

Marital Disruption and Marital Control among Black Americans

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Running Head: Marital Control

Introduction

Within the past forty years the United States has experienced major changes in family organization. Marital disruption is one of the primary contributors of this change. Crude rates of marital disruption in the United States have markedly risen since the end of World War II and have remained relatively stable since an unprecedented sharp increase from the early 1960s until the late 1970s (Cherlin, 1991). For Black Americans, however, this recent trend has been more pronounced (Cherlin, 1991; Farley and Allen, 1987; Martin and Bumpass, 1989; Norton, 1979). Black Americans are more likely than Whites to separate, divorce, and remain separated. Relative to Whites, Black Americans, especially Black American women, also tend to separate and divorce earlier in

their marriages and are less likely to remarry (Cherlin, 1991; Opitz, Kelly, & Frisbie, 1985). Data from the Census Bureau indicates that high rates of separation and divorce among Blacks is a recent phenomenon. Prior to 1940 Black Americans had slightly higher rates of marriage and intact marriages than Whites (Walker, 1987). The primary source of marital disruption among Black Americans before the post World War II period was widowhood (Wilson, 1987).

Although a look at rates of marital disruption suggests that similar factors for Black Americans and Whites are responsible for the increase in separation and divorce, subgroup differences indicate that other factors are also relevant specifically for Black Americans. Most explanations of higher rates of marital disruption, as well as other changed aspects of family organization among Black Americans focus on the relative effects of race and socioeconomic status. Most research suggest that indicators of lower socioeconomic status including less prestigious occupations, lower income, and a higher prevalence of poverty have a greater impact than race with regard to accounting for marked changes in family formation among Black Americans. Wilson (1987), for example, argues that educational attainment, and not race, per se, is linked to differences in rates of marriage between Black Americans and Whites. He suggests that the greater prevalence of lower educational attainment among Black Americans reduces the availability of marriageable Black American males and females. The increased economic marginality of Black American males is another factor that is commonly attributed to the much higher rates of marital disruption among Black Americans relative to Whites, as well as the imbalanced sex ratio of Black American males to Black American females, where females outnumber males (Wilson , 1987; Wilson and Neckerman, 1986).

Despite recent findings that Black Americans have lower marriage rates convincing empirical evidence shows that Black Americans are similar to Whites with regards to their attitudes about marriage (Hatchett, 1991; Locksley, 1981). Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1995) examined attitudes about marriage among nearly 301 Black Americans and 491 Whites. Both groups gave similar responses to questions about the importance of long-term relationships and marriage. The only patterns of difference between Black Americans and Whites, however, was that Black Americans were more likely to view adequate income as more central for marital success. Given the major and positive contribution of marriage to the life satisfaction of Black Americans (Ball, 1983; Ball and Robbins, 1986; Billingsley, 1992; Jackson, Chatters, and Neighbors, 1986; Zollar and Williams, 1987) and the

deleterious effects that marital disruption can have on the mental health and economic stability of Black families (Bloom, White, and Asher, 1978; Glick and Norton, 1979) investigations of factors that are uniquely related to marital disruption among Black Americans are needed. Most studies on marital disruption among Black Americans tend to focus on social and economic factors that explain changes in crude rates of marital disruption. Existing knowledge about how structural and socioeconomic factors affect what occurs within Black American marriages is scant. There is a need for focus on those social psychological processes among Black Americans that are impact on their marital relationships. In this paper I discuss the relevance of marital control as a marital process that has the potential to expand what is known about Black American marriages, including marital instability.

Marriage and Control

Marital control is defined as a spouse's global perception of his or her ability to make a significant change in the marriage by somehow changing something about his or her self. Most theory and research on control and marriage suggest that a sense of control acts as an intervening variable in the relationship between marital problem-solving behavior and marital outcomes, including how spouses interact with one another, and the well-being and stability of their marriages. Doherty (1983) developed a systematic theory of marital control whereby levels of perceived control differentially affect marital satisfaction and stability through problem-solving behavior and the extent to which both spouses mutually perceive their efforts to resolve marital conflict as being effective. Levels of perceived control directly influence the types of behaviors that spouses' engage in to resolve conflict that arises within the marriage. Individuals with high levels of perceived control are more likely than those with relatively lower levels of perceived control to use problem-solving behaviors that are assertive and direct. Individuals with lower levels of perceived control tend to engage in problem-solving behaviors that are relatively aggressive, indirect, and passive. The extent to which spouses mutually perceive their efforts to resolve conflict as effective directly influence their perceptions of self, their spouse, and the marriage. Married individuals who believe that their problem-solving efforts were effective in creating a desired outcome are more likely to be satisfied with their marriage. On the other hand, those married individuals who believe that their problem-solving efforts were ineffective in bringing about desired outcomes are less likely to be satisfied with their marriage. Marital satisfaction, in turn, is positively related to marital stability.

Most studies on perceived control and marriage have primarily focused on the relation between level of perceived control and problem-solving behaviors (Doherty, 1983; Sabatelli, Buck, and Dreyer, 1983), satisfaction (Doherty, 1981; Doherty and Ryder, 1979), marital instability (Constantine and Bahr, 1981; Mlott and Lira, 1977), and disruption (Doherty, 1980). A majority of studies on control and marriage use generalized measures of control including Rotter's (1966) popularly used Internal-External Locus of Control Scale. Recently, however, there has been an increase in the use of marital-specific measures of control such as Miller's (1983) Marital Locus of Control Scale. As previously stressed (Rotter, 1975) situation-specific measures of control explain more variance in situations than do generalized measures of control. This has been demonstrated in marital research where measures of perceived control specifically within the marriage provide greater precision with regard to predicting marital outcomes than do generalized measures of control (Crohan and Veroff, 1989; Miller, Lefcourt, Ware, and Saleh, 1986).

Marital control has been demonstrated to be an important explanatory variable for marital instability. Veroff, Douvan, and Hatchett (1995) found that marital control was a significant predictor of marital instability for Black Americans. Those Black American couples with low levels of control were in less stable marriages than those Black American couples with relatively higher levels of perceived control.

Knowledge about the effects of marital control among Black Americans is sparse. Most research on marital control, is based on predominately White middle-class samples (Doherty and Ryder, 1979). This state of affairs is surprising given the social context of marriages (Duck, 1993). That is, what occurs within relationships is influenced by structural and social factors. Research shows that the stress associated with lower socioeconomic status and job insecurity, for example, has a negative effect on marital relationships (Larson, Wilson, and Beley, 1994). For Black Americans, who tend to have lower measures of socioeconomic status than Whites (Thomas and Hughes, 1986), the effects of structural and social factors on marriage have serious implications with regard to the stability of their marriages. Research has demonstrated the transmission of stress from socioeconomic factors on Black American marriages. Bowman (1985) found evidence of "provider role strain" among Black American husbands-fathers who experienced greater stress from perceived difficulty in meeting the needs of their wives than actual job loss. The transmission of stress from structural and social factors have deleterious effects not only on the individual, but also on his or her spouse at home (Crouter, 1984). Other studies indicate that unemployment also has

negative effects on marital relationships among Black Americans (Testa and Krogh, 1995). These findings lead me to believe that what occurs within Black American marriages, specifically perceived control, and marital instability among Black Americans are influenced by structural and socioeconomic factors.

Directions for Future Research

Future research on marriage and control should consider the effect of race on perceived marital control. Specifically, there is a need for knowledge about the meaning and outcome of marital control among Black American married couples. Findings and theory on perceived marital control has been limited to White samples. Nevertheless, enough promising findings seem to suggest that perceptions of marital control have important implications for marital instability among Black Americans. Given the social context of marriage and findings on the relationship between marital control and instability, it is important that marital researchers consider those structural and socioeconomic factors that might influence perceived marital control among Black Americans. The continuing and inclining significance of race calls for an examination of structural and social forces that are related to race and marriage. With regard to perceptions of control, Schwalbe and Gecas (1983) pervasively argue, for example, that the experience of efficacious action is important to the development and maintenance of perceived control. Blocked opportunities to experience efficacious action reduce perceptions of control. Work has been shown to be an important avenue for efficacious action (Kohn and Schooler, 1983). The pervasiveness of low indicators of socioeconomic status, including unemployment, low educational attainment and low income among African Americans, influence their development and maintenance of perceived control, and ultimately the stability of their marriages.

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