the extent to which spouses are happy with their marriage. It is sometimes asked in surveys as a general question, measuring global marital happiness (Glenn, 1991; Heaton & Albrecht, 1991; Suito, 1991), and other times measured using multiple survey items that are aimed at capturing spouses' happiness with different aspects of their marital relationship (such as the amount of love, affection, and understanding they receive, their sexual relationship, and faithfulness) along with global measures (Johnson, White, Edwards, & Booth, 1986). Some researchers use marital happiness and marital satisfaction interchangeably (Douglass & Douglass, 1995), whereas others use marital happiness as one indicator among others of marital satisfaction (Booth, Johnson, White, & Edwards, 1984).

Marital happiness is typically considered as one component of marital quality (Johnson et al., 1986). Other components include marital interaction (engaging in activities together), marital disagreements (ranging from mild arguments to physical violence), marital problems (characteristics or behaviors that create a problem in marriage, such as becoming angry, hurt, or jealous; infidelity; drug use; and criminal behavior), and divorce proneness (also referred to as marital instability, which includes thinking about, discussing, or filing for divorce or separation). Johnson and colleagues (1986) found that these five components of marital quality are empirically distinct concepts representing two dimensions of marital quality. Marital

happiness and marital interaction represent a positive dimension of marital quality whereas marital disagreements, problems, and instability represent a negative dimension of marital quality. Although positive and negative dimensions of marital quality are related, they do not measure the same thing and therefore need to be treated as distinct concepts (Booth et al., 1984; Douglass & Douglass, 1995; Heaton & Albrecht, 1991). The current research focuses specifically on marital happiness.

Gender and Marital Happiness

Jessie Bernard (1972) suggested that gender differences in (primarily White, middle-class) marital experiences result in the existence of “his” and “her” marriages. Bernard observed that married women were more likely to report frustration, dissatisfaction, and negative feelings toward their marriages and exhibit poorer mental and emotional health than married men or single women. Compared with single men, married men exhibited better mental and physical health, progressed further in their careers, and generally lived longer, happier lives. Bernard attributed women’s unhappiness in marriage primarily to the isolating and unstimulating nature of women’s roles as housewives and the power imbalance that resulted from husbands’ and wives’ differing roles.

Based on Bernard’s assertions and others’ reports of the unfulfilling nature of housework and child rearing for many women (e.g., Friedan, 1963), we would expect women’s increased participation in the labor force since the early 1970s to result in higher levels of marital happiness for wives over time. Wives’ participation in paid labor may improve marital quality by contributing to greater equality between spouses (Coltrane, 1996; Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998; Scanzoni, 1978) and greater financial stability among couples (Greenstein, 1990; Hoffman & Duncan, 1995; Oppenheimer, 1994; Rogers & DeBoer, 2001; Tsang et al., 2003). However, some researchers have found wives’ employment related to decreased levels of marital happiness (Booth et al., 1984). A recent study found wives’ employment related to greater marital stability but unrelated to marital happiness (Schoen, Rogers, & Amato, 2006).

Some scholars have suggested that wives’ increased labor force participation resulted in a new set of challenges for married women that hindered improvement of happiness within marriage. Specifically, wives’ increased participation in the workforce has not coincided with equal changes in the distribution of household labor. Although younger cohorts of husbands have increased their share of household labor compared to older cohorts

(Rogers & Amato, 2000), and husbands as a group currently perform more housework than in the past (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Robinson & Godbey, 1997), wives in dual-earner families still perform a disproportionate amount of household labor (Ferree, 1991; Hochschild, 1989). Thus, after a full day of work, many wives return home to work what Hochschild (1989) called the “second shift.” In addition, as workdays have become longer, Hochschild argues that less time has become available to perform household and child care duties. The result is that many parents (working mothers in particular) now work a “third shift”—“the emotional work necessary to repair the damage caused by time pressures at home” (Hochschild, 1997, p. 51).

Some research supports the position that changes in women’s labor force participation has created new challenges for women rather than significant improvements in marital satisfaction over time. In a comparison of two marriage cohorts, Rogers and Amato (2000) found that increased conflict between work and family demands was the most significant factor in explaining higher levels of marital discord among the most recent cohort. Some of this conflict for wives may result from the distribution of labor within the home. Wives’ marital happiness is shown to be related to husbands’ increased share of household labor (Pleck, 1997; Robinson & Godbey, 1997; Rogers & Amato, 2000), whereas perceptions of inequality in the division of household labor are related to lower levels of marital happiness (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998; Tsang et al., 2003). Wives with more egalitarian attitudes report lower levels of satisfaction with marriage and greater marital discord and are more likely to have their marriages end in divorce than their more traditional counterparts (Amato & Booth, 1995; Lueptow, Guss, & Hyden, 1989). In addition, although wives’ income has increased over time (Spain & Bianchi, 1996), some research suggests that increases in women’s economic power are not significantly related to marital happiness (Rogers & Amato, 2000).

Over-time changes in the nature and structure of marriages are likely to also affect men’s levels of marital happiness. According to Bernard (1972), men’s greater happiness in marriage was partly a result of their greater power, status, and importance within the marriage that resulted from workforce participation. Since the 1970s, men’s real wages have declined whereas levels of unemployment and underemployment have increased (Hernandez, 1993). Combined with wives’ increased contributions to family income (Spain & Bianchi, 1996), men’s economic power within the family may be declining, which could result in lower levels of marital happiness over time. However, some research indicates that marital

happiness and marital quality are highest when spouses have equal amounts of power rather than in situations that favor either party (Amato et al., 2003; Rogers & Amato, 2000).

Changing gender roles within the family could also affect men's marital happiness. Although husbands' greater contribution to housework is related to increased marital quality for wives, it corresponds with decreased marital quality for husbands (Amato et al., 2003). In addition, husbands who hold more egalitarian attitudes exhibit greater marital happiness than those with more traditional attitudes (Amato & Booth, 1995; Kaufman, 2000; Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2006).

Race and Marital Happiness

Since the 1970s, Black families have undergone different changes than White families. Where White women's entry into paid employment is a significant change for the White family, a large proportion of Black women in the United States have always engaged in paid employment (Durr & Hill, 2006). In addition, Black husbands are more likely than White husbands to engage in housework (Broman, 1991; Shelton & John, 1993) and the overall division of household labor tends to be more egalitarian in Black families than in White families (Dillaway & Broman, 2000; Orbach & Eyster, 1997). The notions of second and third shifts for wives, therefore, may be predominantly White phenomena. The Black family instead has been affected primarily by other changes in the economy: disproportionately high levels of unemployment and underemployment among Black men and increasing employment rates among Black women.

Since 1970, Black men have experienced increased rates of unemployment and underemployment coupled with decreased rates of employment (Holzer, 2006). Although White men have followed the same pattern, these economic changes have disproportionately affected Black men. The unemployment rate rose from 7.3% in 1970 to 12.0% in 1994 for Black men and from 4.0% in 1970 to 5.4% in 1994 for White men (Holzer, 2006). Similarly, the employment rate decreased for Black men from 71.9% in 1970 to 60.8% in 1994; White men experienced less substantial decline, from 77.8% in 1970 to 71.8% in 1994 (Holzer, 2006). The employment rates for Black women, on the other hand, have been increasing. During the past two decades, the employment rate for Black women increased from 53.1% to 62.9% (McLoyd & Enchautegui-de-Jesus, 2005).

Researchers have posited that the economic decline among Black men has contributed to many changes in the Black family in recent years. Increasing

levels of unemployment, underemployment, and declining wages are resulting in Black husbands' increased inability to fulfill the "masculine" role of family provider (Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan, 1995; Wilson, 1987). Indeed, structural barriers such as racism that limit Black husbands' ability to fulfill the provider role have been interpreted as significant factors in declining rates of marriage among African Americans (Darity and Myers, 1995; Lichter, LeClere, & McLaughlin, 1991; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992), increasing rates of divorce (Hatchett et al., 1995; Martin & Bumpass, 1989; South & Lloyd, 1992; South & Spitze, 1986), and lower levels of satisfaction with marriage and family life (Broman, 1993; Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little, 1991).

Some researchers suggest that lower levels of marital happiness among Blacks may result from the lack of economic opportunities for racial minorities. Faulkner et al. (2005) examined racial differences in marital satisfaction from the National Survey of Families and Households covering a 7-year period and more than 10,000 couples and found that Black husbands and wives reported lower marital satisfaction than Whites. Researchers attribute racial differences in marital happiness to differences in economic opportunities and racism. Veroff et al. (1993) compared interview data for 174 White and 199 Black couples and found the latter, particularly Black males, were burdened by the lack of economic opportunities, which depressed personal and marital happiness. Difficulty in getting ahead and taking care of one's children financially were relentless challenges. A study of Black urban residents found perceptions of economic adequacy to be the strongest predictor of marital happiness for Black men and women, more significant than any objective measure of socioeconomic status (Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little, 1991). Research also shows that economic resources play a greater role in marital happiness for low-income than middle-income Blacks (Clark-Nicolas & Gray-Little, 1991). One study (Thomas, 1990) found high levels of marital happiness among Black women and men; however, the sample was limited to Black dual-career, professional couples.

Some researchers suggest that observed racial differences in marital happiness result from Black wives' dissatisfaction with marriage. These studies observe no significant differences between Black and White husbands' levels of marital happiness, but significantly lower levels of marital happiness among Black wives compared with White wives and Black husbands (Broman, 1993; Rank & Davis, 1996). Broman (1993) suggested that Black wives may be more likely than other groups to remain in unhappy marriages for financial support, especially when children are present. Because of

lower income levels, Black wives may feel less empowered to leave unhappy marriages, resulting in lower levels of marital happiness.

In a recent study, Broman (2005) found that race differences in marital quality disappear when perceptions of spouse behavior are controlled. Black participants were significantly more likely to describe their spouses as having affairs, hitting, pushing or slapping, and wasting money and significantly less likely to report feeling loved by their spouses. These differences in perceptions of spouse behavior explained race differences in marital quality in the study.

Other Factors Related to Marital Happiness

A variety of other factors have also been linked to marital happiness. Employment, for example, has been linked to higher levels of global happiness and well-being (Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldsteen, 1990; Taylor et al., 2006) and marital happiness (Larson & Holman, 1994), although this relationship may be more significant for husbands than for wives. Indeed, some research suggests that wives' employment has a negative effect on marital happiness (Booth et al., 1984) or is unrelated to marital happiness (Schoen et al., 2006).

Divorce has also been associated with differing levels of happiness, with spouses in second marriages tending to report lower levels of marital happiness than spouses in first marriages (Booth & Edwards, 1992). The presence and number of children in the home has also been linked to marital happiness, with more children lowering levels of happiness (Crohan, 1996; Glenn & McLanahan, 1982; Tsang et al., 2003).

Socioeconomic variables of education and income are also related to marital happiness, with spouses who have higher levels of education and income reporting slightly higher levels of marital happiness (Amato et al., 2003; Broman, 1993; Rogers & DeBoer, 2001). Amato et al. (2003) argue that greater levels of education and income are associated with factors (e.g., better communication skills) that promote greater levels of marital happiness.

Age has also been found in previous literature to be related to marital happiness, although findings are quite variable in the literature, with researchers questioning whether age actually affects levels of marital happiness (Glenn, 1998; Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993; Van Laningham et al., 2001). Past research has offered evidence that increased religiosity is associated with greater levels of marital happiness (Faulkner et al., 2005; Hunler & Gencoz, 2005).

Data and Method

The data for the study were taken from the General Social Survey (hereafter, GSS), a randomly drawn nationally representative sample of English-speaking adults (18 years of age and older) living in noninstitutional settings in the United States. The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) has conducted the GSS annually from 1972 to 1994 and, since then, biennially. The analyses to follow use data from surveys conducted from 1973 to 2006 (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2007).

Dependent Variable

Our dependent measure of marital happiness is the GSS questionnaire item¹ “Taken things all together, how would you describe your marriage” (GSS mnemonic name “hapmar”).

Responses for the question are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy. The responses were coded so that higher scores reflect greater happiness and lower scores reflect the reverse. Response items don’t know, no answer, and not applicable were excluded from the analysis. The foregoing marital happiness questionnaire item was included in the GSS for a total of 23 years during the period 1973 to 2006 (1973-1978, 1980, 1982, 1983-1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006).

To assess change across time, we pooled data into four time periods for each analysis and then calculated linear regression models. Each time period represented a single decade, with all accompanying years. For instance, the decade of the 2000s included data from the following years: 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006. Pooling annual data into four separate decades improves the reliability of our results by reducing the impact of undersampling of Black respondents, a phenomenon previously associated with GSS data (Kane & Kyyro, 2001).² For this analysis, we only included married individuals. However, because of the cross-sectional nature of the GSS, the individuals are not married to each other. Past research has similarly used cross-sectional data from the GSS to assess change in reported levels of general happiness for married and nonmarried respondents (Glenn and Weaver, 1988) and marital happiness among married respondents (Glenn, 1991) over time.

Taking a longitudinal time-series approach, this study makes use of the cross-sectional GSS data to assess interindividual (or between-individual) differences associated with race and gender at different time intervals. Such a design should not be confused with a longitudinal panel study, which

assesses intraindividual differences by following a sample during a particular time period (Neuman, 2003). Although commonly used with survey research, cross-sectional data may not capture advanced social processes or changes associated with aging (Neuman, 2003).

Independent Variables

The main explanatory variable is a social location measure (demarcated by respondents' sex and race) delineating the four groups (White husbands, White wives, Black husbands, and Black wives). Other independent variables in the study include work status of the respondent, whether the respondent is divorced or not, whether there is a child under the age of 18 currently living in the home, respondents' and spousal employment status, age, education, income, and religiosity. We treated work status as an ordinal variable indicating varying levels of work, with the following categories: (a) full-time, (b) part-time, and (c) unemployed.

Although the GSS does not assess whether respondents are in their second, third, or fourth marriage, respondents are asked whether they have ever been divorced. This item allowed us to assess whether respondents were at least in their second marriage. We treated the divorce variable as nominal, comparing divorced (1) to never divorced (0) individuals. The GSS also does not provide information on the number of children; however, three questions measure the existence of children in the home (GSS mnemonics: babies, preteens, and teens). The questions asked whether there are household members less than 6 (babies), 12 (preteens), and 18 (teens) years old in the home. Collapsing these three questions, we coded (1) yes, a child is in the home under the age of 18, and (0) no, there is no child under the age of 18 in the home.

We also controlled for respondent and spousal education (GSS mnemonics: educ, speduc) and familial income (GSS mnemonics: income). Assuming a linear effect, the respondent and spousal education variables were treated as continuous in the analysis, with years of education ranging from 0 to 20 for both variables. Using GSS categories, the familial income variable was treated as an ordinal variable with categories ranging from 1 to 12.

Age (GSS mnemonics: age), initially treated as a continuous variable in the GSS, was collapsed into categories to assess nonlinearity. Using the 75-and-older age category as the reference, the ages were collapsed into the following categories: 18 to 24, 25 to 34, 35 to 44, 45 to 54, 55 to 64, and 65 to 74.

We used two variables that have been previously used as measures of religiosity (Carter & Corra, 2005). The first variable (GSS mnemonic:

fund) asked respondents to describe the nature of their religion as being fundamental, moderate, or liberal. This variable was treated as a dummy variable in our analysis, with liberal (0) used as the reference category for fundamental (1) and moderate (1). We used the GSS frequency of religious service attendance variable (GSS mnemonic: attend) as a measure of religiosity. The GSS variable *attend* asked respondents to indicate the frequency of their religious service attendance. We treated this variable as an ordinal variable ranging from 0 (*never*) to 8 (*every week*).

In accord with previous research, we wanted to include age at marriage and egalitarian gender-role attitudes as control variables. Past research has shown these variables to be associated with increased levels of marital happiness (Amato et al., 2003; Lueptow et al., 1989). However, these questions were only asked in a select number of years, which would not allow for an extensive assessment of change in marital happiness across the four-decade period. Hence, these variables were omitted in the analysis to follow. Length of marriage has also been shown to be associated with marital happiness (Schoen et al., 2006; Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993), but it was not included because the GSS does not collect this information. In addition, the GSS does not provide data on the race of the respondents' spouse, so we were unable to determine whether participants were in same-race or mixed-race marriages.

Descriptive Statistics

Our data set consists of 24,455 married respondents (not married to each other) surveyed by the GSS from 1973 to 2006. Of the 11,606 husbands, 41.4% ($n = 10,139$) were White and 4.2% ($n = 1,023$) were Black. Of the 12,849 wives, 46% ($n = 11,251$) were White and 4.6% ($n = 1,117$) were Black. The remaining 3.8% of the married sample were categorized as Other races by the GSS.

To evaluate change across time, our analysis assesses marital happiness of spouses in four decades (1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s). Of the total sample of the 1970s ($n = 6,018$), 2,596 were White husbands, 238 were Black husbands, 2,896 were White wives, and 245 were Black wives. With a total sample of 7,862 in the 1980s, we analyzed 3,263 White husbands, 370 Black husbands, 3,598 White wives, and 424 Black wives. Of the 6,622 respondents in the 1990s, 2,744 were White husbands, 260 were Black husbands, 3,027 were White wives, and 281 were Black wives. Finally, in the 2000s, the total sample of 3,953 included 1,536 White husbands, 155 Black husbands, 1,730 White wives, and 167 Black wives.

Figure 1
Unadjusted Marital Happiness Scores by Decade for White Husbands, White Wives, Black Husbands, and Black Wives

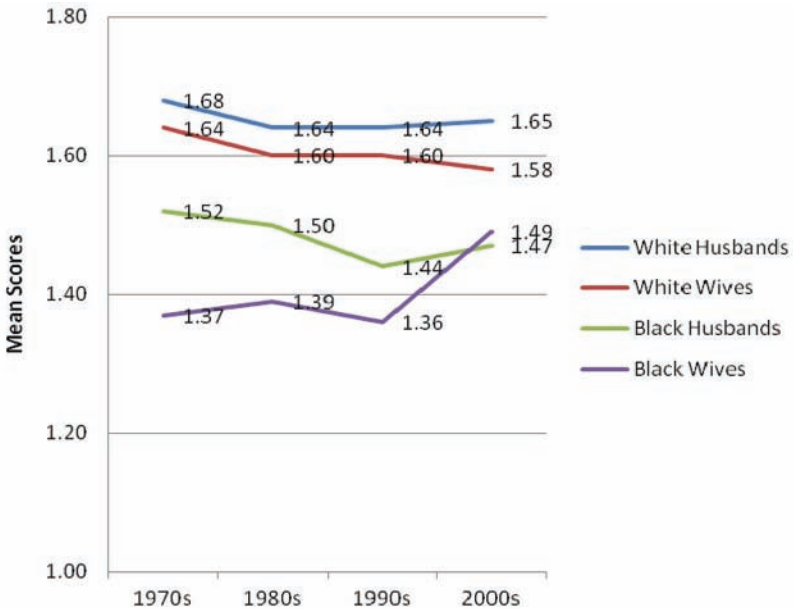


Figure 1 presents unadjusted marital happiness mean scores for White husbands, White wives, Black husbands, and Black wives for each decade under study.³ The mean scores provide initial approximations of overtime trends in marital happiness for each group. Higher mean scores indicate greater levels of marital happiness, whereas lower mean scores indicate the reverse.

As shown in Figure 1, the mean scores indicate that White husbands generally reported higher levels of marital happiness than White wives, Black husbands, and Black wives. Although generally reporting lower levels of marital happiness than White husbands, White wives indicate higher levels of marital happiness than Black husbands and wives. Note that the mean scores for Black husbands and wives are consistently lower than those for their White counterparts. Finally, although Black husbands generally reported higher levels of marital happiness than Black wives, that

pattern did not persist into the 2000s. In the 2000s, the mean scores for Black husbands and wives are 1.47 and 1.49, respectively.

In terms of change over time, Figure 1 provides little information that can be used to make definitive statements yet suggest the need for further statistical scrutiny. For example, the data in Figure 1 reveal a small decrease in mean scores across decades for White husbands, White wives, and Black husbands, a decrease that is not particularly pronounced. The figure, however, does reveal one notable pattern: that for Black wives. From the decade of the 1970s to that of the 1990s, the mean score remained quite stable; however, from the 1990s to the 2000s, the mean score increased substantially from 1.36 to 1.49. This change suggests that the reported levels of marital happiness among Black wives may be quickly catching up with those of the other three groups. The following section uses multivariate regression analyses (using ordinary least squares) to more fully investigate differences between the comparison groups.

Multivariate Analysis Results

Table 1 provides unstandardized parameter estimates and standard errors for two linear regression models assessing the impact of the independent variables on marital happiness. Model 1 assesses the independent impact of race and gender, comparing levels of reported marital happiness of White and Black respondents and male and female respondents while controlling for the other independent variables. Models 2, 3, 4, and 5 make all possible comparisons for each of the four social categories (White husbands, White wives, Black husbands, and Black wives), while controlling for the same compositional variables controlled in Model 1. In Model 2, Black wives are the reference category, whereas in Models 3, 4, and 5, Black husbands, White wives, and White husbands are the reference categories, respectively.

Consistent with previous research (Amato et al., 2003; Broman, 1993, 2005; Faulkner et al., 2005; Tsang et al., 2003), Model 1 reveals that White and male respondents report greater levels of marital happiness than Black and female respondents, net of the control variables. Models 2 through 5 reveal a consistent and statistically significant hierarchical pattern for our four comparison subgroups, with White husbands reporting the highest level of marital happiness and Black wives reporting the lowest. Although reporting lower levels of marital happiness than White husbands, White wives tend to report greater levels of marital happiness than Black husbands or Black wives. Finally, Black husbands tend to report statistically greater levels of marital happiness than Black wives, a finding that contradicts

Table 1
Unstandardized Parameter Estimates and Standard Errors
Assessing the Effect of Sex and Race on Marital Happiness

Independent Variable	Main Effects				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
White	.186 (.013)***	–	–	–	–
Husband	.068 (.008)***	–	–	–	–
White husband	–	.283 (.019)***	.147 (.019)***	.061 (.008)***	–
White wife	–	.223 (.018)***	.087 (.019)***	–	–.061 (.008)***
Black husband	–	.136 (.025)***	–	–.087 (.019)***	–.147 (.019)***
Black wife	–	–	–.136 (.025)***	–.223 (.016)***	–.283 (.019)***
Work status	–.009 (.005)	–.009 (.005)*	–	–	–
Divorced	–.008 (.009)	–.008 (.009)	–	–	–
Child in home <18	–.101 (.009)***	–.101 (.009)***	–	–	–
Age					
18-24	.050 (.026)	.050 (.026)	–	–	–
25-34	–.009 (.023)	–.010 (.023)	–	–	–
35-44	–.057 (.023)	–.058 (.023)	–	–	–
45-54	–.078 (.023)**	–.080 (.023)**	–	–	–
55-64	–.058 (.022)*	–.059 (.022)*	–	–	–
65-75	–.039 (.022)	–.040 (.022)	–	–	–
75 plus	–	–	–	–	–
Family income	.011 (.002)***	.011 (.002)***	–	–	–
Education of respondent	.001 (.002)	.001 (.002)	–	–	–
Education of spouse	.012 (.002)***	.012 (.002)***	–	–	–
Nature of religion					
Fundamental	.010 (.011)	.011 (.011)	–	–	–
Moderate	–.006 (.010)	–.007 (.010)	–	–	–
Liberal	–	–	–	–	–
Church attendance	.022 (.001)***	.022 (.001)***	–	–	–
Year	–.004 (.000)***	–.004 (.000)***	–	–	–
R ²	.042	.047	–	–	–
df	20984	17420	–	–	–

Note: Repetitive unstandardized parameter estimates are omitted in Models 3 to 5.

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

some previous studies that found lower levels of marital happiness among Black wives but no significant differences between Black and White husbands (Broman, 1993; Rank & Davis, 1996).

Results of the models presented in Table 1 also show several of our control variables to have statistically significant effects on our dependent measure. In Models 2 through 5, greater work status and the presence of children in the home under the age of 18 are associated with lower levels of marital happiness. Conversely, respondents who report higher familial income, have higher educated spouses, and attend church more frequently report higher levels of marital happiness. No significant relationships were found between marital happiness and the education level of the respondent, divorce status, religious fundamentalism, and for most of the age categories (in reference to the 75-and-older age category). The only age group reporting greater levels of happiness than the 75-and-older age category was the 18-to-24 category, a measure that does not reach statistical significance. Levels of happiness (in reference to the 75-and-older age category) tended to decrease thereafter, with the age categories 45 to 54 and 55 to 64 reporting significantly lower levels of marital happiness than the 75-and-older age category.

Results of the Trend Analysis

Table 2 presents unstandardized parameter estimates and standard errors for four linear regression models assessing the interactive impact of race and gender on marital happiness across decades (1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s) net of the control variables. By comparing parameter estimates across the four decades, we can assess whether reported levels of marital happiness among White husbands, White wives, and Black husbands are converging or diverging with those of Black wives over time. In this way, we can compare the absolute values of the estimates to see if the magnitude of each effect size has decreased, increased, or remained constant over time. Given the finding in Table 1 that Black wives indicate lower levels of marital happiness than any of our other three comparison groups, Black wives are treated as the reference category for the trend analyses.

Results of the models presented in Table 2 reveal that the estimates for all three social groups (White husbands, White wives, and Black husbands) remain positive and significant, with two exceptions. The estimate for Black husbands for the 1990s and 2000s is positive but not statistically significant, suggesting that by the 1990s and 2000s, reported levels of marital happiness of Black husbands and wives had virtually converged. Conversely, the estimates for White husbands and wives remain positive and significant for all four decades. This finding suggests that differences between reported levels of marital happiness of Black wives and White

Table 2
Unstandardized Parameter Estimates and Standard Errors
of Three Models Assessing the Interactive Effect of Race
and Gender on Marital Happiness by Decade

	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
White husband	.319 (.039)***	.278 (.031)***	.309 (.037)***	.174 (.050)***
White wife	.251 (.039)***	.218 (.030)***	.254 (.037)***	.107 (.049)**
Black husband	.185 (.051)**	.171 (.041)***	.096 (.050)	.035 (.066)
Black wife	—	—	—	—
R^2	.053	.042	.044	.044
df	5491	6936	5522	3032

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

husbands and wives have persisted to a certain extent through these years. Note also a strong race effect as the absolute values of the estimates for Black husbands are consistently lower than those for White husbands and wives. For example, whereas parameter estimates for White husbands and wives (with two exceptions—the estimate for White husbands and wives for the 2000s) are all higher than .20 (with some as high as .35), none of the estimates for Black husbands reaches .20.

To help assess whether marital happiness levels have been diverging or converging over time, we conducted regression difference t tests comparing parameter estimates for the social categories across each decade. Knoke, Bohrnstedt, and Mee (2002) posit that the regression difference test (t test) is a procedure that determines whether regression coefficients differ statistically between groups in a given population. For the purpose of this article, regression difference t test allows for a comparison of unstandardized parameter estimates across each decade.⁴ More specifically, the t test allows us to compare shifts in parameter estimates for the race and gender groups across the decades, providing each possible decade pairing (e.g., 1970s vs. 1980s; 1970s vs. 1990s; 1970s vs. 2000s; 1980s vs. 1990s; 1980s vs. 2000s; 1990s vs. 2000s). Assessing the difference in the parameter estimates for each of the social groups by decades will provide insight into the relative shift in marital happiness for these social groups across the four-decade period. Past research has used t tests in this manner to assess changes in attitudes related to feminism and gender equality (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004) and changing gender-role attitudes (Carter & Borch, 2005; Carter, Corra, & Carter, 2009).

The regression difference t tests show interesting results over time. First, although no significant shift in the parameter estimate for White husbands is observed from the 1970s to the 1990s, when comparing the parameter estimate from the 1970s and the 2000s, a significant shift is observed ($t = 2.30$, $p < .05$, two-tailed). Such a shift across the four decades provides evidence that the difference in marital happiness levels between White husbands and Black wives may be diminishing over time. Although we are unable to assess whether White husbands are becoming less happy or Black wives are becoming more happy through the parameter estimates, the mean scores in Figure 1 provide some evidence that Black wives are actually becoming happier in marriage whereas White husbands are only showing a small decrease in marital happiness during that same period. Second, for White wives, a similar shift is observed. Although no significant change in parameter occurs from the 1970s to the 1990s, the shift from the 1970s (and 1990s for that matter) to the 2000s also shows a significant decrease. Again, the descriptive statistics from Figure 1 reveal that although the data for White wives appear to show a slight decrease in marital happiness across the decades, the data for Black wives indicate a closing of the gap. Black wives are reporting greater levels of marital happiness, especially from the 1990s to the 2000s.

Finally, for Black husbands, the same pattern (decrease in the gap that separates Black husbands and wives) is shown but with a different ending. Although shifts from the 1970s to the 1990s reveal a decline, the difference never reaches statistical significance. When comparing the parameter estimates from the 1970s to the 2000s (as with White husbands and wives), the decrease reaches statistical significance ($t = 1.85$, $p < .05$, one-tailed). However, there is one aspect of this trend that differentiates Black husbands from White husbands and wives (relative to Black wives). In the 1990s and 2000s, there is very little difference between Black husbands and Black wives in terms of marital happiness.

Taken together, results of the models presented in Table 2, along with those of the t tests, reveal that differences in reported levels of marital happiness between Black wives and Black husbands, and White husbands and White wives, diminished from the 1970s to the 2000s. This change is most evident for Black husbands, who indicate similar levels of happiness in the most recent data. The descriptive mean statistics reveals that the diminishing effect witnessed in the parameter estimates are primarily due to a sharp increase in marital happiness for Black wives from the 1990s to the 2000s. The closing of the gap also appears to be stimulated by a slight decrease in marital happiness for White husbands and wives and Black husbands over time.

Conclusion

Data from the 1973-2006 General Social Survey were used to assess the interactive impact of race and gender on respondents' reported levels of marital happiness over time. Findings indicate that race and gender each have independent and statistically significant effects, with White and male respondents reporting greater levels of marital happiness than their Black and female counterparts. Among four subgroups (White husbands, White wives, Black husbands, and Black wives), results indicate the highest levels of marital happiness among White husbands and the lowest levels of marital happiness among Black wives. Assessment of trends from the early 1970s to the mid-2000s revealed a noticeable convergence in the reported levels of marital happiness of White and Black husbands and wives. In addition, much of this convergence seems to result from a recent increase in marital happiness among Black wives.

Further research is needed to verify the causes of changes in marital happiness for Black and White husbands and wives that we observe over time, especially for the upsurge in marital happiness for Black wives from the 1990s to the 2000s. However, the changing social context within which these four groups experience marriage may provide tentative explanations for our findings. Over-time changes in the nature and structure of marriages in the United States are bound to influence marital quality and happiness.

Regarding White families, Bernard (1972) maintained that White husbands' greater happiness in marriage was partly attributable to their greater power, status, and importance within the marriage that resulted from their participation in the workforce. Since the 1970s, men's real wages have declined, levels of unemployment and underemployment have increased (Hernandez, 1993), and wives' contributions to family incomes have increased (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). Such changes could result in a decrease of power within the family for White husbands, which may explain the convergence in reported levels of marital happiness between White wives and husbands. Alternatively, wives' increased workforce participation could create other changes in the family dynamic for husbands that are unrelated to power. It could be that wives' focus on their careers corresponds with less time and energy dedicated directly to their marriage, and hence to their husbands. Such explanations require further research to determine why White husbands' levels of marital happiness are declining in relation to the other groups.

Our results also indicate that marital happiness for White wives has not increased during the time period under study, despite gaining greater access

to jobs and contributing to the financial success of the family. Hochschild (1989, 1997) argued that working wives now must work a "second" and "third shift," which include performing a disproportionate amount of housework and repairing the emotional damage caused by overall decreases in family time. Conflicting demands between work and family may account for White wives' lack of increase in marital happiness over time despite changing roles within the family.

Black husbands' levels of marital happiness have decreased slightly since the 1970s. During this time period, Black men as a group have experienced disproportionately high rates of unemployment and underemployment (Holzer, 2006). Even if the husbands in the current study sample are not burdened by employment difficulties, the ever-present threat of such difficulties may relate to decreasing levels of marital happiness for Black husbands. This may account for some of the convergence in reported levels of marital happiness for Black husbands and wives.

Regarding Black wives, our findings show a sharp increase in marital happiness in the latter decade. Such a result was unexpected, and therefore explanations are only tentative. One possible explanation is changes in the overall profile of Black married couples. Research demonstrates a decline in Black marriage rates (Teachman et al., 2000), partly due to a lack of eligible marriage partners for Black women (Darity & Myers, 1995; South & Lloyd, 1992). Such structural changes in who is and is not married could be related to marital happiness. Women's position in the economy could also explain the observed increase in marital happiness for Black wives. Although still unequal, women as a group have slowly been gaining equality with men in regard to income and education. As a result, Black wives, who have had higher rates of employment than White wives throughout the time period under study (Durr & Hill, 2006), could be experiencing better financial rewards than in the past. In addition, full-time employment among wives is no longer viewed as an anomaly, which could result in better overall treatment and sense of belonging among Black wives in the workforce. Improvements in the work environment could potentially spill over into greater marital happiness (Rogers & May, 2003). Future research is needed to determine which variables contribute to changes in Black women's marital happiness over time.

Taken together, the findings of the current study lend support to the long-noted argument that the interactive effects of race and gender create exclusive social categories with unique histories and experiences (Collins, 2000; Dugger, 1988; Kane, 1992; Zinn & Dill, 1996), each of which require careful theoretical and empirical scrutiny. Comparing levels of

marital happiness by just race or just gender obscures the findings. In the current study, we would not have discovered that Black wives' marital happiness has increased in recent years by analyzing race and gender separately. By analyzing the interactive effects of race and gender, we are able to obtain a clearer picture of how a particular phenomenon—in this case marital happiness—varies by social position.

Last, our study has some limitations (notwithstanding the foregoing) that require noting. Our analysis is somewhat limited by the fact that it included only one measure of marital happiness, in essence limiting the understanding of marital quality to a one-dimensional global measure, though this was dictated by our data set. Future research may benefit from data sets that include measures that are multidimensional. Future researchers should also seek to include controls for length of marriage, number of divorces, and egalitarian gender roles. The control of these variables and others that may affect levels of marital happiness was also limited by our data set. In addition, our data consist of individuals who are interviewed at only one point in time and husbands and wives who are not married to each other rather than longitudinal data that include both spouses and follow them over time. Longitudinal data sets that follow couples over time will continue to inform our understanding of marital quality and group position. Finally, although this was also limited by availability of data, the study would have benefited from additional comparisons that include other racial and ethnic groups.

Notes

1. The merit of using a one-item global question versus multiple questions assessing marital quality has been subject to much debate in the literature (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Johnson, Amoloza, & Booth, 1992). Johnson et al. (1992) pose that marital quality should be considered as having multiple dimensions, with a global assessment of marital happiness as one dimension along with other dimensions measuring relational qualities of the marriage. Such an argument was earlier posed by Fincham and Bradbury (1987). However, Fincham and Bradbury (1987) state that "items thought to reflect a global evaluation of the marriage are used to interpret the validity of items that assess various domains of the marriage" (p. 799).

2. To account for these disproportioned sampled groups, past research has used different techniques, including the practice of randomly selecting a proportion of the larger subgroup (say 10% of the White sample) to approximate the proportion of the smaller group(s) (e.g., Corra & Kimuna, in press; Dodoo, 1997; Dodoo & Takyi, 2002). However, this technique remains controversial. The process of sampling only a small percentage of one group may lead to misleading regression coefficients, where the weight of the sampled group on the regression coefficients is reduced. Furthermore, the act of reducing sample size reduces reliability.

Hence, we use the full sample with our regression models and account for the low number of Black respondents by pooling our data by decade.

3. Considering the little variation within each decade in the mean scores, presenting mean scores for all years did not significantly contribute to the analyses. Hence, mean scores for each year were omitted from Figure 1 whereas the decade mean scores were presented. Interested readers may contact the primary author for complete listing of the mean scores for each year included in the analysis.

4. The formula for the regression difference t test is $\frac{(b1 - b2)}{\sqrt{se1^2 + se2^2}}$.

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